

Sabaneta to Miraflores: Afterlives of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela



The inner-city parish of La Vega sits in the lush mountain terrain of Western Caracas. Roughly 130,000 poor residents are cordoned off sociologically from nearby El Paraíso, a wealthy neighborhood that supplies the clients for the upscale shopping center that separates the two communities. In La Vega, the bottom 20 percent of households live on US\$125 per month, while the average family income is \$US409. Well over a third of households are led by a single mother. Proletarians of mixed African, indigenous, and European ancestries populate the barrio's informal economies.[1]

In Venezuela, one of the most urbanized countries in Latin America, these households constitute a key demographic base of *chavismo*. Six years ago, the journalist Jacobo Rivero asked a 50-year-old black woman from La Vega what would happen if Chávez died. The Bolivarian process “is irreversible,” she told him, its roots are too deep to be easily torn asunder in the absence of *el comandante*. In the years since Chávez's rise to the presidency in 1999—an interval of unprecedented popular political participation and education for the poor—the woman had learned, for the first time, the history of African slavery and the stories of her ancestors. The historical roots of injustice were being demystified, their causes sorted out. Dignity was being restored in inner-city communities, and their political confidence was on the rise. There had been motive, it now seemed to her, behind the manufactured ignorance of the dispossessed.[2] The “Venezuelan people stood up,” political theorist George Ciccariello-Maher observes, “and it is difficult if not impossible to tell a people on their feet to get back down on their knees.”[3]

The residents of La Vega, Petare, San Agustín, and 23 de Enero, among the other poor urban barrios of Caracas, entered an extended period of public commiseration, of shared mourning, on March 5, 2012, when Vice President Nicolás Maduro announced on television that Hugo Chávez had passed away at the age of 58, after 14 years as president, the last two years of which he struggled with cancer.[4] Identification with this improbable president runs in the veins of the popular classes of contemporary Venezuela.

Raised in poverty by his grandmother—"Mamá Rosa"—in Sabaneta, the capital of the state of Barinas, young Chávez dreamt of being a professional baseball player, like his hero Isaías Látigo Chávez. Indeed, this was one compelling reason for him to join the army, where he was able to rise through the ranks of their baseball league. The complicated climb to the presidential palace in Miraflores began with entrance into the Military Academy in Caracas in 1971. Chávez graduated as a sub-lieutenant in 1975 with a degree in engineering, and a diploma in counterinsurgency.

In one thoughtful commemoration of his life, the Mexican journalist Luis Hernández Navarro remarks on its parallels with the magic realism of a Gabriel García Márquez novel. In one exemplary moment, in Navarro's account, Chávez finds himself in 1975 in the middle of a military operation. Half hidden in the vegetation of mountainous Marqueseña, Barinas, he encounters an abandoned Mercedes Benz. Prying open the trunk of the black car with a screwdriver, Chávez discovers the works of a certain Carlos Marx and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. He begins to read.[5]

Perhaps a more banal ideological genealogy would begin with his older brother, Adán, a militant in the *Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria* (Movement of the Revolutionary Left, MIR), whose early influence on the leftward movement of the future president is widely acknowledged.[6] Adán went on to become Minister of Education, ambassador to Cuba, and governor

of Barinas over the course of the Chávez era. Also important in Chávez's political formation was an educational experiment within the military called the Andrés Bello Plan, dedicated to the construction of humanist values within the armed forces. Through his military education, Chávez discovered nineteenth century liberation hero Simón Bolívar, and the lesser known Ezequiel Zamora. Blending these influences with twentieth century left-military nationalism and anti-imperialism, Chávez linked his rule historically to Panama's Omar Torrijo and Peru's Juan Velasco Alvarado. Indeed, while still a cadet in the Military Academy, Chávez travelled, together with other young Venezuelan soldiers, to Peru for a celebration of the 150[th] anniversary of the battle of Ayacucho. "Chávez and the other Venezuelan cadets were each given a small memento by President Velasco," Richard Gott records in his *Hugo Chávez*, "a booklet of speeches called *La Revolución Nacional Peruana*.... The Peruvian experiment has remained an important influence on his political thinking." [7] Soviet-inflected, bureaucratic Cuban socialism also lent its considerable weight to the president's orientation, not least through his close personal ties to Fidel Castro.

Chávez drew on an eclectic range of classical and contemporary Marxist thinkers—from Rosa Luxemburg to István Mészáros—who he cited and discussed with growing frequency in the later episodes of his weekly *Alo Presidente* TV program. Without drawing too neat a linear progression from moderate to radical, it is not for nothing that in the earliest period of his presidency he was taking advice from the Argentine Peronist Norberto Ceresole, whereas in the latter years the Chilean Marxist Marta Harnecker, and her Canadian partner and theoretician of *Capital* Michael Lebowitz, were common points of reference. [8]

Dancing on Chávez's Grave

Part of the popular appeal of Chávez has to do with the exuberant hatred he inspired in his enemies. The latter's

frothing at the mouth tended to stoke the loyalty of his supporters. Perhaps not since Ronald Reagan's hysterical reaction to the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua in 1979 has a government in Latin America been the subject of such relentless demonization. Recall that once Reagan assumed office in 1980 he depicted the regime in charge of tiny Nicaragua, nestled in the middle of the Central American isthmus, as an imminent threat to the national security of the United States. Chávez stood in as the region's bogeyman for the new millennium.

