Venezuela: Oil and Madness. Politics, Propaganda, and Realities of the Chavista Era

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VENEZUELA: OIL AND MADNESS
POLITICS, PROPAGANDA, AND REALITIES OF THE CHAVISTA ERA

by

ALVARO DE PRAT

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2018
Venezuela: Oil and Madness. Politics, Propaganda, and Realities of the Chavista Era

by

Álvaro de Prat

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Kenneth Paul Erickson
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Date

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis
Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

Venezuela: Oil and Madness. Politics, Propaganda, and Realities of the Chavista Era

by

Álvaro Eduardo de Prat

Advisor: Kenneth Paul Erickson

_Venezuela: Oil and Madness. Politics, Propaganda, and Realities of the Chavista Era_, is an interdisciplinary exploration of Venezuela’s politics and its consequences during the _Chavista_ years. On a concrete level, in this thesis I propose how the very manner in which Hugo Chávez implemented his at first apparently benign redistributive politics could do nothing but precipitate what I will argue are the times of starkest inequality in modern Venezuelan history, as well as its current humanitarian crisis. Integral to this, although on a more philosophical level, here I also offer a theory of how and why Chávez’s representations might have been so misinterpreted.

The list of eminent political thinkers who have vouched for Hugo Chávez’s “socialism” is puzzling; the damage that they have caused by ignoring the counterevidence and discarding even the most radically progressive and honest of Chávez’s critics as “neo-conservatives” has been profound. It has served only the most undemocratic extremes of the Manichean divide that Chávez contrived to consolidate his “neo-totalitarianism,” and today to the general discredit of the Left in the continent, perhaps for decades to come. The above notwithstanding, although I intend to show how Chávez and his successors have made of Venezuela one of the most unequal countries in the planet in the _material domain of its economy_, essential to Marxism, I will also present in what ways, in the theater of appearances of the political, Chávez was the first Latin American politician in the neoliberal era who could effectively articulate for its _dēmos_ that there
could never be true democracy with rampant poverty. For while he empowered “the people” in the end only symbolically, Chávez showed his spectators how they were players of their play.

This work was initially planned to be a much longer Ph.D. thesis, both inspired by and including the full series of ten interviews—eight of which were hours-long conversations—that I conducted in Venezuela with well-known leaders, politicians, and intellectuals of its government and opposition during 2013. I offer brief summaries of all ten interviews (of roughly 1,200 words each) as an appendix due to their prescience and historical value, but the limitations of space for this master’s thesis, as well as the time elapsed, has forced me to refocus instead on my own interdisciplinary explorations. However, without those conversations this thesis would not exist.

Among my interviewees, there were two former ministers: the first, vice-Secretary of the Presidency during Chávez’s first term and later Minister of Culture until 2011; the second, a former vice-minister of Health. There were two former presidential candidates: one, a legendary guerrilla leader during the 60s, founder of the Venezuelan party “MIR,” and prolific writer; the other, Venezuela’s highest vote-getter to Congress in 2010. But I also interviewed some well-known intellectuals: historians, journalists, and political analysts, as well as the heads of leading public and private institutions, such as the then director of both the National Center of History and the National Archive; the then President of the UNT—the largest trade-union organization in Venezuela—; and the former Dean of the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello—President of the “Association of Universities Entrusted to the Society of Jesus in Latin America,” as well as the chief research coordinator of PROVEA, one of the country’s most prominent HR organizations.

The first and more theoretical chapter of this thesis studies what populism, neo-populism, and rentierism are and how they operate. It also explains the ways in which Chavismo fits and
exceeds these categories. In this chapter’s first half, we consider works from the Argentinian post-Marxist theorist Ernesto Laclau to the Mexican philosopher Ernesto Dussel, the political theorist Benjamin Arditi, the comparativist Kenneth Erickson, and other specialists for their “political science” understandings. The second half incorporates the French Marxist theorist Guy Debord, the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, and several experts in cultural and literary studies for what I offer as my first original contribution in this text: it is both a psychological and literary deconstruction of Chávez’s myth and his “Aló Presidente” program in a baroque key.

The second, more sociological chapter, presents Venezuela’s gruesome off-the-charts statistics, albeit focusing on its homicide rates—Caracas has been the “world’s homicide capital” since 2015, and Venezuela has the second highest murder rate worldwide. While the first chapter considers the magic of Chavismo’s “magical realism,” this one deals with its realities, its darkest side. In it, I establish the link between those statistics and the systematic dismantling of the country’s institutions, and proceed to discard alternative explanations. Since the country’s institutional meltdown is common knowledge in Venezuela, this chapter’s contribution is to have linked that reality to the country’s collapse in general, and to present it to the American public.

The last chapter analyses the prior statistics from the point of view of economics and income inequality, to propose how Chavismo’s “socialism” might have turned Venezuela into one of the world’s most unequal countries. Because the search for social equality is what brings together all socialisms from their most democratic to their totalitarian forms, at least rhetorically, I consider these findings as my third original contribution to the text. In the concluding section, a journalistic postscript, I present a sequence of the political events after the constitutional coup d’état, on March of 2017, and of the ensuing crimes against humanity to repress street protests.
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PREFACE

This work was initially planned to be a much longer Ph.D. thesis, inspired by but also including a series of ten interviews that I conducted in Venezuela with well-known leaders, politicians, and intellectuals of its government and opposition during 2013. For making that initial stage possible, I owe a special debt of gratitude to some very dear people, both at the City College of New York’s Division of Interdisciplinary Studies and in Venezuela. Before concluding a Master’s in the Study of the Americas at the CCNY, I traveled to Venezuela under the auspices of that program with a superb recommendation letter from the division’s dean, Dr. Juan Carlos Mercado, written at the instigation of my professor and former mentor of undergraduate studies at the CUNY BA, Martin Woessner, and of my former professor Alessandra Benedicty, then director of that M.A program. Without their constant encouragement during that summer to pursue my “independent studies” this thesis would not exist. However, in its present form this work would not be possible either without a course I took under Professor Carlos Aguasaco to complete that master’s upon my return from Venezuela. The first chapter of this text incorporates many ideas of my final paper for his course.

I lived in Venezuela most of my adult life and know personally two of my interviewees. Guillermo Cerceau, a dear lifelong friend, facilitated another three of my interviews. The rest of notable intellectuals and political figures granted me interviews thanks to the good offices of María Elena Ramos and Ricardo Martínez. I dedicate this thesis to María Elena and Ricardo not because they made those interviews possible (nor because Ricardo later helped me transcribe those rather long conversations that ran into many hours of tape) but because they are my mother and stepdad, and with them I have had many of the most fruitful discussions about Venezuelan politics ever.

Regarding the preparation of this thesis as part of my requirements to obtain a Master’s in Liberal Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, I would like to thank
Professor David Halle for his course, “Global Cities.” His classes as much as his books inspired me to venture into the domains of sociology and statistics to develop this thesis’ down-to-earth second chapter, and with that a new approach. I also want to specially thank the economist Branko Milanovic, whose writings and course, “Within-National Inequalities: From Pareto to Piketty,” both sparked and helped me articulate this thesis’ third chapter, which I see as one of its original contributions. I express my gratitude to Professor Tomohisa Hattori for an important addition I had to make in the first chapter to help clarify Hugo Chávez’s rise to power, and to Professor David Gordon for important reflections during our long conversations about the left-right controversy.

Before graduating summa cum laude at the CUNY Baccalaureate for Interdisciplinary Studies, I was granted the opportunity to study over half a dozen courses at the graduate level. One of the Ph.D. courses I studied, at the Graduate Center, in 2011, was with Professor Kenneth Paul Erickson. Near the end of this second master’s I had the opportunity to take a second course under Professor Erickson, but already in 2011 I knew that Ken was then, and would continue to be for many years to come, one of the very few professors who I would ever want as my thesis’ tutor.

Indeed, everything in this thesis that has transcended my affinity for “debater’s phrasings” and my bent to write “a mystery story,” as Ken puts it, as well as my lack of rigor to “define all key concepts” and to provide documentation to “support every claim,” is due to him. But thanks also to his dedication I have made innumerable additions to this text that have both enriched it and made it clearer. What I could not fully incorporate after so much caring advice is only my fault.

Finally, I want to thank my dear friend Alex Wieder for translating into English the many interview excerpts and citations in Spanish that I have used in this text. Without Alex’s generous offer when I was just too burnt-out to translate anything, and without the intellectual support and inspiration from my wife, Ivonne, and my daughter, Camille, I could not have finished this work.
Introduction

At first, I thought that Chávez’s failed coup d’état was right wing. Then I realized that there was no coup that was not right wing.

Manuel Caballero

Socialism is the equivalent of developing the productive forces, because a socialism that impoverishes them would be a step backwards in the name of social charity.

Américo Martín

Already in my first academic paper in the United States, entitled “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters”—for my first B.A. course at the City College of New York, in the summer of 2009—, I dealt with a subject that bothered me as the most intriguing and vexing contradiction: How was it possible that Hugo Chávez’s government in Venezuela was almost universally perceived as a leftist administration, both by its population and in major academic circles overseas?¹ Cui bono: “to whose benefit” was this, admittedly not so obvious, misrepresentation of the facts? The Italian philosopher of law and political sciences and historian of political thought, Norberto Bobbio, tells us in his now classic, Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction:

One of the most significant achievements of the socialist movements, which for a century have been and are still, for the moment at least, identified with the left, is the recognition of social rights alongside libertarian rights […] There is an element which typifies the doctrines and movements which are called and are universally recognized as left-wing, and that element is egalitarianism, by which we mean a tendency to praise that which makes people more equal rather than that which makes people less equal.²

¹ “The Sleep of Reason” is Goya’s best known print from his masterful series “Los caprichos.” All the scholars mentioned below have affirmed at some point Chavismo’s democratic spirit. Thus, like them, by “left wing” I imply its democratic variations. But all left wing and “socialist” ideologies share one trait, at least rhetorically: the search of egalitarianism and social equality. ² Norberto Bobbio, Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 70-71
And, in his *Political Economy: A Comparative Approach*, the political economist Barry Clark also explains how “leftists claim that human development flourishes when individuals engage in cooperative, mutually respectful relations that can thrive only when excessive differences in status, power, and wealth are eliminated.” While, for him, “rightists claim that hierarchical social relations are essential to a good society. A society lacking sufficient hierarchy will fail to provide incentives for citizens to excel, resulting in a stifling mediocrity, dragging the entire society into economic stagnation, boredom, and apathy.” In any case, Bobbio clarifies:

> It was pure accident that the names given to the two political poles were ‘left’ and ‘right.’ As is well known, the use of these two words goes back to the French Revolution, at least as far as national politics are concerned. It is an extremely banal spatial metaphor, whose origin was pure chance, and whose sole function was to name the dichotomy which has prevailed in politics for two centuries, [but it] has prevailed because it is essential.

On a concrete level, in the following pages I propose how the specific manner in which Chávez implemented his at first apparently benign redistributive politics could do nothing but precipitate what I will argue are the times of starkest inequality in modern Venezuelan history. Integral to this, albeit on a more philosophical level, here I will offer as well a theory of why and how Chávez’s representations might have been so misinterpreted. In his translator’s introduction to Jacques Rancière’s *The Politics of Aesthetics*, the philosopher Gabriel Rockhill observes:

> [For Rancière] the essence of politics consists in interrupting the distribution of the sensible by supplementing it with those who have no part in the perceptual coordinates of the community, thereby modifying the very aesthetico-political field of possibility […] Those [without] name, who remain invisible and inaudible, can only penetrate the police

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4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 33
order via a mode of subjectivization that transforms the aesthetic coordinates of the community by implementing the universal presupposition of politics: we are all equal.  

Whereas I argue how Chávez and his successors have made of Venezuela one of the most unequal countries in the planet in the *material domain of its economy*, essential to Marxism, here I also propose in what manner, in the theater of appearances of the political, Chávez was the first Latin American politician in the neoliberal era who could effectively articulate for its *dēmos* that there could never be true democracy with rampant poverty. While empowering “the people” in the end only symbolically, Chávez “showed his spectators how they were players of their play.”