George W. Bush's national security strategy documents claimed that Hugo Chávez was a "demagogue awash in oil money," seeking to "undermine democracy" and "destabilize the region." Donald Rumsfeld, Bush's secretary of defence, compared Chávez to Adolf Hitler, reminding us that Hitler, too, had been elected.[9] Not much has changed since Barack Obama took over. The main message from the White House continues to be that Chávez ran a dangerously authoritarian regime in desperate need of democratization. In a 2009 interview with the opposition television station Globovisión, Obama's Secretary of State Hilary Clinton noted that the U.S. would "like very much to see leaders being effective in helping to create greater economic opportunity for poor people, but we think there are ways that that can work that are not anti-democratic." In a patronizing gesture emblematic of the Obama epoch, she pointed out that democracy "had worked pretty well for us for a very long time, so I would hope that it could be viewed as a good idea for others as well." [10] The drones over Pakistan would soon spread the democratic word to wedding parties and other civilian gatherings, a message already received in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"As Venezuela begins a new chapter in its history," Obama said in response to the death of Chávez, "the United States remains committed to policies that promote democratic principles, the rule of law, and respect for human rights," all implicitly

absent in the South American country.[11] "At this key juncture," Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper echoed, "I hope the people of Venezuela can now build for themselves a better, brighter future based on the principles of freedom, democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights." Although disingenuous in the extreme, this statement was more measured than Harper's comments in 2009, just prior to a Summit of the Americas meeting. There he noted that Chávez was representative of certain leftist leaders in the Western hemisphere who were "opposed to basically sound economic policies, want to go back to Cold War socialism... want to turn back the clock on the democratic progress that's been made in the hemisphere." [12]

The establishment press—from London to Barcelona, from Toronto to Miami via New York—has sought viciously to distort the character and significance of the collective, street eulogizing of the dead Venezuelan president expressed in the gatherings of humble millions throughout Venezuela in the wake of Chávez's death.

Rory Carroll, the former Caracas-based correspondent for the *Guardian*, is one prominent dilettante narrating dystopias for leading broadsheets and websites of what life is said to have been like in Venezuela since 1999.[13] Viewing the South American country through his lens we learn how Chávez managed to cajole the support of his infantilized supporters through a "dramatic sense of his own significance." Rather than the political fissures of contemporary Venezuela being read as the result of longstanding contradictions of uneven capitalist development in an oil-rich dependent country, Carroll teaches us that it was instead the president's "dramatic flair" that "deeply divided Venezuelans."

During election periods in North America or Europe, it is commonplace to read in the financial press of the candidates' promises to reduce corporate taxes in order to reassure investors and establish attractive business environments.

These considered measures to reward materially the propertied classes are as natural to the background environment of contemporary liberal elections as water is to a fish's habitat, and about as closely scrutinized. But when Chávez introduced a new initiative for building subsidized housing for the destitute in the lead up to the presidential elections of October 2012, it was vilified as manipulative vote buying.[14] On this reckoning, meeting human needs is populist witchcraft, while meeting the imperatives of profit is the science of economics. "He spent extravagantly on health clinics, schools, subsidies and giveaways," Carroll reports, with characteristic contempt for the undeserving poor.

As if the profligate spending of a charismatic populist, prone to clientelist manipulation of the lower orders, was not enough to buckle in disgust, in Carroll's world we can add to that the creeping authoritarianism of unfair elections and the regime's domination of the airwaves. With all the power Chávez ostensibly concentrated in his hands, he nonetheless lacked the managerial sense with which to employ it to good effect. A constant media refrain signals the deterioration of Venezuela's state institutions and economy since Chávez assumed office. In present day Venezuela these are said to suffer from "decay, dysfunction and blight" while "bureaucratic malaise and corruption" is all pervasive.[15]

Paths to Popularity

If the state of Venezuela is in such disrepair, what explains support for Chávez? At the time of death, the president's approval rating hit 70 percent.[16] Mark Weisbrot, a social-democratic economist based in the United States, once complained that Venezuela "is probably the most lied-about country in the world." [17] Chávez won decisive mandates for three presidential terms, together with a series of national referenda on constitutional reform. According to Jimmy Carter, former U.S. president, Nobel Prize winner, and monitor of ninety two elections worldwide in his capacity as director of

the Carter Center, the Venezuelan electoral system is “best in the world.” While the press lambasts Chávez for his “giveaways,” in the 2006 presidential race, the opposition candidate Manuel Rosales offered US\$450 per month to three million impoverished Venezuelans on personal black credit cards as part of a plan called *Mi Negra*. Despite this blatant attempt at vote buying, the ungrateful would-be recipients aligned themselves on the other side of history, backing Chávez with 62 per cent of the vote.[18]