From extraordinary internationally renowned thinkers, such as the Nobel Prize economist Joseph Stiglitz, Slavoj Žižek, Noam Chomsky, and Gianni Vattimo, to intellectuals—only in the United States—like NYU’s History Professor Greg Grandin; Pomona College’s historian and political analyst Miguel Tinker Salas; economist, writer, and activist Michael Albert, or Drexel University’s political theorist George Ciccariello-Maher, the list of political thinkers who have vouched for Hugo Chávez’s “socialism” is puzzling. In Europe, we could add to this group the

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6 Jacques, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 3. For Rancière, “Subjectivization” is the process by which a political subject extracts itself from the dominant categories of identification and classification; and “the police” “is an organizational system of coordinates that establishes a distribution of the sensible or a law that divides the community into groups, social positions, and functions. This law implicitly separates those who take part from those who are excluded.” Ibid. aesthetic division between the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, the sayable and the unsayable.

7 As we will read later in this text, a very appropriate sentence paraphrased from Issac V. Joslin, “Baroque and Post-Colonial Sub-Saharan Francophone Africa: The Aesthetic Embodiment of Unreason” (Ph.D. Dissertation submitted to the University of Minnesota, 2010), 211.

8 Just to name a few books relevant in U.S. academia: the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo’s (with Santiago Zabala) *Hermeneutic Communism: from Heidegger to Marx* (2011); Steve Ellner’s *Rethinking Venezuelan Politics: Class, Conflict, and the Chávez Phenomenon* (2008); Miguel Tinker Salas’ *Venezuela, What Everyone Needs to Know* (2014), and his *The Enduring Legacy: Oil, Culture, and Society in Venezuela* (2009); George Ciccariello-Maher’s *We Created
enormously influential circle around the former editor-in-chief of *Le Monde Diplomatique* from 1991 to 2008, Ignacio Ramonet. The list only grows exponentially in Latin America and the “Third World.” But the damage that many of these thinkers have unwittingly caused by ignoring the counterevidence and discarding even the most radically progressive and honest of Chávez’s critics as “neo-conservatives” has been profound.\(^9\) It has served only the most undemocratic extremes of the Manichean divide that Chávez contrived to consolidate his “neo-totalitarianism,” and today to the general discredit of the Left in the continent, perhaps for decades to come. In reality, as the Mexican historian and political writer Enrique Krauze already described in 2008:

> La Revolución bolivariana es ante todo un fenómeno mediático posmoderno en el que un solo hombre, Hugo Chávez (el teleevangelista político más extraordinario que ha nacido en América Latina), actúa el papel de revolucionario heroico frente a una multitud de sinceros adeptos a su mensaje mesiánico […] El teleevangelista es militar y ha salido de compras para comprar armas, cada vez más armas. El teleevangelista es dueño del petróleo y reparte dinero, mucho dinero. El teleevangelista es propietario privado de la presidencia venezolana. El teleevangelista, en suma, puede salir de las pantallas y hacer, en un acto de “realismo mágico”, su “real gana”. Es un monarca absoluto.\(^{10}\)

Paraphrasing my epigraph by the notable left-wing Venezuelan historian, essayist, and journalist, Manuel Caballero: There is no political televangelist who is not right wing either.\(^{11}\)

Indeed, long before 2005, when Chávez proclaimed his “Socialismo del Siglo XXI” at the Fifth

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\(^9\) Showing that counterevidence from an interdisciplinary perspective is one of this thesis’s goals.

\(^{10}\) The Bolivarian revolution is, first and foremost, a post-modern media phenomenon in which one man alone, Hugo Chávez (the most extraordinary [political*] televangelist born in Latin America) plays the role of a heroic revolutionary before a crowd of sincere followers of his messianic message […] The televangelist is a military and has gone shopping to buy arms, more and more arms. The televangelist is the owner of the oil and distributes money, lots of money. The televangelist is the private owner of the Venezuelan presidency. The televangelist, in short, can come out of the screens and perform, in an act of “magical realism” “whatever he wants.” He is an absolute monarch. Enrique Krauze: *El poder y el delirio* (Caracas: Editorial Alfa, 2008), 62

\(^{11}\)*On “televangelism” as transcending the original connotation used in the U.S. to encompass as well any televised form of politics with strong messianic components that addresses a group of “elect” vs. the reject, see the interviews’ excerpts quoted on pages 15 and 16 and my comments.
World Social Forum, in Brazil, he founded his *Movimiento Revolucionario “Bolivariano”* 200 in 1982, with which he planned and executed his failed military coup in 1992. And only much later, after 1997 through its decade-long transformation into the *Movimiento V República*, he would create the *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* in March of 2007. For as Carl Schmitt cleverly observed nearly a century ago, in his “The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy:” “Until now the democracy of mankind and parliamentarism has only once been contumely pushed aside through the conscious appeal to myth. And that was an example of the irrational power of the national myth.”12 But Chávez did not need to say, like Mussolini, “We have created a myth, this myth is a belief, a noble enthusiasm […] the great nation which we want to make into a reality for ourselves.”13 In his new and exuberant iconography, he created a foundational tale: the “Tree with the Three Roots,” which reminded us of how Hugo Chávez and his Bolivarian Revolution had been inspired by the lives and spirits of Simón Bolívar, Simón Rodríguez, and Ezequiel Zamora.14 Instead, he settled for renaming the country “*Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela:*”

_Audazmente hemos tratado de buscar un punto de referencia original y autóctono, de un modelo ideológico que pudiese ser cohesionado en torno al planteamiento bolivariano, zamarano y de Rodríguez […] Somos un movimiento revolucionario, un movimiento popular a favor de la causa de los dominados de este país y de este planeta.***”15

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13 Ibid., 76
14 Simón Bolívar was the Venezuelan soldier and statesman who led the independence wars against the Spanish Empire that established Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Perú, Bolivia, and Panamá as independent states. Simón Rodríguez was Bolivar’s tutor and mentor; Ezequiel Zamora was a legendary caudillo in the 19th century (See more about this on pages 12 and 13).
15“*We have boldly tried to search for an original, indigenous reference point, of an ideological model that might fit around the premise of Bolívar, Zamora and Rodriguez… We are a revolutionary movement. A popular movement working on behalf of the subjugated of this country and this planet.***” Cristina Marcano y Alberto Barrera-Tyszka, *Hugo Chávez sin uniforme. Una historia personal* (Caracas: Ramdom House Mondadori, 2004), 154.
Venezuela: Oil and Madness. Politics, Propaganda, and Realities of the Chavista Era, is an interdisciplinary exploration of Venezuela’s politics and its consequences during the Chavista years. This work was initially planned to be a much longer Ph.D. thesis, both inspired by but also including the full series of ten interviews—eight of which were hours-long conversations—that I conducted in Venezuela with well-known leaders, politicians, and intellectuals of its government and opposition during 2013.\textsuperscript{16} However, the vertiginous political, economic, and social changes that started to unravel in the country in February of 2014, shortly after my interviews, and later personal circumstances that led me to pursue this M.A. in Liberal Studies with a specialty in International Studies, rather than my envisioned Ph.D., complicated that project.\textsuperscript{17} Still, I offer brief summaries of all ten interviews (of roughly 1,200 words each) as an appendix due to their

\textsuperscript{16} Those conversations lasted from nearly fifty minutes in one case to over three hours on two occasions. Among my interviewees, there were two former ministers: the first, vice-Secretary of the Presidency during Chávez’s first term and later Minister of Culture until 2011; the second, a former vice-minister of Health. There were two former presidential candidates: one, a legendary guerrilla leader during the 60s, founder of the Venezuelan party “MIR,” and prolific writer; the other, Venezuela’s highest vote-getter to Congress in 2010, later impeached, in 2014, after co-leading the movement “The Way Out,” which capitalized from and further promoted massive student protests on the streets since February of that year. I was also able to interview some well-known intellectuals: historians, journalists, and political analysts, and some heads of leading public and private institutions. Among them were the then director of both the National Center of History and the National Archive; the then President of the UNT—the largest trade-union in Venezuela—; the former Dean of the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello—and President of the “Association of Universities Entrusted to the Society of Jesus in Latin America”—; and the chief research coordinator of PROVEA, one of the country’s most prominent HR organizations.

\textsuperscript{17} In February of 2014, \textit{La salida}—translated by the international press as “The Exit,” but rather meaning “The Way Out” (as in “the only way out”)—, was a spontaneous wave of massive student protests that had started in January of that year in the city of Mérida, after the murder of Héctor Moreno, a student of the Universidad de los Andes – Mérida, that spread to the rest of the country after a second student was nearly raped in February in the city of San Cristóbal, at the Universidad de los Andes – Táchira. On February 12\textsuperscript{th}, three important leaders of the opposition: at the time Caracas’s Mayor, Antonio Ledezma, popular former presidential candidate Leopoldo López, and Member of Congress María Corina Machado (one of my interviewees) helped organize that movement as a national protest to oust Nicolás Maduro’s government. The drastic fall in oil prices later that year has ended by submerging Venezuela in a humanitarian crisis.
prescience and historical value, but the limitations of space for this Master’s thesis, as well as the
time elapsed, has forced me to refocus instead on my own interdisciplinary explorations. The
above notwithstanding, without those conversations this thesis would not exist; there are multiple
quotations of those interviews interspersed in the text for a more encompassing understanding.  

During the past few years alone, I have read literally thousands of articles and several dozen
books related to Venezuela and its circumstances. Only to mention a fraction of representative
books just by the Venezuelan left: Teodoro Petkoff’s El chavismo como problema (2010), El
socialismo irreal (2007), and Las dos izquierdas (2005); Manuel Caballero’s La peste militar.
Escritos polémicos (2007); and my interviewees’ Margarita López Maya’s (who proclaimed the
official discourse for Hugo Chávez’s ratification before the National Assembly, in 2004), Del
Viernes Negro al Referendo Revocatorio (2005); Américo Martín’s Huracán sobre el Caribe
(2013) and Socialismo del siglo XXI. ¿Huida hacia el laberinto? (2007); and Rafael Uzcátegui’s
La revolución como espectáculo (2010). In fact, from the majority of my interviewees who are
prolific writers, I have read many of the texts they have published (and from the few who are not,
most of their testimonies). A bibliography of some fifty books by Venezuelan authors from its
full political spectrum and by international experts on the subject is offered at the end of this
thesis. But, as with my now remote first paper, beyond all the interviews, books, articles, and
interactions, it is my passion as a knowledgeable Venezuelan that has vitally motivated and
informed this work. I write this thesis as an engaged observer as much as a dedicated scholar.

The first and more theoretical chapter of this thesis involves a general study of what
populism and neo-populism (and rentierism) are, and how they operate. It also explains the ways

18 Translations in footnotes of the original excerpts and citations in Spanish by Alex Wieder.
in which Chavismo fits and exceeds these categories. In its first half, we consider works from the
Argentinian post-Marxist theorist Ernesto Laclau to the Mexican philosopher Ernesto Dussel, the
political theorist Benjamin Arditi, the comparativist Kenneth Erickson, and other specialists for
their “political science” understandings. The second half incorporates the French Marxist theorist
Guy Debord, the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, and other experts in cultural and literary
studies for what I consider to be this thesis’ first original contribution: it is a psychological and
literary deconstruction of Chávez’s myth and his “Aló Presidente” program in a baroque key.

The second, more sociological chapter, presents Venezuela’s gruesome off-the-charts
statistics, albeit focusing on its homicide rates—Caracas has been the “world’s homicide capital”
since 2015, and Venezuela has the second highest murder rate worldwide. While the first chapter
considers the magic of Chavismo’s “magical realism,” this one deals with its realities, indeed its
darkest side. In it, I establish the link between those statistics and the systematic dismantling of
the country’s institutions, and proceed to discard alternative explanations. Since the country’s
institutional meltdown is common knowledge in Venezuela, this chapter’s contribution is to have
linked that reality to the country’s collapse in general, and to present it to the American public.