At its root, explaining support for Chávez involves none of the complexity of quantum mechanics, nor the pop-psychological theory of masses entranced by a charismatic leader. Venezuela sits on oil. Other petro-states, such as those in the Gulf, have funnelled the rent into a grotesque pageantry of the rich—skyscrapers, theme parks, and artificial archipelagos—built on the backs of indentured South Asian migrant laborers. They’ve done so, moreover, while aligning geopolitically with the U.S. empire—backing the wars, and containing the Arab uprisings.[19] In Venezuela, as a result of the shifting balance in social forces and the radicalization of the Bolivarian process since 2003, the state has been forced to adopt a different set of priorities.

After recovering from the steep collapse in gross domestic product (GDP) in 2002 and 2003—hitting -8.9 and -7.8 per cent respectively as a consequence of political crisis spurred by an unsuccessful coup attempt and business-led oil lockout—GDP soared on high petroleum prices to 18.3, 10.3, 9.9, and 8.2 per cent in the years 2004-2007. There was a drop to 4.8 per cent in 2008 as the international oil price took a fourth-quarter plunge from US\$118 to US\$58 a barrel due to centrifugal waves of the global crisis spreading out from its epicentres in the U.S. and the Eurozone. Within six months, however, world oil prices recovered, and countercyclical spending brought the Venezuelan economy up to 4.2 per cent growth in 2011 and 5.6 in 2012.[20]

A significant cut of oil revenue captured by the state over this period was directed toward social programs—known as missions—in health, education, and housing.[21] According to official national statistics, the cash income poverty level fell 37.6 per cent under Chávez, from 42.8 per cent of households in 1999 to 26.7 per cent in 2012. Extreme poverty dropped 57.8 per cent, from 16.6 to 7 per cent between 1999 and 2011. If these income poverty measures are expanded to include welfare improvements from the doubling in college enrollment since 2004, access to free health care for millions of new users, and extensive housing subsidies for the poor, it is easy to see how Carroll's narrative of decay breaks down.[22]

The Venezuelan process has also had an enormous impact on the region. The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) has undoubtedly been the most important achievement in this domain. ALBA first destabilized and then eventually crippled the U.S.- and Canada-backed Free Trade Area of the Americas by the early 2000s. ALBA has been a means of establishing cooperation between Latin American countries on principles other than free trade and market exchange, exemplified in the reciprocal transactions of Venezuelan oil for Cuban teachers and doctors, in solidarity with the internally displaced in Haiti, the landless dispossessed of Central America, and those in need in Bolivia.[23] Credit for these gains belongs, above all, with the social forces in Venezuela driving its capitalist state in social democratic directions.

If ALBA has been a mechanism for the transmission of anti-imperialist strategy and the revalorization of socialist debate and imagination, Venezuela under Chávez has also played a part in the construction of integration projects under a wider ideological umbrella, projects which, at a minimum, have helped to establish a relative Latin American autonomy from the immediate dictates of the behemoth to the north. These

include the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), driven by Brazil, Venezuela, and Argentina at its core, which has been able to generate independent regional responses following the geopolitical crises spurred by right-wing coups—in Honduras in June 2009 against Manuel Zelaya, and against Fernando Lugo in Paraguay in June 2012. Likewise, Bolivarian Venezuela has been a central protagonist in the establishment of the Community of Caribbean and Latin American States (CELAC), which with 33 country members and 600 million people under its tent, is the first regional body of its kind to exclude participation of the United States and Canada.[24] The international legacy of the Venezuelan president for sections of the Left has been tarnished by his appalling support of Gaddafi, al-Assad, Ahmadinejad, and the Chinese state. But to begin there for an understanding of the profound resonance of his death for the millions upon millions of Venezuelan and Latin American victims of colonial rule, capitalist exploitation, and imperial humiliation would be to resolutely miss the point.

The October and December Elections of 2012

These domestic and regional realities were the background drivers of the October presidential elections in 2012. That Hugo Chávez had to win on October 7 in order for the Bolivarian process to continue—in whatever form—was recognized by close to the entirety of the Venezuelan Left in the preceding months, including those social movement and labor sectors especially critical of the limits to the political economic program of the government, and the lingering influence of important bureaucratic layers within the governing United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). Chávez's victory, with 55 percent of the popular vote on a turnout of 80 percent—10 points above the Democratic Unity Roundtable's (MUD) candidate Henrique Capriles Radonski—signified a straightforward blow to the domestic Right and the interests of the United States in Venezuela and Latin America more

generally.[25] Whatever the internal contradictions of the Bolivarian process, then, the electoral victory of Chávez was seen as the necessary starting point for addressing them, salvaging the social gains that have been introduced, and radically extending their breadth and intensity.