The last chapter analyses the prior statistics from the point of view of economics, and
specifically of income inequality, to propose how Chavismo’s “socialism” has turned Venezuela
into one of the world’s most unequal countries. Because the search for social equality is what
brings together all socialisms from their most democratic to their totalitarian forms, at least
rhetorically, I see these findings as my third original contribution. In the concluding section, a
journalistic postscript, I offer a sequence of the political events after the constitutional coup
d’état, on March of 2017, and of the ensuing crimes against humanity to repress street protests.
**La Cuarta República: Venezuelan democracy in crisis before Chávez’s rise to power**

Two introductory sections seem essential before we start considering our explorations. The first involves a brief account of the institutional crisis that led to the social explosion of 1989, known as *El Caracazo*, and to the two failed coups d’état in 1992, the first of them led by Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez Frías together with other field and junior officers. This historical narrative is crucial to understand important aspects that in my opinion explain the perfect timing, acumen, and *naturalness* with which Chávez started to be perceived as a “Bolivarian socialist” during the neoliberal period. The second segment deals with the subject of Venezuela’s exceptionalism.

Contrary to all of Latin America except for Costa Rica, Venezuela lived decades of representative politics—and remarkable social achievements—from the late 1950s to the early 1980s, until the infamous “Black Friday” that wrecked the country on February 18 of 1983 (*La Salida, El Caracazo*, and Chávez’s coup also occurred in a February).¹⁹ The region’s most stable and widely accepted currency since the 1930s lost over half of its value that day. During the next decade, the Bolívar’s unstoppable downward spiral and the geometrically increased corruption due to the mix of a sudden and unprecedented scarcity and new currency exchange controls, all but severed the democratic channels that a vertiginously impoverishing population had once

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¹⁹ Not to make an overstatement, many political analysts consider that Colombia and Mexico should also be included as imperfect democracies during this period, but this author disagrees. Venezuela’s “Black Friday” happened on February 18 of 1983 due to massive capital flights of U.S. dollars, mostly from corporate sectors (estimated at US$90 billion) that started to occur in 1981 as a consequence of declining oil prices after the Islamic Revolution in Iran cut production, making oil prices peak in 1979. With the Central Bank devoid of foreign exchange reserves, that day banks did not open their doors, and the government of President Luis Herrera Campins was forced to devalue the Venezuelan currency by 100% and soon after to impose exchange controls. For more about Venezuela’s “Black Friday,” see Ramón Santiago, “On the Anniversary of Black Friday: Venezuela’s Devaluation and Inflation Debacle from 1983 to 1998,” *Axis of Logic*, February 18, 2008: http://www.axisoflogic.com/artman/publish/Article_26069.shtml
enjoyed with its representatives. The IMF’s neoliberal “adjustment program” further deepened the population’s protests and despair. However, alternative channels of expression started to fill that vacuum: groups of students and intellectuals, more attuned and nimble new (and renewed) socialist parties, HR NGOs, communal organizations, the media, the Church, and of course the military: Hugo Chávez rode that tsunami. Once on the shore, he carefully started to adjust his uniform. Few of those civilian groups kept leverage after El Comandante Chávez’s second year in power. And only in 2005, after those groups had been either tossed or absorbed into Chávez’s militias, he proclaimed his Socialismo del Siglo XXI at the Fifth World Social Forum, in Brazil.  

But a second set of events catapulted Chávez to enter the presidential elections of 1998 and win the country’s presidency. And it was the series of incidents, or rather of extraordinary blunders, that led to his early release from prison a mere two years after his unsuccessful coup against then President Carlos Andres Pérez, when Chávez briefly appeared on national TV to proclaim his celebrated “Por ahora” allocation (“Comrades: unfortunately, for the moment, the objectives that we had set for ourselves have not been achieved”); there, he personally assumed responsibility for the coup and asked his comrades to lay down their arms.  

After spending two years in jail, Chávez received a “pardon” from Carlos Andrés Pérez’s nemesis—and then newly reelected President—Rafael Caldera. Caldera had been one of the original signatories of the Pacto de Punto Fijo (the Punto Fijo Pact, named after Caldera’s house, where it was signed) that had consolidated the two-party system of representative politics forty years earlier. The pact was

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20 Term coined by Heinz Dietrich, first used by Chávez in 2005 at the Fifth World Social Forum.  
22 Popularly called a “presidential pardon,” it was rather a dismissal with prejudice of the case decided from Rafael Caldera’s Presidency. In fact, Chávez’s trial was still pending at the time.
signed by Rómulo Betancourt, the founder of Pérez’s own party, Acción Democrática, Rafael Caldera for his party, COPEI, and an important political figure who was never to achieve the presidency, Jóvito Villalba, for his party, URD. In the aftermath of Chávez’s coup, Caldera gave some polemic declarations justifying the “painful and deplorable incident of the military revolt” that infused with new life his long declining political career: “We cannot ask people to immolate themselves for freedom and democracy, when freedom and democracy are not able to feed them [...] Democracy cannot exist if the people are hungry.”23 Those words gained him the people’s trust to become the country’s president for a second term after having tried for two decades; he also promised to pardon the coup plotters should he be elected.24 At a time when the Venezuelan people had become disenchanted with the two-party “partidocracia” (indeed, the shrewd Caldera disavowed the party he founded to run and win as an independent), Chávez’s release from jail—and some gross miscalculations by those parties during the next election, further weakened after Caldera’s victory—opened the gates for Chávez to become the next Venezuelan president.25

According to Michael Coppedge’s “Explaining Democratic Deterioration in Venezuela:”

Partyarchy helped channel this moral outrage into a rejection of AD and COPEI at the polls. The downside to being so much in control for so many years is that everyone knows whom to blame when things go wrong. (Of course, voters could have blamed the IMF or oil buyers, but they were not on the ballot.) [...] When the oil economy went bust, the middle class shrank and working-class unions lost membership and clout. The political culture became less moderate and more radical. Venezuelans withdrew some

24 Carlos Eduardo Guerra, “¿Quién es el culpable? ¿Indulto o Sobreseimiento?” Wordpress, Jan 26, 2013: https://carloseguerraa.wordpress.com/2013/01/26/quiien-es-el-culpable-indulto-o-sobreseimiento/
support for the regime and the moderate parties, and turned instead to leftist parties and an immoderate, intransigent, and intolerant politician—Hugo Chávez Frías.\textsuperscript{26}

But Venezuela’s \textit{exceptionalism} is not only due to its oil riches, or to Simón Bolívar’s feats in the continent to liberate six countries from the Spanish monarchy and help cement with his writings the bases for modern Latin American republicanism. Venezuela also had the largest civil devastation during the Independence wars (a third of its population died).\textsuperscript{27} And, following its Independence, it suffered 166 \textit{caudillo} insurrections during half a century of wars that left between 400,000 and one million casualties, depending on the source.\textsuperscript{28} According to Steve Ellner and Miguel Tinker Salas, two scholars who vouch for \textit{Chavismo}’s socialism, those events “nearly decimated the established aristocracy,” which contributed to the country’s “having greater social mobility than its socially stratified neighbors […] a high degree of miscegenation and [a lack of] the legal structures of [social] separation evident elsewhere in Latin America.”\textsuperscript{29} Venezuela is the only country in Ibero-America never to have fought a war against a neighboring nation. And, together with Costa Rica, it was the only Latin American nation not to fall under

\textsuperscript{26} Michael Doppage, “Explaining Democratic Deterioration in Venezuela through Nested Inference,” (presentation, Congreso Latinoamericano de Ciencia Política, Universidad de Salamanca, España, 9-11 de julio de 2002), 5 and 13.
\textsuperscript{28} Luis Salamanca, “Las tres etapas más violentas en la historia de Venezuela,” Politika UCAB, Revista del Centro de Estudios Políticos, Junio 12, 2015: https://politikaucab.net/2015/06/12/las-tres-etapas-mas-violentas-en-la-historia-de-venezuela/
some form of dictatorship or civil war from the late 1950s until the early 2000s. Indeed, as the
Venezuelan political scientist Andrés Stambouli points out in his book, *La política extraviada*:

_No logramos la democracia porque tuvimos petróleo, más bien, los logros democráticos son producto de la artesanía política dirigida a confeccionar una comunidad política, utilizando al petróleo para tal fin [...]_ Venezuela pudo evitar, durante los años sesenta y los setenta, la ola militar autoritaria de la América Latina, no porque dispusiera del petróleo sino por el uso que le dio el liderazgo político social, en función de los fines democráticos compartidos. Venezuela dispuso de petróleo desde principios de siglo, pero de una democracia en proceso de permanente consolidación solo a partir de 1958._

Today, together with Cuba, Venezuela is the only country in Latin America under a hybrid military-civilian regime. In fact, after Chávez’s death, Venezuela has transitioned to a unique military takeover: the most exceptional in the Americas. In a country where, as Ellner and Tinker Salas explain, “its protracted democratic stability after 1958 appeared to differentiate the nation from the military dictatorships that dominated Latin America from the 1950s through the 1980s,” in the following pages we will examine an era of exceptions of a different kind.

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30 “We did not achieve democracy because we had oil; the democratic achievements are rather the product of a political craftsmanship aimed at creating a political community that used oil to such end [...] During the sixties and seventies, Venezuela was able to avoid the authoritarian military wave of Latin America, not because it had oil at its disposal, but because of how the socio-political leadership made use of it in terms of shared democratic purposes. Venezuela had access to oil since the beginning of the century, but to a democracy in a permanent consolidation process only after 1958.” Andrés Stambouli, *La política extraviada. Una historia de Medina a Chávez* (Caracas: Fundación para la cultura urbana, 2009), 123

31 According to Sergio Bitar (a former Chilean minister in the administrations of Salvador Allende, Ricardo Lagos, and Michelle Bachelet), who was a political refugee in Venezuela during Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship, “Se ha instalado un poder que tiene la complicidad de unas Fuerzas Armadas que son incapaces de señalar que se respete la Constitución. Yo diría que, siendo algo muy propio de Venezuela, que no se puede asimilar con las dictaduras de los 70 y los 80, es más sofisticada, usan mecanismos democráticos de fachada para ir devorando a la democracia.” Sergio Bitar, “Uno no gana con ética en la política, gana con poder; por Hugo Prieto,” Pro davinci, August 13, 2017: _http://prodavinci.com/2017/08/13/actualidad/sergio-bitar-uno-no-gana-con-etica-en-la-politica-gana-con-poder-por-hugo-prieto/

32 Ellner and Tinker Salas, Ibid.
First Chapter

I. Populism, Neo-Populism, and Paradoxes of the Chavista Era

The root of the spectacle is that oldest of all social specializations, the specialization of power. The spectacle plays the specialized role of speaking in the name of all the other activities. It is hierarchical society’s ambassador to itself, delivering its messages at a court where no one else is allowed to speak. The most modern aspect of the spectacle is thus also the most archaic.

Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

Form is the limiting principle by which a thing is itself.

R. P. Blackmur

To understand the Hugo Chávez phenomenon, as well as the appalling deterioration of Chavismo and his successors after his death, a panoramic view of classical populism and of “neo-populism”—the later tellingly so-called only after the Washington Consensus—will help us elucidate in what ways Chavismo became the emblematic embodiment of neo-populism, the implications of the reemergence of populist politics in many parts of our world upon the seeming shortcomings of liberal democracy, and the ways in which Chávez and his successors are at once representative of neo-populist traits and unique to the Venezuelan experience. Besides, when confronted with what according to most poststructuralist analysts is the false binary of liberal democracy and neo-populist politics, such an analysis will help us decipher how, more than an *articulatory form* (Ernesto Laclau), or an *internal periphery of democracy* (Benjamin Arditi), Chávez’s radical takeover of the country through his *baroque* televised revolution marked a departure from traditional political forms, both liberal and populist, not as a hybrid, either, but rather as a mutation: a crude but clear manifestation of a detour in the unfolding of democracy.