In the regional elections for governors and state legislatures on December 16, 2012, the victory for the process was solidified further, despite the fact that Chávez was in Cuba, suffering respiratory complications stemming from a fourth surgical attempt to excise the cancer. Although it is important to note that the abstention rate rose from 22 to 46 percent from the presidential to regional elections, it was nonetheless an unambiguous victory for *chavismo* that the PSUV and its allies bested the MUD at a national level by 14 points, and crucially took back five of the eight states that had previously been controlled by the opposition. In the end, the PSUV took 20 of 23 governorships and were victorious in 22 of 23 state legislatures.[26]

Puntofijismo to Neoliberalismo

On the canvas thus far we have a rough portrait of the immediate scenario. This is at best an insufficient guide for the range of possibilities in the post-Chávez future, and, without a richer engagement with the past, a poor foundation for assessing the historical mark, shifting patterns, and internal contradictions of the period under Chávez. The contested emergence of Chávez, who rose out of the ashes of the *ancien régime*, has made him, in death as in life, a carrier of competing myths.

Up until the late 1980s, Venezuela was considered one of the “exceptional” democracies of Latin America. Unlike most other countries of South America, Venezuela escaped the period of non-constitutional rule that cast a dark shadow over the region during the 1960s and 1970s. Since 1958, three centrist political parties—COPEI, URD, and AD—forged a pacted democracy

under which the parties agreed to a basic political program. The Communist Party of Venezuela was excluded from the legal political system. This gentlemen's agreement, known as the "Punto Fijo" (Fixed Point), offered relative political stability for almost four decades during which time the two main political parties, the COPEI and the AD, alternated terms in office. For the Venezuelan elite, it was an efficient way to retain monopoly over the spoils of office without resorting to the levels of bloodshed that characterized the violent suppression of the Left in countries like Brazil, Argentina, and Chile.

These spoils have indeed been plentiful. Venezuela sits upon the largest reserves of conventional oil (heavy and light crude) in the western hemisphere and has the largest proven reserves of non-conventional oil (extra-heavy crude) in the world. Venezuela's status as a "petro-state" has shaped almost every aspect of the country's history: its economy, its politics, and its culture. Indeed, from the perspective of right and left alike, oil has been both a blessing and a curse. And this is equally true of *puntofijismo* and the Bolivarian process.

In the times of *puntofijismo*, oil cushioned the elite's projects of clientelist rule. As political scientist Daniel Hellinger explains, Venezuelan democracy before Chávez rested "upon a material basis: the distribution of international oil rents through a system of clientelism." [27] During times of plenty, governments have used the oil wealth to guarantee political loyalty to the state. In the days of the Fourth Republic, the most ambitious program of wealth redistribution was implemented during the first presidency of Carlos Andrés Pérez (1974-1979). Pérez nationalized the oil industry in 1976 following the Yom Kippur War. From 1970 to 1980, oil prices skyrocketed, increasing by 948 percent. [28] This enormous wealth was captured by the state in the form of rent, some of which trickled down to the masses. Workers were paid higher

wages than in the rest of Latin America and the government implemented price controls and subsidies on basic food goods, transportation, and expanded social services like education and health care.[29] The leaders of corporatist labor unions in key sectors of the economy—such as public services and heavy industry—stood firmly behind Pérez. Meanwhile, a growing layer of consumers enjoyed the spending frenzy precipitated by the oil wealth that flooded the country.

The flip side of this enormous injection of oil wealth into the Venezuelan economy in the 1970s was the exacerbation of a structural imbalance known as the “resource curse” or “Dutch disease.” While Pérez made successful efforts to industrialize the economy in an earlier phase of capitalist expansion, it has been difficult for the Chávez government to diversify the economy. Amongst other problems, Venezuelan elites have long considered themselves to be more “modern” and “western” than most Latin Americans, and demonstrate their modernity by consuming products made abroad. Imported whisky, for example, tends to be Venezuelans’ drink of choice. The heart of the problem lies in a chronically over-valued currency, which cheapens imports and raises the price of Venezuelan exports, which chokes the manufacturing sector and makes it difficult to expand the base of production. In short, why bother to make anything when you can simply sow the oil? Such a strategy is all very well and good when oil prices are high, but over-reliance on one primary export commodity has made the Venezuelan economy subject to boom and bust cycles. While it is possible to fund generous social programs during boom times, these programs tend to crash along with the price of oil. As former Venezuelan oil minister Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonso famously said during the oil boom of the 1970s, “Oil will bring us ruin...Oil is the devil’s excrement.” A decade later, his words seemed prophetic as the boom of the 1970s turned to bust and Venezuela descended into political and economic crisis.[30]