In the introduction to their *Latin American Populism in the Twenty-First Century*, the political scientists and editors Carlos de la Torre and Cynthia J. Arnson argue that “the reemergence of populism as part of the discussion of contemporary politics in Latin America is,
for the most part, a product of the regime and persona of Hugo Chávez;”³³ For his part, Francisco Panizza, a senior lecturer in Latin American politics at the London School of Economics and Political Science as well as a prolific analyst on the subject of populism, adds in his “What Do We Mean When We Talk About Populism?” “If the political conflict in Venezuela in the 1990s and 2000s had been defined only by struggles about the distributions of oil rents, it is unlikely that it would have led to such a radical rupture of the political order as seen in the Bolivarian Revolution.”³⁴ Similarly, the Ecuadorian politician, scholar, and political analyst César Montúfar concludes in his “Rafael Correa and his Plebiscitary Citizen Revolution” that our current populist radical regimes do not see themselves as “another government, subject to democratic alternation, but as a new political regime that will endure over time, opening a new epoch.”³⁵ One of my interviewees, the historian Luis Pellicer, at the time President of Venezuela's Archivo General de la Nación and President in charge of the Centro Nacional de Historia, explained it this way:

*Te lo digo con Tucídides y con Manuel Briceño Guerrero: Hay hombres que empalman su corazón con el corazón colectivo y las circunstancias históricas para lograr grandes hazañas y grandes hechos. Si esos hombres siguen vivos en la memoria del colectivo, en el corazón del colectivo, su legado logrará perpetuarse. Lo que llamamos aquí corazón es la afectividad y el raciocinio. Eso fue Bolívar y eso debe ser Chávez para nosotros.*³⁶

If this paean may seem like a radical statement coming from the acting director of two of Venezuela’s most important historical institutions, *Chavismo*’s messianic reality has been the cause of much consternation as well as of considerable curiosity for many of its opponents. One

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³⁴ Ibid., 98
³⁵ Ibid., 8
³⁶ “I'll tell you with Thucydides and with Manuel Briceño Guerrero: There are men who join their hearts with the collective heart and the historical circumstances to achieve great feats with great deeds. If those men remain alive in the collective memory, in the collective heart, their legacy will perpetuate itself. What we call here “heart” is emotion and reason. That is who Bolívar was, and that's who Chávez must be for us.”
of my interviewees, Luis Ugalde, s.j., President of the “Association of Universities Entrusted to the Society of Jesus in Latin America,” author of numerous books and essays on the subject, and member of the Academia de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, sees this as a motive of great concern:

Chávez, con su magia comunicacional, con su audacia verbal y con su condición militar encarnadora del poder de imposición armada, resultó para muchos ideal para castigar a los que traicionaron al pueblo y colmar las esperanzas de éste. [Un problema con esto] es la ilusión mesiánica de que hay acceso a la felicidad por la vía de creer en el mesías político, fértil en imaginación y promesas, pero anti modelo en la responsabilidad de gestión pública, eficiente, honesta. [...] Uno de los daños mayores que hemos heredado es que el mesías no creía en la democracia y sobre todo descalificaba a todos los que no fueran seguidores y dóciles a él. Sin reconocimiento desde el Estado de la dignidad y razón de los que opinan de otra manera, no es posible la democracia.\textsuperscript{37}

But Rafael Uzcátegui, the Chief Research Coordinator of PROVEA (Venezuelan Program of Education-Action on Human Rights), one of Venezuela's most prominent Human Rights NGOs, author of Venezuela, Revolution as Spectacle, and other works, and coeditor of the only anarchist publication in the country, told me something that in part inspired this chapter’s second half. A critic both of the government and of the traditional opposition, he wondered:

Una cosa en la que he estado pensando mucho [...] es en todos los elementos subjetivos, carismáticos, de la relación de Chávez con la gente. Yo creo que eso faltó. En el libro [above] había mucha racionalidad, un análisis profundo, una necesidad de racionalizar mucho el análisis para dar un primer elemento, pero creo que faltó explicar toda esa sintonía que tenía con los sectores populares por una serie de sincretismos religiosos, carismáticos, esa construcción de una nueva religiosidad popular llamada chavismo.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{37} “With his communicational magic, his verbal audacity, and military condition that embodied the power of armed imposition, Chávez was ideal, for many, to punish those who betrayed the people, and thus to sate their hope. [A problem with this] is the messianic illusion that there is access to happiness through the belief in this political messiah, fertile with imagination and promises, but an anti-model with regards to efficient, honest, public policy responsibility [...] One of the greatest harms we have inherited is that the messiah did not believe in democracy and, above all, disqualified all who weren't followers and docile to him. Without the State's recognition of the dignity and reason of those who think differently, democracy is not possible.”

\textsuperscript{38} “Something I've been thinking about a lot [...] is all the subjective, charismatic elements of Chávez's relationship with the people. I believe that that was missing. In the book there was much rationality, a profound analysis, a need to overly rationalize the analysis in order to provide
After offering an analysis of what populism and neo-populism are—and are not—to ask whether Chavismo has inaugurated a new political category, in the second part of this chapter I suggest that to understand Chavismo’s seismic repercussions in the continent we must transcend the strictly political and inquire into what gave form to the revolution that made Chávez a major protagonist in contemporary history: the style and meaning of his relatively neglected and often derided media government from the “Aló Presidente” program. Only through its conduit could Chávez impress his “politics,” first by re-presenting and progressively by molding Venezuela’s mass culture. Indeed, as his fervent admirer and remarkably successful new kid on the “populist” block, Spain’s Podemos party’s Pablo Iglesias, explains: “En el año 2012, el 90% de un discurso político es un dispositivo audiovisual, el 95% de un liderazgo es un dispositivo audiovisual.”

Following the Argentinian post-Marxist political theorist Ernesto Laclau, most political analysts explain neo-populism today variously (and aptly, but insufficiently) as a “mode of articulation.” Rather than exploring the contents of populist discourses or offering us a functionalist analysis, Laclau tells us: “a movement is not populist because in its politics or ideology it presents actual contents identifiable as populistic, but because it shows a particular logic of articulation of those contents—whatever those contents are.” Thus, to intend the paradoxical goal of more fully encompassing a subject that can only be comprehended by “the isolation of smaller units than the group, and the consideration of the social logic of their articulation,” Laclau invites us to see in one initial element, but I believe that his being so in tune with the popular sectors due to a series of religious and charismatic syncretism, that construction of a new popular religiosity called “Chavismo,” was left unexplained.”

39 Eduardo Muriel, “Cinco claves del éxito de la campaña electoral de Podemos,” La Marea, May 26, 2014: https://www.lamarea.com/2014/05/26/cinco-claves-del-exito-de-la-campana-electoral-de-podemos/

40 Francisco Panizza, Ed, Populism and the Mirror of Democracy (New York: Verso, 2005), 33
the distinct demands of the multiple collective wills the social building blocks that must be thus articulated. In his essay, “What’s In a Name?” we find the three structural elements that will link these demands to understand (neo) populism: “equivalential chains,” an “internal frontier,” and “empty (or floating) signifiers.” For Laclau, “a social situation in which demands tend to reaggregate themselves on the negative basis that they all remain unsatisfied is the first precondition of that mode of political articulation that we call populism.” He explains:

A *logic of equivalence* (is) one in which all the demands tend to reaggregate themselves, forming what we will call an *equivalential chain of reivindicaciones* [“demands,” where] each demand presents its own claim as only one among a large set of social claims […] The subject of a demand conceived as differential particularity we will call a *democratic subject*. In the other case the subject will be wider, for its subjectivity will result from the equivalential aggregation of a plurality of democratic demands. A subject constituted on the basis of this logic we will call a *popular subject* […] A situation in which a plurality of unsatisfied demands and an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb them differentially co-exist, creates the condition leading to a populist rupture.

However, if a popular *subject* emerges through *equivalential chains*, there can still be no popular *subjectivity* “without the creation of an ‘internal frontier’ [because] the equivalences are only such in terms of a lack pervading them all. Equivalential popular discourses divide the social into two camps:” the power block and the *people*. But a fourth “articulatory surface” is still missing from our compound articulation: the “empty” and/or “floating” signifier. For the

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41 Most post-structuralists resort to varying sets of jointed and disjointed metaphors: “internal frontier” (Laclau); “de-alignments” (Panizza); “antagonistic dimensions” (Chantal Mouffé); “internal periphery” (Benjamin Arditi); “constitutive outside” (Glenn Bowman); “body-in-pieces” (Joseph Lowndes); “mirror-imaging” (David Laycock); a “network of meaning” with a “nodal point” (Yannis Stavrakakis); “structural dislocations” (Sebastián Barros), etc. Like with any efficient articulation, their styles adjust to their explored subjects: because both post-structuralism and populism reject the self-sufficiency, respectively, of the human sciences and of liberal politics, each calls into question the binary oppositions that constitute these structures.

42 Panizza, Ibid., 33

43 Ibid., 37

44 Ibid., 38

45 A “compound articulation” has three or more articulatory surfaces where the bones connect.
hegemony of one symbolic signifier over the rest can only be achieved by the populist production of *tendentially* empty signifiers: “As their function is to bring to equivalential homogeneity a highly heterogeneous reality, they can only do so on the basis of reducing to the minimum their particularistic content.”⁴⁶ Hence, for Laclau, populism is a *mode* of discourse made of empty or floating hegemonic signifiers that symbolically link a diversity of unsatisfied demands in equivalential chains by creating an internal frontier (a culpable other). And I would add: *thus molding, while assuming its shape, the popular subject that it purports to embody.*

Two advantages of this formula are that it can be equally applied to the neo-populism of the extreme right and of the radical left and to the full spectrum between them. And, as I will propose here, that by putting an emphasis on its “articulatory” logic, this formula immediately refers us to its enhancing prosthesis: the mass media. This is what sets neo-populism apart as a mutation. Intuitively copying Guy Debord’s third thesis, early in his mandate, Chávez discovered that “The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a means of unification. […] But due to the very fact that this sector is separate […] the unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of universal separation.”⁴⁷ This is strikingly similar to how the political analyst Joseph Lowndes describes the populism of George Wallace, the segregationist 45th Governor of Alabama: “hegemonic movements all require some illusion of complete commonality—a particularity that comes to stand for the general—as well as foes against which to forge that commonality.”⁴⁸ Right or left, the formula makes no difference.

But if most poststructuralist definitions of neo-populism differ considerably from more classical explanations of populism (perhaps obviously, for they are distinct political phenomena

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⁴⁶ Ibid., 40
⁴⁸ Panizza, Ibid., 170-71
regardless or their similarities), both interpretations, as well as their traits in common and those where they stand apart, will help us identify where Chavismo stands as a political phenomenon. Of classical populism, Kenneth Erickson, the co-editor-in-chief of the Journal of Comparative Politics, says that: “Nationalism, stemming from political and economic dependence, marks all populist movements.” And “At best, Latin American populist movements reflect what Theodor Geiger defined (in contradistinction to ideologies) as mentalities, i.e., non-codified ways of thinking and feeling which are more emotional than rational.” We could argue how both nationalism and a “non-codified way of thinking” function as structural equivalents of Laclau’s internal frontiers and “empty signifiers.” But, for Erickson, these traits also help explain that:

Populist movements, because they seek a social base in the lower class, and their rhetoric emphasizes economic nationalism, state enterprise, and equitable distribution of food and services, are sometimes confused with socialist ones. This is a fundamental misunderstanding. Unlike socialism, populism fails to address itself to two important aspects of production [...] Because populist movements lack a comprehensive ideology, they see workers merely as consumers and thus focus mainly on distributing food and services to them [...] Second, their exclusive focus on distribution leads them to neglect the saving and investment necessary to create the food and services, [failing] everywhere to emphasize the necessity to create enduring political institutions to safeguard the just society they seek to establish [...] Hope for social justice rests instead with a hero-figure who will create with one blow the just society. Even if a savior could work such wonders, however, no political institutions would exist to ensure their preservation.  

Although Erickson’s paper was written a full quarter century before Chávez’s first government, it brings together what I believe is the central confounding aspect of Chavismo (thanks to its rhetoric) and accurately describes the country’s maladies today. I address those realities in detail in the following two chapters, but specifically as to Chavismo’s trait of treating

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50 Ibid., 120
51 Ibid., 123. But read as well the long excerpt of my interview with Américo Martín, on page 40.
“workers merely as consumers,” contrary to any socialism, that was, interestingly, a critique of several of my interviewees regardless of political affiliations. I will only quote three of them.

Tulio Hernández, arguably one of the handful of most influential intellectuals for the opposition (self-exiled in Spain in June of 2017 due to public threats of incarceration received from the Venezuelan president), a sociologist expert in culture, communication, and politics, as well as an international consultant for cultural and urban politics, explained it to me this way:

Lo único nuevo fueron las misiones que hacían sentir a la gente que se les estaba prestando atención directa, pero la verdadera gran inclusión fue la redistribución del ingreso que permitió que mucha gente se incorporara al consumo, sobre todo al consumo de determinados bienes eléctricos, electrónicos, del hogar, y al consumo de ropas de marcas y al consumo globalizado. Esa inclusión a través del mercado es realmente la única transformación profunda porque, a juzgar por el aparato económico, esto es un capitalismo de estado con un mercado tradicional de sociedades mono-productoras.52

But José León Uzcátegui, a former Health Vice Minister and at the time Carabobo State’s Director of Misión Barrio Adentro (the government’s flagship social welfare program, with over 7,000 centers nationwide that provide healthcare in poor communities), with an M.A. in Oil Economy, an M.D in Psychiatry, and a Ph.D. in Social Sciences, diagnosed a similar problem:

En la gente está la idea del “buen vivir” antes de saber que viene de los aimara o de los quechuas.53 Solo que el buen vivir en el lenguaje oficial -de nuevo, allí creo que el comandante supremo en esa parte no lo leyó bien- se convirtió en algo tan simple como que con una tarjeta de crédito podían adquirir electrodomésticos, colmar los mercados

52 “Las misiones (missions) were the only new thing that made people feel they were getting direct attention. But the true great inclusion was the re-distribution of income, which allowed many to join consumption, especially the consumption of certain electric, electronic home goods, and the consumption of brand-name fashion and general consumption. This inclusion through the market is really the only profound transformation because, judging by the economic apparatus, this is state capitalism with the traditional market of single-commodity producing societies.”

53 “Rooted in the indigenous belief system of the Quechua, “sumak kawsay,” the Quechua word for “buen vivir,” or “good living,” connotes a harmonious collective development that conceives of the individual within the context of the social and cultural communities and his or her natural environment.” It is in the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia. Adapted from Wikipedia: “Sumak Kawsay;” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sumak_Kawsay
bicentenarios, más equipos de aire acondicionado, más lavadoras, con lo cual de paso el problema eléctrico se hace mayor. Y vivir mejor así es lo contrario del buen vivir.  

While for his part, Luis Ugalde, who has been accused from each extreme of the political spectrum in Venezuela of being, respectively, a communist and a CIA agent, had this to say:

Esta demagogia lleva a despreciar la educación de calidad, el profesionalismo y la eficiencia productiva, a nombrar incompetentes, siempre que sean incondicionales políticamente. Crea además la ilusión y el deseo de acceder al consumo abundante de bienes superiores importados sin pasar por la producción de los mismos o de los equivalentes, que se transan en el mercado. Cuesta salir de la ilusión de que en Venezuela se puede dar la revolución del consumo sin la revolución de la producción.

However, there are several features of Chavismo that do not match classical populism’s traits. According to the former consultant for the Argentinian Ministry of Social Development, Hector E. Schamis, the main defining characteristics of classical urban-industrial populism are:

“movement, proindustrialization, multiclass, urban, inclusionary, reformist and redistributive, corporatist, nationalist, and a charismatic leader.” Chávez’s movement, which never was “proindustrialization,” “multiclass,” or “corporatist” (and “urban” only inasmuch as 90% of the country’s population already lived in its cities), displays just half of classical populism’s traits.

Following, we explain why Chavismo has been anything but multiclass and corporatist; and

54 “People have this notion of what ‘good living’ is before realizing that it originates from the Aymara or the Quechua. Except that in the official language—and, again, I believe that the supreme commander didn't quite ‘get’ that part—it became something as simple as the ability to acquire home appliances, stock the Bicentenario supermarkets, get more air conditioners, more washing machines, with a credit card, which, in turn, exacerbates the electrical problem. And living better this way is the opposite of ‘good living.’ ”

55 “This demagoguery leads to contempt for quality education, professionalism and productive efficiency, to the naming of incompetent individuals as long as they're politically unconditional. It also creates the illusion and the desire for access to abundant consumption of superior, imported goods foregoing the production of similar or equivalent products traded in the market. It is difficult to leave behind the illusion that the revolution of consumption can take place without a revolution of production in Venezuela.”

56 De la Torre and Arnson, Ibid., 151

Chavismo’s most solid constituency is not in the urban slums but in the smaller cities, towns and hamlets in the countryside (populations that during the past eighteen years have progressively become consumers of highly subsidized imported goods). And regarding “proindustrialization,” after in fact decimating the country’s private industry and laying waste its farm land, its civilian-military ruling caste has been fabulously enriching itself under the euphemism of an Alianza Cívico-Militar Bolivariana that sucks its oil and sacks the country by having also become its de facto trading elite.\footnote{58} Felipe Pérez, for instance, former minister of planning under Chávez’s first government, recently denounced the regular theft of 80% of the imported food managed by the military.\footnote{59} Yet, during Chávez’s first presidential campaign, one of his most powerful arguments was that it was a disgrace that in Venezuela nearly half of the goods consumed were imported. But eighteen years later the country must import nearly every good and over 70% of its food!\footnote{60}

The Argentinian-Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel calls today’s “populism:” “El ‘pseudo-populismo’ de hoy. Epíteto peyorativo como crítica política conservadora sin validez epistémica,” and tells us that classic urban-industrial populism emerged in the periphery thanks only to the hegemonic center’s “loosening of the grip” during its “world wars” for supremacy:

\begin{quote}
Fue un pacto social, en el que una débil burguesía nacional crecía al mismo tiempo que la clase obrera y organizaciones de campesinos. Las “Confederaciones Generales” de
\end{quote}

\footnote{58} Refer to the second and third chapters for a more detailed explanation of this.

\footnote{59} Federico Parra, “Felipe Pérez: Militares se quedan con 80% de las importaciones de los CLAP,” El Interés, January 4, 2017: \url{http://elestimulo.com/elinteres/felipe-perez-militares-se- quedan-con-80-de-las-importaciones-de-los-clap/}


\footnote{60} Anatoly Kurmanaev, “Venezuela has to Converge FX Rates to Grow, Ramirez Says,” Bloomberg News, Jun 15, 2014: \url{https://www.bloomberg.com/authors/ARFe0MFySwc/anatoly-kurmanaev}

Also, according to the United States Department of Agriculture, Venezuela imports 70% of its food. \url{http://www.fas.usda.gov/data/venezuela-prospects-us-agricultural-exports}
empresarios, obreros y/o campesinos pusieron de manifiesto la irrupción de una nueva constelación política, económica, social y cultural que se denominó “populismo”. Esta categorización no era negativa, sino intentaba mostrar el hecho de un proyecto político hegemónico (en tanto cumpla con los requerimientos de la mayoría de la población, incluyendo a la elite industrial) que afirmaba un cierto nacionalismo y protegía, gracias a un Estado con relativa autonomía de las clases dominantes, el mercado nacional.61

Other than for the systematic dismantling of Venezuela’s liberal institutions and a more socio-electorally conscious redistribution of its oil wealth (which after destroying the national industry is now more vital than ever), Chávez and his successors have been dramatic examples of anything but of a corporatist “pacto social,” and indeed of classical populism’s opposite traits.62

In fact, de la Torre and Arnson explain five ways in which these neo-populist democratic revolutions constitute a distinct phenomenon in the region. First, the “revolutions” are “carried out through [permanent] elections”; second, they are carried out in the name of a “substantive” and “redemptive” democracy; third, they seek to “refound” the nation, “creating expanded

61 “It was a social pact, in which a weak national bourgeoisie grew, at the same time as the working class and peasant organizations. The “General Confederacies” of entrepreneurs, workers, and/or peasants brought to light the irruption of a new political, economic, social, and cultural constellation that was denominated “populism.” This categorization wasn't negative, but rather attempted to present the fact of a hegemonic political project (at the same time as it met the requirements of the majority of the population, including the industrial elite) that would affirm a certain nationalism and protect, thanks to a State with relative autonomy from the dominant classes, the national market.” Enrique Dussel, “Cinco tesis sobre el ’populismo’” (México, UAM-Iztapalapa, 2007)
mechanisms of direct and semi-direct citizen participation and elaborately enshrining the role of the state in providing for social welfare;” fourth, they rely on state intervention of the economy in the name of distributing wealth and reducing poverty and inequality; and, lastly: “They view their governments as part of a continental or even worldwide movement aimed at the realignment of international politics.”63 As to all these traits, more than merely representative, Chavismo was pioneering in the continent. Margarita López Maya, former editor of the Venezuelan Magazine of Economics and Social Sciences of the Universidad Central de Venezuela, visiting professor, among others, at the universities of Oxford, Columbia, and Notre Dame, and member of both the Academies of Social and Political Sciences and of History, elaborated this during our interview:

Chávez fue el primero que puso la agenda de los pobres sobre la mesa en lugar principal y dijo: si no hacemos igualdad, aquí no hay democracia y no hay nada. Cuando él lo dijo en los años 98 y 99 eso era absolutamente contracorriente en América Latina y ahora es absolutamente de consenso, de derecha y de izquierda, Santos repartiendo tierras en Colombia, Lula y Roussef pasando los pobres a ser clase media en Brasil, Chávez con su discurso súper radical y todos de alguna manera [...] Él hizo el esfuerzo para que, además, se diese un diálogo entre estos países que no se hablaban. Hoy la relación que hay entre los gobiernos es muy diferente a la que había antes, incluso porque hay una camada de dirigentes que se han mantenido mucho rato en el poder. Se abrieron vasos comunicantes en esas naciones que pueden ir a otra cosa y el tema de la inclusión se volvió un tema importante de México para abajo. Cómo va a incidir eso en el planeta no lo sé porque venimos de un boom de materias primas en toda América Latina y eso está llegando a su fin. Claro, es más grave para Venezuela porque su materia prima es el petróleo. Cuando venga el tiempo de las vacas flacas no sé si esto va a retroceder…64

63 de la Torre and Arnson, Ibid., 9-13
64 “Chávez was the first to put the agenda of the poor on the table, in the main place and said: ‘if we don’t build equality, there's no democracy and there’s nothing here.’ When he said it, in 1998 and 1999, that was absolutely counter-current in Latin America and now it’s the absolute consensus, of left and right: Santos distributing land in Colombia, Lula and Roussef bringing the poor into the middle class in Brazil, Chávez, with his super-radical discourse and all somehow […] He made the effort so that, also, a dialogue would ensue between those countries that didn't talk to one another. Today, the relationship that exists among governments is quite different from the one that existed before, even because there is a cohort of leaders who have stayed in power for a very long time. Communicating vessels opened up in these nations that could lead to something else, and the topic of inclusion became an important one from Mexico and to the
In his “Populism, Socialism, and Democratic Institutions,” Schamis echoes the last point: Chávez’s rule represents an oil-funded, twenty-first century version of patrimonial domination. Along with the nebulous socialist goals come clearly undemocratic methods. The question is whether, with a shift in the price cycle, his “Bolivarian Revolution” will collapse just as the Punto Fijo arrangement did in the late 1980s and, if that happens, how much farther from stable and democratic party politics in Venezuela will then be.65

We can only understand the paradox of calling “neo-populist” projects that have little in common among them, other than media-enhanced messianic leaders that present themselves as outsiders, if we analyze the forms in which these leaders appear as being superior to the political class but are still subordinated to capital and corporate interests.66 This is important, for “neo-populism” stretches from various rights (Uribe, Fujimori, Menem), through the tepid and more liberal lefts (the Kirchners, Lula, Mujica), to those who have moved on a misleading axis all their own, such as Correa and Chávez. Thus, if Chávez was essentially “the most extraordinary political televangelist born in Latin America,” as Krauze puts it (as I did, too, after watching my first “Aló Presidente”), it is time for us to take a detour into the mass media and psychological dimensions of his neo-populism. Speaking of audience democracy, the Mexican political theorist Benjamin Arditi elaborates in his “Populism as an Internal Periphery of Democratic Politics:”