While Venezuela's economy is characterized by boom and bust, cyclical growth patterns are typical of the region where most countries are dependent on the export of primary materials. Contrary to many claims, Venezuela's political economy between the 1960s and early 1980s was not that exceptional. The region's economy grew by 82 percent between 1960 and 1980, the same time that Venezuela experienced its boom. Likewise, when oil prices crashed and Latin America entered the debt crisis of the 1980s—growing only 15 percent in the 26 years between 1980 and 2006—Venezuela also plunged into the abyss—although Venezuela's fall proved longer and deeper than most. Real GDP plummeted by 26 percent between 1978 and 1986.[31] The effects on Venezuela's middle class were particularly devastating. During the 1980s, poverty rates in Venezuela rose from 40 percent (10 points below the regional average) to above 50 percent (about 5 points above the regional average).[32]

Oil wealth has also fueled a political culture characterized by populism. As the late historian Fernando Coronil argued in his brilliant book, *The Magical State*, the nation's oil wealth came to be personified in the figure of the president as a magnificent sorcerer.[33] As a magician performing tricks of prestidigitation, the Venezuelan president also appears to pull things out of his hat—constitutions, car factories, roads, houses, cosmogonies. Coronil's analysis belies accusations that Chávez has transformed political culture in Venezuela, for the book was published one year before Chávez was elected to office. A more accurate interpretation suggests that Chávez, as charismatic as he might be, filled a void left by the corrupt, incompetent, and unresponsive governments of the Punto Fijo. Throughout the 1980s, Venezuelans consistently voted for presidents who campaigned against neoliberalism, including the ill-fated Pérez, whose bait-and-switch move in his second term as president (1989-1993) turned out to be the last straw. Rather than focusing on the personal attributes of the leader, to paraphrase Marx's adage in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, "Men [sic] make their own history, but not in

circumstances of their own choosing.”

Making Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Process

The shallow veneer of Venezuela’s “democratic exceptionalism” was shattered on February 27, 1989, the day of the *caracazo* when anti-austerity protests were violently suppressed by state security forces. Under a neoliberal structural adjustment package introduced by Pérez, then in the early days of his second term (1989-1993), the government removed a subsidy on domestically produced gasoline. When owners of the private buses that many poor *caraqueños* rely on for daily transportation attempted to pass the cost onto their passengers, protests broke out in the streets of Caracas. Late into the evening state security forces began to use live ammunition to stymie the protests. In some neighborhoods such as Petare, security forces used automatic weapons to protect property owners against looting. After four days of shooting, the official death toll was 287, but estimates range up to 3,000.[34] The wide disparity in official and estimated death toll is explained by the fact that many families could not register the death of their loved one because they couldn’t find the body. Many organizers in the most rebellious neighborhoods, such as 23 de enero, were dragged from their homes and “disappeared.” Invisible to the state in life, these Venezuelan citizens were also invisible in death.

The painful memory of the *caracazo* is deeply etched in the minds of poor Venezuelans. As Rosangela Orozco, a young militant with the community organization, Foundation Alexis Vive, put it, “I was only nine years old then, but even then I could see how awful it was that arms were used directly against our community.”[35] For those who lost their neighbors and loved ones like Rosangela, nostalgic calls by the opposition for a return to the “unity” that they enjoyed under the Punto Fijo (a time when the rich and the poor supposedly got along) have a rather hollow ring. While the largest protests occurred in Caracas, Venezuela’s largest city,

protests emerged early in the morning in San Cristóbal, Barquisimeto, Maracay, Barcelona, Puerto la Cruz, and Mérida, and later in the afternoon in other major cities like Maracaibo and Valencia. For this reason, Ciccariello-Maher has argued that the term *caracazo* is misleading since it conceals the generalized and national nature of the rebellion.[36]

The rebellion also made a large impression on young military officers such as Chávez who “had not assimilated to North American geopolitical doctrines nor been fully integrated into the structures of *puntofijismo*.”[37] Nor had Chávez undergone training at a U.S. counterinsurgency school, having obtained a degree in engineering from the Military Academy and begun graduate studies at a public, civilian university.[38] In 1982 Chávez and other like-minded officers founded a clandestine revolutionary movement within the military called the Revolutionary Bolivarian Army (*Ejercito Bolivariana Revolucionaria*, EBR-200) in celebration of the 200[th] anniversary of Bolívar’s birth in 1783. As the political and economic situation deteriorated, they began to recruit civilians to their movement, renaming themselves the Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement (*Movimiento Bolivariana Revolucionaria* MBR-200).

On February 4, 1992, the MBR-200 launched an unsuccessful coup d’état. While the movement was successful in taking several military installations, the state authorities were able to thwart the coup attempt thanks to a leak in intelligence. As a key organizer, Chávez was arrested. In his address to the nation donning his signature red beret, he apologized to the Venezuelan public telling them that he had failed, but only “for now.” In the context of the deeply delegitimized government of Pérez, Chávez’s bold apology made him an instant folk hero—a daring leader who stood up to the corrupt, clientelistic establishment. Chávez spent the next two years in jail, reading, reflecting, and preparing. As Marta Harnecker recounts in her biography of Chávez, it was during

this time he immersed himself in the work of the neo-structuralists of the Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), which inspired his early economic policies.[39]

After another failed coup attempt on November 27, 1992, by a splinter group from the MBR-200, a new formation led by Chávez, the Fifth Republic Movement (*Movimiento Quinta República*, MVR), was formed in 1997 with an electoral orientation. Campaigning on an anti-corruption, anti-poverty platform, on December 6, 1998, Chávez won with 56.4 percent, the largest percentage of the popular vote since 1983. While the majority of the poor voted for Chávez, as political scientist Lesley Gates explains, so did a substantial portion of prominent business leaders who were disillusioned by the corruption scandal that brought a premature end to Pérez's presidency in 1993.[40] Chávez's early economic and social policies were decidedly center-left. But the new constitution that founded the Fifth Republic on December 15, 1999, laid the ground for more radical policies to come, including the establishment of two additional branches of government (in addition to legislative, executive, and judicial)—electoral and popular power. Chávez and the Fifth Republic Movement swept the elections on July 30, 2000, with Chávez winning his second six-year term with an even larger mandate of 60 percent.

Chávez's shift to radicalism was a contingent process, inspired by the blunders of the right-wing opposition. The failed right-wing coup in 2002, the bosses' strike in 2002-2003 and the recall referendum against Chávez in 2004 are major turning points.[41] Instead of neutralizing the Bolivarian process, the events had the unintended effect of further radicalizing voters, as citizens who support the process got a sense of what they almost lost.

On April 11, 2002, Chávez was removed from office for 47 hours, held hostage by members of the military and the peak

business association, Venezuelan Federation of the Chamber of Commerce (Fédecamaras), on an island off the north coast of Venezuela. The coup organizers were concerned about Chávez's efforts to assert executive control over the state oil company, which had become a "state within a state" over decades of liberalization.[42] In particular, one of Chávez's most important foreign policies was the reactivation of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) that lay dormant after nearly two decades of neoliberalism. Under the leadership of Alí Rodríguez Araque, the cartel began to curtail production again. Oil prices soared 660 percent from 1998 to 2008.[43]

Upon hearing the news of Chávez's ouster, tens of thousands of citizens poured onto the streets calling for the return of the president. During what has been dubbed the first "media coup," the privately owned media launched a deliberate misinformation campaign, refusing to cover the pro-Chávez rallies in the streets and to report that a key segment of the military rejected the coup, and remaining silent when the pro-Chávez forces regained control over the presidential palace. Venevisión, RCTV, Globovisión, and Televen replaced regular programming with relentless anti-Chávez speeches, interrupted only for commercials calling on viewers to take to the streets to join the opposition rallies. The ads telling viewers "Not one step backward. Out! Leave now!" were sponsored by the oil industry, but the stations carried them for free, as "public service announcements." [44]

Undeterred by the show of popular support marked by the celebrations in the streets with the return of Chávez, the next move of anti-Chávez factions of Venezuela's elite was economic sabotage. In December 2002 and February 2003, the management of Venezuelan Petroleum, (*Petróleos de Venezuela*, PDVSA) shut down production, locking out workers. Chávez's response was to fire the disloyal managers, dismissing 300 of them by January. By April, production was back to pre-lockout

levels with the help of new managers and, more importantly, workers loyal to the government who decided to take matters into their own hands. Thus began the initiatives in worker control, as workers restarted the pumps and delivered gasoline to key distribution points. In subsequent months, Chávez fired 18,000 oil workers who participated in the business strike, to create a new PDVSA that would thereafter fulfill its role as a publicly owned and operated corporation. While the bosses' strike had severely damaging consequences on the economy (GDP growth rate hit a record low of -26 percent), it was a boon for the popular movement. Left dissidents from the oil sector along with other industrial workers founded the first independent labor central, the National Union of Workers (*Unión Nacional de Trabajadores*, UNT) in the heat of the oil lockout. The lessons learned from the short-lived experiment in workers' control in the oil industry have since blossomed in other areas of the Venezuelan economy, including the industrial and service sectors. The number of cooperatives in Venezuela has risen from an estimated 877 in 1998 to more than 30,000.[45]

The opposition's third and final futile attempt to get rid of Chávez—apart from regular electoral contests—was the unsuccessful recall referendum of 2004. Critics of the Bolivarian process were the first to put a mechanism created by the new constitution to the test. *Súmate*, a civil society coalition funded by the United States Agency for International Development, collected signatures of 20 percent of the electorate. Chávez passed with flying colors: 59 percent of voters reaffirmed his mandate as president, with a voter turnout of 70 percent. Two years later this popular mandate was confirmed again when Chávez won his third mandate in the presidential elections of 2006 by 62 percent.

With the opposition thoroughly demoralized by defeat, Chávez appeared to be an unstoppable force. In front of an enthusiastic crowd at the January 30, 2005, meeting of the

World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, he announced the birth of "Twenty-First Century Socialism." "Everyday I become more convinced" roared Chávez, "there is no doubt in my mind, and as many intellectuals have said, that it is necessary to transcend capitalism. But capitalism can't be transcended from within capitalism itself, but through socialism, true socialism, with equality and justice. But I'm also convinced that it is possible to do it under democracy, but not in the type of democracy being imposed from Washington." [46] This version of socialism, he highlighted, would be different from its twentieth-century predecessors. It would be founded on democracy, and determined, in part, at the ballot box through competitive elections.