Media experts replace party bureaucrats and activists (and transform) politics into a spectacle run by media and marketing professionals […] There is a personalization of the

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65 Hector E. Schamis, “Populism, Socialism, and Democratic Institutions,” Journal of Democracy, 27, no. 4 (October 2006): 31

66 See the last chapter for a more detailed description of this, and in more than one sense. To quote Schamis again on what is still a not so well-known fact, even after Chinese companies started participating with their own large share in the Venezuelan oil industry: “most of Venezuela’s offshore exploration remains contracted out to U.S. firms and all the country’s oil continues to be refined in Louisiana.” Ibid. The latest negotiations for Citgo are with Russia.
link between candidates and voters [...] characterized by the “as if” of virtual immediacy. Audience democracy intertwines with populist representation as a crossover between acting for others, authorization, and the strong role of symbolic imagery.67

However, Chávez did not need any media or marketing professionals, López explains, “either because there was no clear or coherent government communication strategy or because Chávez decided it should be that way, Chávez himself became the center of [the strategy of] nationwide government broadcasts and the ‘Aló Presidente’ program.”68 Guy Debord tells us in his introductory thesis that “in societies where modern conditions of production prevail [...] everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation;” Arditi echoes this: “representation means bringing into presence through a substitute, ‘the making present of something that is nevertheless absent’ [...] acting for others.”69 In the next section we explain how Hugo Chávez—El Líder Supremo, El Comandante Eterno, and empty signifier par excellence—by indefatigably reenacting the battle of good vs. evil in a panoply of Latin American myths, powerfully articulated a whole worldview rather than just “a diversity of unsatisfied democratic demands.” For after the initial push to gain the presidency, Chávez did not need to “articulate” much in the democratic sense: his neo-populism purged its multiple and many times conflicting origins, and the poorest segments of the population that comprised the vast majority of the country were solidly behind him (and after eighteen years of Chavismo, they remain poor).70 Rather, after copiously showing the obscene class divide of the richest country in Latin America, Chávez radicalized his message by “naming” the split as one between Chavistas and oligarchic right wingers. He did not need to “articulate” the old liberal institutions either, for

67 Quoted in Panizza, Ibid., 84-6
68 de la Torre and Arnson, Ibid., 253-53
69 Debord, Ibid., 1st. thesis, and Panizza, Ibid., 80-81
70 Poverty in Venezuela as compared with pre-Chávez years is covered in the third chapter.
he either dismantled or replaced them, but could only coopt part of the workers movement and his intents to win the student movement and sectors of the middle class ended up in failure.\footnote{The dismantling of the country’s institutions is addressed in detail in the second chapter.}

According to another of my interviewees, the former National Coordinator of the UNT \textit{Unión Nacional de los Trabajadores}, or “ÚNETE” (the largest trade-union confederation in the country) and editor of the former pro-government journal \textit{Marea Socialista}, Stalin Pérez Borges:

\begin{quote}
Yo pertenezco al partido (PSUV), a una corriente, como dirigente sindical. Ahorita soy del Consejo Consultivo de la nueva Central de Trabajadores. Yo me desprendí de Chávez y en privado me he burlado del socialismo tropical, socialismo bucal, pero no creo que haya socialismo. El capitalismo está muy arraigado en Venezuela, pero hay un proceso revolucionario en marcha. Ha habido cambios importantes dentro de la sociedad. De hecho, el gobierno ha hecho conquistas sociales y democráticas, las primeras mediante una redistribución distinta de la renta petrolera, que no es cualquier renta, para desarrollar inversiones sociales [...] Con Chávez vivo, y fue un error de Chávez, todo se fue corporativizando, institucionalizando. A todos los movimientos les quitaron su independencia [...] Al sector campesino también. En el movimiento sindical no tan así, aunque tiene un sector que sí. Con la UNT lo quisieron hacer pero nunca lo lograron. Nunca perdió su independencia. Muchos compañeros y yo logramos que se mantuviera.\footnote{“I belong to the party (PSUV - United Socialist Party of Venezuela), to a current, as a union leader. Right now I belong to the Council of the new Workers' Central. Y seceded from Chávez and have mocked tropical socialism, speech socialism, in private, but I don't believe that there's socialism. Capitalism is very deeply rooted in Venezuela, but there is a revolutionary process underway. There have been important changes within society. In fact, the government has achieved social and democratic conquests, the former through a different re-distribution of oil rents, which aren't just any rent, in order to develop social investments [...] In the beginning of Chávez some initiatives of social movements were developed. With Chávez alive, and this was a mistake of Chávez, everything was slowly corporatized, institutionalized. All the movements were stripped of their independence [...] The farming sector too. In the unions, not so much, even though there is a sector where it was so. With the UNT they tried to do it, but were never able. It never lost its independence. Many comrades and I managed to keep it that way.”}

But Chávez would have replied: “Exijo lealtad absoluta a mi liderazgo porque yo no soy yo [...] yo soy un pueblo, ¡carajo!”\footnote{“I demand absolute loyalty to my leadership because I am not me [...] I am a people, damn it!” Hugo Chávez, Video “No soy un individuo, yo soy un pueblo, ¡carajo!” Youtube Video, 1:15, Globovisión – RCTV, February 10, 2010: \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swBsxRWAmbk}”} How this came to happen is the subject of our next section.
II. On Hugo Chávez’s Baroque Televised Revolution

But for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, appearance to essence . . . truth is considered profane, and only illusion is sacred. Sacredness is in fact held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.

Ludwig Feuerbach

To the eyes of any liberal democrat or petit bourgeois, the “Aló Presidente” programs seemed like an abhorrent compendium of Mikhail Bakhtin’s “four categories” of the Carnivalesque. It is no wonder that in the long-forgotten first years of his mandate—as right before them—one of Chávez’s epithets among “la gente bien” was “that ignorant clown.” And, indeed, in his “Aló Presidente” Chávez used, abused, and supremely excelled at becoming an embodiment of “the familiar and free interaction between people” with his “eccentric behavior,” his “carnivalesque misalliances,” and “the sacrilegious” tirades with which he treated topics from George W. Bush to nearly everything under the sun. Chávez artfully weaved his programs with myriad allusions, quotations, and parodies in a multifarious pastiche that transcended the intertextual to become true appearance of a promised land where an upside-down people had finally seized power.

74 Mikhail Bakhtin’s four categories of what he calls the “carnivalistic sense of the world” are: 1. Free and familiar interaction between people: normally separated people can interact and freely express themselves. 2. Eccentric behavior: behavior that is otherwise unacceptable is legitimate in carnival, and human nature's hidden sides are revealed. 3. Carnivalistic misalliances: the free and familiar attitude of the carnival enables everything which is normally separated to connect – the sacred with the profane, the new and old, the high and low etc. 4. The Sacrilegious: the carnival is a site of ungodliness, of blasphemy, profanity and parodies on things that are sacred. These categories are not abstract notions of freedom and equality, but rather a lived experience of the world manifested in sensual forms of ritualistic acts that are played out as if they were a part of life itself. See “Mikhail Bakhtin "Carnival and Carnivalesque,” Cultural Reader: Articles, Summaries, and Reviews in Cultural Studies, July 22, 2011: http://culturalstudiesnow.blogspot.com/2011/07/mikhail-bakhtin-carnival-and.html
It is unlikely that Chávez ever read—at least back then—anything by Bakhtin, Debord, or Julia Kristeva. But what makes him both fascinating for many and abhorred by just as many is that he intuitively tapped from the same springs that have nurtured some of our most lucid and iconoclastic critics of modernity and the enlightenment. Yet, if for Bakhtin the carnivalesque refers to a literary mode where “social hierarchies of everyday life—their solemnities and pieties and etiquettes, as well as all ready-made truths—are profaned and overturned by normally suppressed voices and energies,” the carnival itself is circumscribed to a very limited time of the year, and thus has more significance as a cathartic release of energies where the profane meets the sacred. Bakhtin never considered the carnivalesque as a revolutionary force. But associated with the carnivalesque is the Baroque, of which in fact it is one of the main traits. Dr. Esperança Camara, St. Francis University’s specialist in the Italian Renaissance and Baroque Art, says:

In the context of European history, the period from c. 1585 to c. 1700/1730 is often called the Baroque era. The word baroque derives from the Portuguese and Spanish words for a large, irregularly-shaped pearl—barroco and barrueco, respectively. Eighteenth-century critics were the first to apply the term to the art of the 17th century. It was not a term of praise. To the eyes of these critics, who favored the restraint and order of Neoclassicism, the works of Bernini, Borromini, and Pietro da Cortona appeared bizarre, absurd, even diseased—in other words, misshapen, like an imperfect pearl […] While the Protestants harshly criticized the cult of images, the Catholic Church ardently embraced the religious power of art. The visual arts, the Church argued, played a key role in guiding the faithful. They were certainly as important as the written and spoken word, and perhaps even more important since they were accessible to the learned and the unlearned alike. In order to be effective in its pastoral role, religious art had to be clear, persuasive, and powerful. Not only did it have to instruct, it had to inspire. It had to move the faithful […] Caravaggio turned to a powerful and dramatic realism, accentuated by bold contrasts of light and dark, and tightly-cropped compositions that enhanced the physical and emotional immediacy of the depicted narrative. Other artists […] turned to daring feats of illusionism that blurred not only the boundaries between painting, sculpture, and architecture, but also those between the real and depicted worlds. In so doing, the divine was made physically present and palpable. Whether through shocking realism, dynamic movement, or exuberant ornamentation, 17th-century art was meant to impress. It
aimed to convince the viewer of the truth of its message by impacting the senses, awakening the emotions, and activating—even sharing—the viewer’s space.  

Indeed, the Baroque’s subverting force has been amply studied, particularly in the Latin American arts. Following, we will explore Chávez’s *baroqueness* to grasp the uniqueness and impact of his “*Aló Presidente*” program. It is only poetic justice to thus interpret the mass media power of a figure whose critics kept lambasting for making of Venezuela a “magical-realism.”

What follows is a collage of journalistic texts in English taken from the web, all devoted to Chávez’s “*Aló Presidente*.” In *The New York Times*, the journalist Rachel Nolan tells us:

Chávez sits at a desk in a field before a collection of rural supporters, while cows swish their tails behind him. “You are an ignorant man,” he says, looking straight into the camera, addressing President George W. Bush, whom for the purposes of the show he has nicknamed Mr. Danger after a villain in a popular Venezuelan novel. It is the height of the Iraq war. “You are a donkey, Mr. Danger,” Chávez says, then goes on to call him a coward, assassin and genocidist. “It’s very easy to command an army from far away,” he says. “If one day you ever get the crazy idea of invading Venezuela, I’ll be waiting for you on this savanna.” His eyes blaze. The crowd cheers. “Come on here, Mr. Danger!”

In *The Radical Philosophy Journal of the Independent Left*, Martin Marinos says:

Chavez’s television show, *Aló Presidente*, is also mainly treated as a joke. The programme began in 1999 and was broadcast every Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., although its ending was never firmly fixed. [...] It is true that some of the conversations with audience members, as well as the frequent dancing and singing demonstrations by Chávez, created a comical and amusing presidential image. For this reason, the description of Chavez as a ‘clown’ and a ‘buffoon’ was very common in mainstream media discourses. But one should not forget that the success of a populist discourse depends on its capacity to connect with the broader masses and not with the refined university, middle and upper classes in Venezuela and the West.

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For its part, the ubiquitous and ever more reliable Wikipedia describes in English:

Chávez addressing topics of the day and touring locations where government social welfare programs were active. The first broadcast was made on May 23, 1999 […] Government ministers were required to attend the program. They may be questioned by the president about anything […] even military policy is made on the show. During the March 2, 2008 airing, Chávez ordered a top general to send ten battalions of troops to the border with Colombia in response to a bombing by Colombian forces inside Ecuador that killed Raúl Reyes, a top member of FARC (the battalions were not deployed).78

From another U.S. major newspaper, in The Washington Post, Juan Forero explains:

It's true that the program usually goes on and on—the record is eight hours straight—but some say "Aló Presidente" is anything but tedious. In fact, no matter which way they lean politically, many Venezuelans watch "Aló Presidente" to learn what new social program officials have hatched or which companies the state plans to seize. Chávez's foes monitor it to see which one of them is in the government's sights […] Without a teleprompter, Chávez gabs about whatever catches his fancy, all in the argot of the working class, which supports him. Sipping one cup after another of strong Venezuelan coffee, Chávez often breaks into song (he favors folkloric ballads from his native plains region), scolds his ministers and discusses the love of his life—his job. He once spoke at length about a bout of diarrhea […] "Never has a revolutionary idea made use of a medium of communication with such efficiency," former Cuban President Fidel Castro wrote… 79

Quoting Michel Foucault in his Postslavery Literatures in the Americas, George B. Handley tells us: “Political power is characterized by its ability to divide truth in two parts repeatedly […] and conceal those parts from each other. Thus a coherent whole becomes fragmented and incoherent, unintelligible in any of its individual parts.”80 Or, as the political scientist Susan Buck-Morss explains in her Hegel and Haiti: “Disciplinary boundaries allow counterevidence to belong to someone else’s story.” 81 Anglo America’s emphasis on the “sciences” (related to the Latin

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78 “Aló Presidente,” Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al%C3%B3_Presidente
81 Ibid., 822.
scindere, “to cut, to divide;” and the Greek skhizein [root of “schizophrenia”] “to cut, to split”) as opposed to the “arts” (from the Latin artus, “to join” and the Greek artios, “complete”) is at the root of our incapacity to understand what Chávez has meant to the Latin American continent. Through his multifarious and ubiquitous “Aló Presidente,” Chávez was able to re-connect (to articulate, truly) “through everyday expressions, tropes, themes, and images” (Kazin) for many Venezuelans as well as in the continent how “the presence and consequences of global capitalism and the imperial power rhizomatically spread through various forms of cultural, economic, and racial domination.” He purportedly empowered the people to “grasp their reality and act.”

How Chávez shattered those boundaries, thus lifting the veil for his viewers through his “Aló Presidente” program and larger-than-life persona—in the process mocking to oblivion the Western understanding of liberal politics as inherently self-serving, elitist, and corrupt—can be better grasped when we explore the meaning of his style through the concept of the Baroque. Paraphrasing Paul Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic, Modernity and Double Consciousness, Chávez re-created “not a succession of tropes and genres, but a philosophical discourse to hold on to the unity of ethics and politics sundered from each other by modernity’s insistence that the true, the good, and the beautiful had distinct origins and belong to different domains of knowledge. 

In her work Barroco y América Latina, un itinerario inconcluso, the former Venezuelan coordinator of the Universidad Simón Bolívar’s Literature Graduate Program, Carmen Bustillo, notes as one of the fundamental aspects of the Baroque its opposition to “master narratives:”

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82 Panizza, Ibid., 8
La escritura “clásica” trata de equilibrar lo central y lo lateral, dando a cada uno su peso correspondiente, y manteniendo la importancia semántica también a partir del centro. En cambio la escritura barroca presentará una alteración de ese equilibrio, reforzando la lateralidad en detrimento del núcleo o explotando una sola rama lateral que destruye el centro de gravedad: construcción en fuga que se vale de un efecto de derivación de sentido [...] En el fondo del barroco está la destrucción del equilibrio entre alma y cuerpo, espíritu y materia, como anota (Arnold) Hauser, para quien “(su) esencia consiste en esta unión de oposiciones aparentemente inconciliables: racionalismo e irracionalismo, intelectualismo y anti-intelectualismo, ilustración y misticismo, anhelo de Dios y sensualismo”.\textsuperscript{85}

Viewing the Baroque as a style that “dissolves” master narratives acquires new meaning in the context of dependency theory’s “center” and “periphery.” Bustillo’s lines also remind us of one of the Argentinian philosopher Rodolfo Kusch’s main tenets to understand the continent:

Either America is the hole where a humanity limited to homo faber is to be buried, or homo faber covers only one aspect of the totality of man. In the later case, it is possible that the blockage is due to the fact that in América residual aspects of man accumulate, those aspects that were not predicted by Western thinking [...] Could the blockage be due to a dialectical moment pointing to the rescue of the missing part of the mutilated conception of modern man? Not to accept this would be to suppress the […] Américan pueblo so that a small executive bourgeoisie may fulfill its programs of development.\textsuperscript{86}

Indeed, Kusch adds that these programs presuppose all different aspects of the thinking “of a bourgeoisie in crisis, in which I gladly include the most utopian revolutionaries as well as the most enterprising of progressives. The one and the other are segregated—and history shows

\textsuperscript{85} “Classical” writing tries to balance what is central with what is lateral, giving each its corresponding weight and maintaining also the semantic importance outward from the middle. Instead, baroque writing will present an alteration of this equilibrium, reinforcing laterality in detriment of the nucleus or exploiting only one lateral branch, destroying the center of gravity: a construction en fugue that relies on an effect of derivational meanings [...] At the bottom of the baroque lies the destruction of equilibrium between body and soul, between spirit and matter, as noted by (Arnold) Hauser, for whom ‘(its) essence consists of this union of apparently irreconcilable oppositions: rationalism and irrationalism, intellectualism and anti-intellectualism, illustration and mysticism, yearning for God and sensuality.’ Carmen Bustillo, Barroco y América Latina. Un intinerario inconcluso (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, 1990), 144

\textsuperscript{86} Rodolfo Kusch, Indigenous and Popular Thinking in América (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 155. (América also in its translation to English, a choice of the translators to refer to the Latin American continent).
this—from and by something that breathes within the continent itself. To be sure, the hybrid, *baroque*, mythological Chávez embodied this “something” for *his people*. As Rancière put it, he modified “the very aesthetico-political field of possibility by supplementing the sensible with those who had no part in the perceptual coordinates of the community.” Born in the legendary *Llanos* that has inspired some of the greatest Venezuelan literature (on the topic of civilization and barbarism!), in one of the remotest corners of the country and as far from the modernizing process as from the racial Venezuelan-European mixtures of the twentieth century, *Los Llanos* would mark him with its myths and legends as “a heroic character from the plains, indomitable but also undisciplined an irreverent, whose origin goes back to the independence period.”

Born from a preceding split, thus longing for totality, it is no wonder that, of all the European countries, the Baroque fully flourished only in Spain—and Portugal—and achieved its splendor in Latin America (and again in Spain through a reverse movement). But, in Spain, it appeared as a response to Renaissance humanism in the South and to the Reformation and Enlightenment of the north in a country with a long history of hybridity and in the grip of a medieval worldview. In Latin America, the Baroque responded also to the very split that the Catholic Church imposed on the colonized and later to the rupture that the Independence wars (with ideals imported from France and the United States) caused after centuries of Spanish colonization. Still today, it lives in the schism that capitalism has forced upon a continent where the seamless presence of the worlds of the flesh and the spirit are active in myriad autochthonous and syncretic practices.

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87 Ibid., xxvi
88 de la Torre and Arnson, Ibid., 247
It should not surprise us that Chávez’s first “articulating portent” after his failed coup d’état, in February of 1992, was that the most popular carnival costume in March of that year was the “chavecitos:” myriads of kids across all social classes dressed in military uniform, like Chávez had appeared on TV during his first, now famous “Por ahora” allocution; or that, right after he was elected president, the discreet practice of Santería became a fashionable vogue.\footnote{Cristina Marcano y Alberto Barrera-Tyszka, Hugo Chávez sin uniforme. Una historia personal (Caracas: Rádom House Mondadori, 2004), 266
Associated Press, “Venezuelans increasingly turn to Santeria,” 
\textit{NBC News}, February 8, 2008: (see second section): http://www.nbcnews.com/id/23057224/ns/world_news-venezuela/t/venezuelans-increasingly-turn-santeria/}

Referring to how the Baroque erases these cultural separations, in his book, \textit{Sor Juana, or, the Traps of Faith}, Octavio Paz tells us: “I must add that each of these societies is separated from the other by a negation […] Each negation contains within it the negated society—usually as a masked, a veiled, presence.”\footnote{Octavio Paz, \textit{Sor Juana, Or, The Traps of Faith} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 13}

And the palimpsest and the polyphonic are all fundamental traits in Chávez’s “Aló Presidente.”\footnote{A palimpsest is “a manuscript or piece of writing material on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing but of which traces remain.” Google Dictionary.}

The Cuban author Severo Sarduy explains the Baroque as:

\textit{Espacio del dialogismo, de la polifonía, de la carnavalización, de la parodia y la intertextualidad, lo barroco presentaría, pues, como una red de conexiones, de sucesivas filigranas, cuya expresión gráfica no sería lineal, bidimensional, plana, sino en volumen, espacial, y dinámica. En la carnavalización del barroco se inserta la mezcla de géneros, la intrusión de un tipo de discurso en otro --carta en un relato, diálogo en esas cartas--.}

With his emphasis on the polyphonic and on “reflective appearance” rather than on the veracity of representation, “the realm of politics is no longer a fixed and immutable form of...”

\footnote{“Space of the dialogic, of polyphony, of carnivalization, of parody, and of inter-textuality, the baroque would appear, then, as a network of connections, of successive filigrees, whose graphic expression would not be linear, two-dimensional, flat, but rather in volume, spatial, and dynamic. Inserted in the carnivalization of the baroque is a mix of genres, the intrusion of one discourse into another – a letter in a tale, a dialog in those letters –.” Severo Sarduy, “El barroco y el neobarroco”, en \textit{Obra completa}, Edición crítica. Gustavo Guerrero y François Wahl, coordinadores (Madrid: ALLCA XX, 1999, t. II) 1395-1396.}
authority and power, but subject to revisions based on its appearance to the mind of the once powerless spectator.” And Chávez showed his spectators how they were players of this play.94

Héctor Soto, Minister of Culture until 2011, and founder of Misión Cultura and a Vice Minister of the Secretary of the Presidency during Chávez’s second term, put it to me this way:

Chávez mató, liquidó, eliminó, exterminó, en poco tiempo, en dos años de ejercicio, a los pendejos, a los idiotas. En un pueblo en donde la política era algo solo de unos cuantos, de un 10%, de una gente que dirigía pase lo que pase, hemos pasado a una situación en la cual todo el mundo en Venezuela sabe para qué trabaja, para quién trabaja, para qué intereses. Ese es un logro de Chávez y quisiera recordarlo por ahí.95

But Chávez, too, was split between his autochthonous and his militaristic self, between his honestly hybrid “embodiment of the people” and his totalitarian notions of authority. If he articulated anything outside a mythical heroic worldview of common resistance for the peoples of the “Third World,” it was his own dichotomous self in the eyes of his followers, an art that his successors are sorely lacking. And if his totalitarian tendencies prevailed after 2006, he was still capable through his mass media appeal to symbolically convey an empowering of the people, and thanks to the immensely deep pockets of the most abundant times in Venezuelan history, enough money to “the people” to think that this state of affairs, Chávez’s show, could go on.96

But as Goya put it when naming perhaps the best-known print of his masterful series, Los caprichos: “the sleep of reason produces monsters.” Gone after Chávez’s death is his telegenic

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94 Paraphrased from Joslin, Ibid.
95 “In a short time, in two years of exercise, Chávez killed, liquidated, eliminated, exterminated the morons, the idiots. From a people for whom politics was a matter for just the few, for a 10%, for a group that would lead no matter what, we have reached a situation in which everybody in Venezuela knows what they work for, for whom, for what interests. That is an achievement of Chávez and I would like to remember him for that.”
96 According to my interviewee, Margarita López Maya and Alexandra Panzarelli in their “Populism, Rentierism, and Socialism in Twenty-First-Century Venezuela.” “The opposition’s boycott of the 2005 parliamentary elections gave Chávez the opportunity to issue direct instructions to the National Assembly for five years, in turn enabling the final dilution of institutionalism’s last remains.” de la Torre and Armon, Ibid., 258
magic, and for the foreseeable future the huge oil revenues that he commanded. His successors have been increasingly resorting to violence to stay in power (see my concluding postscript for an account). Paraphrasing Arturo Sosa, the Venezuelan Superior General of the Society of Jesus, populist or not, the “media savvy, statist, presidentialist, autocratic and rentierist military-civilian system of dominion that during its first years was legitimized by a tyranny of the majority built on a doubtful redistribution of oil wealth with electoral purposes” is living its darkest hours.97

For even if the charismatic “hero-figure who would create with one blow the just society” somehow came to exist in Venezuela, paraphrasing Erickson, after his fiesta was over we are witnessing how he did so mostly symbolically and just for a limited time, like in a carnival. As in a carnivalesque frenzy the “savior who worked such wonders” rather went on and destroyed “the very institutions that were to ensure his just society.” That is the underlying subject of our next chapter, but if two decades of Chavismo have been nothing but a flash in the crawling time of our nations, the same cannot be said of the millions of people whose lives have been wrecked.