The reason that the majority of citizens in Venezuela went to the polls to vote again and again for Chávez is because they saw real improvements in their lives. While Chávez is without doubt one of the more charismatic leaders that Latin America has ever seen, his personal attributes are beside the point. There was finally something to vote for. Indeed, the main reason that Chávez inspired such hatred amongst self-professed defenders of "democracy" is that he beat them at their own game.

Danger and Opportunity Ahead

Nicolás Maduro is Chávez's anointed successor as head of the Bolivarian process. He faced off against the MUD's Henrique Capriles Radonski in presidential elections on April 14, 2013. In a surprisingly tight result, Maduro beat Capriles by only 1.5 percentage points. In what many supporters of the Bolivarian process have read as the opposition's return to the tactics of extra-legal destabilisation, Capriles, with the support of the American government, has refused to recognize the legitimacy of the elections. In the immediate wake of the results he called on his supporters to take to the streets. According to government officials, the violence of roving bands of Capriles supporters who responded to the call left

nine dead in the few days following the election. With that dust having settled, at least temporarily, Capriles has moved on to a court challenge, which has little chance of success.

By all accounts, April's election was Maduro's to lose. Capriles garnered 6.5 million votes in the October 2012 presidential elections to Chávez's 8 million. During the campaign leading up to the October contest, the opposition stressed the uncertainty of voting for the incumbent given his ill health. In the April election, coming as it did closely on the heels of Chávez's death, Capriles could no longer play this card.[47] The opposition geared up instead for a fight that sought to avoid the issue of Chávez all together, except insofar as to denigrate Maduro by comparison. If the martyr had become more or less untouchable, the only remaining option open to the opposition seemed to be to stew in the shameless hypocrisy of pointing out that Maduro is no Chávez.

In his youth, Maduro was a student militant. He joined the *Liga Socialista* (Socialist League), a splinter group from the bigger MIR, and, once finished his undergraduate degree, became a bus driver in order to contribute to the labor movement. He ascended quickly to the leadership of the New Union of the Caracas Metro (*Nuevo Sindicato del Metro de Caracas*, SITRAMECA). When Chávez went to prison for his role in the 1992 coup attempt, Maduro was a frequent visitor to the jail. Maduro and his wife, the left-wing lawyer Cilia Flores, had been among the first civilians to join the MBR. Maduro subsequently became a founding member of the MVR.

The new *chavista* president became a Member of Congress at the outset of Chávez's first administration, as well as a Member of the Constituent Assembly, which lasted from August 1999 to January 2000. Beginning in 2001, Maduro presided over the Permanent Commission for Integral Social Development, a congressional commission tasked with the development of new legislation for job creation initiatives. In 2006, he became the President of the National Assembly, and after that

transferred to the position of Minister of Popular Power for Foreign Relations. He took advantage of the latter posting to work for the extension and consolidation of ALBA (first created in 2004), and the establishment of UNASUR in 2008 and CELAC in 2011. On a more idiosyncratic note, Maduro is reportedly a spiritual follower of the Indian guru Sri Sathya Sai Baba.[48]

Just as the past of the Bolivarian process is not reducible to Chávez, its future cannot be anticipated with reference to the results of the April elections and the figure of the new head of state alone. The October and December electoral cycle last year, it should be remembered, was ultimately a contest between two models of capitalism—an oil-dependent state capitalism with a heavier weight for the state in the market, versus a capitalism inflected with a freer market and the privatization of oil.[49] “If [Chávez] loses it would be a terrible setback,” the long-time Venezuelan revolutionary and former Vice-Minister of Planning (2002-2003) Roland Denis reminded us in the run-up to the October presidential elections. “But if he wins, we have not really “won” anything, but the horizons would remain open. What I do sincerely hope happens, is that after the election all of this discontent, this tension that is mounting between the popular forces and the bureaucracy will come to a head. I hope that people will begin to speak and name the problem for what it is. Right now everyone is silent because they are waging an electoral campaign.”[50] For Denis, the lucky thing electorally was that Capriles “is a total ass. He is extremely basic. It is painful that we have to put up with this little bourgeois idiot from Caracas as a candidate,” running against Chávez, “who is a giant.”

With Maduro’s victory over the ass in the forthcoming elections, the pragmatic balancing of contradictory elements within the Bolivarian process that Chávez managed to sustain is likely to be much more difficult. Early signals of

continuity include the renewal of Rafael Ramírez as energy minister, and Elias Jaua as foreign minister. On the other hand, the appointment of a former president of the Central Bank, Nelson Merentes, as minister of finance can plausibly be interpreted as an early rightward shift in the regime's economic orientation.

The game, ultimately, is not a virtuous circle of mutuality, but a zero-sum competition of classes with opposing interests. And the battles are likely to take on a myriad of forms across the extra-parliamentary and parliamentary theaters. The lubricant of oil has blurred this reality temporarily, but different developmental exits in which distinct classes win and lose are likely to come to the fore relatively quickly, particularly in the event of a downturn in oil prices. The conservative *chavista* right within the state apparatus, the currents of reaction inside the military, the red bureaucrats enriching themselves through manipulation of markets, and the union bureaucrats aligned against working-class self-organization and emancipation are the preeminent obstacles of immediate concern to many activists on the *chavista* left. At the same time, the experiences of workers' control, communal councils, communes, and popular assemblies have raised the consciousness and capacities of millions. A dire turn is therefore not a *fait accompli*.

The organic intellectuals of the variegated popular movements in Venezuela are the richest resource for understanding the possible roads ahead. In our interviews with a plethora of labor and community activists across a wide gamut of movements in 2008, 2010, and 2012 we learned a great deal from their critiques of the failure of the Bolivarian process to build a collective leadership, a failure sensed very sharply now in the wake of the president's death. For example, Andrés Antillano, a militant in the *Movimiento de Pobladores* (Movement of the Poor, MP), described

the phenomenon of Chávez as some kind of paradoxical,

egalitarian caudillo. Chávez has been the boss, without being the boss, caudillo without being caudillo—the kind of figure that has been a part of Venezuelan peasant struggles stretching back historically, the clearest example being Simón Bolívar. The idea of the egalitarian caudillo was the negation of the delegation of political power. This phenomenon has made it difficult to build a collective political reference point with the capacity to bring together all of the various popular social forces.[51]

Activists also complain about the presence of conservatives in red shirts within the administrative apparatus of the state and the highest echelons of governing circles. They decry the inefficiencies, corruption, and bureaucratism in the distribution of state resources. When these activists from the labor movement and urban movements of the poor barrios of Caracas and elsewhere point to the problem of conservative, or inefficient and incompetent, bureaucrats, however, the often implicit solution seems to be the replacement of these individuals with others who share the ideology of more left-wing currents within *chavismo*. In other words, they tend to downplay the objective and structural obstacles of the bureaucratization of the process, in favor of attending to the subjective, political, and ideological problems standing in their way. A common view of the rank-and-file, then, is to conceive of the problem as conservative individuals within trade union and party bureaucracies, or inefficient and incompetent individuals in these positions; replaced with competent, committed activists the running of the trade union apparatus, the party apparatus, and the state apparatus would function as it should, in the interests of the exploited and oppressed.

There is, in many ways, still too little sense among the rank-and-file of the popular movements of the bureaucracy—the non-propertyied officialdom of various organizations—as an

independent social layer within the labor movement, the communal councils, the PSUV, and the state apparatus itself, with its own ideology and politics, rooted in its own material interests.[52] A politics of self-organization in opposition to this bureaucracy, structurally understood, remains relatively limited; as do popular understandings of precisely how these bureaucratic material interests have become increasingly attached to and dependent upon the administration of benefits accrued through access to petty drips of the oil riches flowing from the magical Venezuelan state. Antillano, an elegant exception, explains “the perverse role that the state plays in this dynamic, particularly the role of oil rent in the administration of politics and economics in this country. Today, as in the period of oligarchic hegemony, the objective of social organization has been gaining access to parts of the state in order to control a portion of the oil rent, rather than to organize the autonomous struggles of the people.”

Pitted against bureaucratization and the conservative elements of *chavismo* that hope to contain the process from deepening and expanding in the transformative ways desired by so many, are the rich experiences of self-organization and self-activity of the formal laboring classes and the informal proletarians, from struggles to control their workplaces to efforts at community self-management. As Gonzalo Gómez, of *Marea Socialista*, a left-wing current operating within the PSUV, told us in an interview last August: “If there is no struggle, if there is no tension, the bureaucratic apparatus will tend to impose itself over the popular interests. In order to prevent this we need to redouble the popular forces fighting against this tendency, and they need to be taken into account by the government.”

Following Maduro’s victory, then, the battle for the character of *chavismo* without Chávez has just begun. “The process from 1998-2012 has been one of political awakening, raising the

levels of popular consciousness,” explains Juan Contrera, an extraordinary activist of 23 de enero. “Right now it is time to cash in (*cobrar*). I don’t mean this in an economic sense. The people should assume their historic, protagonist role in this process. We need to kick some ass (*da la pata*) in terms of fixing the bureaucracy and resolving the problem of corruption.”[53] When we spoke to Juan in August of last year, Chávez’s cancer seemed to be in remission. “When Chávez gets sick,” he told us, “we feel sad, obviously, I don’t want to be misunderstood here. But it is the oligarchy that thinks that Chávez is the problem. They do not understand that the problem is the millions of Venezuelans that have said, ‘Enough!’ And they are not going to be able to squash our dreams.”

Footnotes

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