97 Sosa, Arturo. “Conversatorio sobre situación socio-política de Venezuela.” Centro de Fe y Culturas, Medellin, YouTube Video, 7:58, August 21, 2014: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=203ueL8FhWU
Second Chapter

Death by Politics: On the Dismantling of the Country’s Institutions and Its Consequences

The most potentially destructive forces today are hidden under the banner of “goodness”. Whether this is done hypocritically or because the rulers believe in such professions of “goodness” is immaterial; the latter is even worse. The terms under which such “goodness” is projected to the heathens—‘the American exceptionalism’, “the Third Rome”, “Hindutva”, “the new (old) Caliphate”—are nothing but a self-license to impose own [sic] values and beliefs on those who dare disagree with them. Such rulers are the most bloodthirsty because belief in own [sic] moral superiority renders them unconcerned with reality.

Branko Milanovic

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If in the previous chapter we dealt with the “magic” of Chavismo’s “magical realism,” in this one we will consider its realities. For both sections I owe different debts of gratitude to one of my interviewees, Rafael Uzcátegui, and to his book, Venezuela: Revolution as Spectacle, published in 2010. Uzcátegui used whenever possible the government’s official figures to turn Chavismo on its head. This section will present in numbers some of those realities. Although it will not be an exhaustive exploration of the subjects’ histories, it will contrast the figures that reflect those realities with what the official discourse calls its “great achievements” as they compare with their pre-Chavismo’s trajectories and countries that Chavistas love, and love to hate. Most Venezuelan institutions have stopped providing official statistics, some of them since 2005. In every case, I have matched either the official or most credible statistics against those of other countries.

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The same situation has affected Venezuela’s national Central Bank and other official institutions.
To say that Venezuela has gone “off-the-charts” in every calamitous manner possible would be an understatement. But neither such clichés nor any readily available adjective could do justice to the country’s deterioration, manifest in the dismal levels of its economy, of its governance and infrastructure, its public and private health, of the salaries, the media, even of its oil production together with record highs of crime, impunity, scarcity, poverty, lawlessness, emigration, hyperinflation, corruption, political prisoners, repression, and an external debt impossible to pay due to rock-bottom oil prices when the country imports almost everything! ¹⁰¹

Américo Martín, the former presidential candidate and noted guerrilla combatant founder of the leftist MIR party, a lawyer, prolific writer, and editorial journalist, put it to me this way:

Aquí se habla de revolución, pero cómo va llamarse así si lo que ha hecho es aniquilar las fuerzas productivas. Hasta etimológicamente es un contrasentido. Revolución es avanzar con doble rapidez [...] Nadie entiende cómo teniendo un financiamiento tan monstruosamente alto de dólares y divisas para una población pequeña, de veinte y pico millones de habitantes, la agricultura se haya reducido a la cuarta parte de lo que era, se han aniquilado la mitad de las empresas industriales que había, todas las industrias del Estado se cayeron, estamos importando gasolina. He llegado a la conclusión de que los que realmente entiendan que esto es una farsa, profundamente, son los que vienen del socialismo-marxistas, socialistas- porque nosotros fuimos formados en varias ideas simples pero exactas. Marx decía que el socialismo implicaba un desarrollo descomunal de las fuerzas productivas. Precisamente ¿de qué surgía el socialismo? Lo dice en el prefacio de La crítica de la economía política. Dice que hay un momento en el que las fuerzas productivas se han desarrollado mucho pero que las relaciones de producción privadas asfixian ese crecimiento. Entonces, cuando las fuerzas productivas revientan esas relaciones de propiedad privada es cuando viene la revolución. Es decir, lo que viene es un desarrollo libre de las fuerzas productivas a tal grado que se producirá una súper abundancia de bienes materiales y espirituales y llegaremos al comunismo, porque el comunismo se basa en el principio de que a cada cual según su necesidad y de cada cual según su capacidad, es decir que aunque tú tengas menos méritos que otros pero tengas más necesidades te dan más. Ese es el comunismo basado en una solidaridad absoluta, pero para que eso sea así se requiere que haya una súper abundancia tal de bienes materiales y espirituales que cada quien reciba de acuerdo con sus necesidades.

¹⁰¹ Rather than offering an avalanche of footnotes here to illustrate each of these claims, in this chapter and the next I document many of these realities and provide a context to most of them.
Esa es la ilusión del marxismo y del comunismo. Y Marx decía que eso iba a ocurrir al desaparecer la propiedad privada sobre los medios de producción, porque entonces los trabajadores van a desarrollar libremente, sin la interferencia de las relaciones de propiedad privada y el derecho privado, la capacidad productiva. Es entonces cuando dice: de allí daremos el salto del reino de la necesidad al reino de la libertad. Partamos de este hecho: socialismo equivale a desarrollar las fuerzas productivas, porque un socialismo que las empobrezca sería un retroceso en nombre de la caridad social.  

With a total urban population of 88.9%, it makes sense to follow Venezuela’s people into their cities, and, specifically, to Caracas, to grasp the magnitude of the country’s crisis in a few brief pages. Caracas is the country’s capital city, as well as the largest in a country with a hyper-centralized government, with by far the most resources, slums, and better statistics. To guarantee

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102 “There is talk here about revolution, but how can it be called so if what has been done is to annihilate the productive forces? Even etymologically, it's non-sense. Revolution is to advance at twice the pace [...] No one understands how, having such a monstrously high financing in dollars and foreign currency for a small population of twenty some million people, agriculture has been reduced to a fourth of what it was, half of the industrial companies that existed have been annihilated, all of the government's industrial enterprises have fallen through, we are importing gasoline. I have reached the conclusion that those who really understand that this is a farce, deeply, are those who come from socialism – Marxists, socialists – because we were educated on several simple but exact ideas. Marx used to say that socialism implied colossal development of the productive forces. Precisely, where did socialism stem from? He states that in the preface of his Critique of Political Economy. He states that there is a moment when the productive forces are quite developed but private production relationships asphyxiate that growth. Then, when the productive forces break those private property relationships, that's when the revolution comes. That is, what is coming is development free from the productive forces, to such a degree, that it will result in a super-abundance of material and spiritual goods, and we shall arrive at communism, because communism is based on the principle of ‘to each according to their need and from each according to their ability,’ in other words, even if you have less merit than others but have more necessity, they give you more. That is communism based on absolute solidarity, but in order for it to be so, there needs to be such a super-abundance of material and spiritual goods, that each and everyone receives according to their needs. That is the illusion of Marxism and communism. And Marx used to say that that would happen once private property over the means of production disappears, because then the workers will develop freely, without the interference of private property rights and relationships, their productive capacity. It is then that he says: from there we will jump from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom. Let's start from this fact: socialism is the equivalent of developing the productive forces, because a socialism that impoverishes them would be a step backwards in the name of social charity.”

Chavismo’s survival, Caracas is also the city least affected both by the electric infrastructure crisis and by the scarcity of food and medicines that is ravaging the country. And to be fair-minded, we will compare Caracas to other cities in nations with every type of political system.

Not that long ago, until the early 1980s, Caracas’ best-known moniker for its massive populations of immigrants and us proud Caraqueños was “Heaven’s subsidiary.” Yet the year Hugo Chávez ascended to power—closing the old millennium, in 1999—Venezuela already shared with countries like Brazil and Mexico similar homicide rates (in 1999, there were 5,968 homicides in Venezuela, and the UN’s “Global Study on Homicide” estimated the murder rate per 100,000 inhabitants at 32.9). However, after a decade of Chavismo that figure had tripled, according to the Laboratorio de Ciencias Sociales del Observatorio Venezolano de la Violencia, a group founded in 2005 by the Social Science departments of Venezuela’s most important public universities to address the vertiginous increase in crime. And after the last three years of having the dubitable honor of competing with San Pedro Sulas in Honduras, San Salvador in El Salvador, and Acapulco in Mexico, in 2015 Caracas displaced all three hell subsidiaries as the world’s homicide capital, at 119.87 murders per 100,000. Four other Venezuelan cities are in the list of the world’s most dangerous twenty cities: Maturín (fifth, at 86.45), Valencia (seventh, with 72.31), Ciudad Guayana (eleventh, at 62.33), and Barquisimeto (twentieth, with 54.96).

To put Caracas’ abstract murder rate for 2015 in still impossibly abstract “murder totals,” when in a country of twenty nine million people there were 5,968 homicides the year Chávez

\[\text{104} \quad \text{Osmary Hernández and Rafael Romo, CNN, April 27, 2016,} \text{ http://www.cnn.com/2016/04/26/americas/venezuela-blackouts/}\]
\[\text{106} \quad \text{Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia, http://observatoriodeviolencia.org.ve/historia/}\]
\[\text{108} \quad \text{Ibid.}\]
was elected president, by the end of 2015, in Caracas’ “Capital District” alone—with 3.3 million inhabitants of Greater Caracas’ total population of 5.3 million people—, 3,946 people had been murdered. In the whole country, there were 27,785 homicides! But before considering the multiple causes of violence in Caracas, let us compare these statistics with those of other cities.

In murders per 100,000 inhabitants, in the United States only St. Louis, a city with 317,420 inhabitants in 2104—roughly one tenth of Caracas’ Capital District population—and Baltimore, which is twice St. Louis’s size, made the “twenty most dangerous cities” list (and only in 2016: in 2015, Baltimore was 40th and St Louis was also much lower, at 49.93, which speaks of a rise in violent crime also in the U.S.). St. Louis ranks 15th now with a murder rate of 59.93, and Baltimore 19th with a 54.98. The only other two cities in the U.S. to make it into the “fifty most dangerous” are Detroit, the 28th, at 43.89, and New Orleans, 32nd, with 41.44 a decade after Katrina’s devastation. However, when we speak of “systemic violence,” it is important that despite the arguably well-deserved reputation of the United States for violent crime when compared to Europe and many other countries in the world, these four cities combined comprise some 2.3 million of the country’s 320 million population (New Orleans had roughly 390,000 inhabitants and Detroit 690,000, as of 2014). Composing far less than one percent of the US population, they represent rather an anomaly, which is rather the opposite of Venezuela’s case.

Venezuela’s murder rate fares much worse under Chavismo’s years when we compare it to those of the European nations, to the rest of Latin American countries with governments both “progressive” and “reactionary,” and to all totalitarian regimes. For instance, in communist Cuba, the country with which Venezuela sealed its political and economic fate after the failed coup d’état against Hugo Chávez in 2002, the per 100,000 rate of murder for 2015 was about the same of the U.S.: 5. Yet, even a 5-homicide rate is still very high when compared with most European countries and other cities in the world. But Caracas’ rate is twenty four times that 5! The next graphic is The Economist’s Data Team chart of the 50 cities with most homicides:

The fifty most dangerous cities in the world are all located in ten countries (with forty four in six countries): twenty one in Brazil, with 200 million people nearly seven times more populous than Venezuela; eight cities in Venezuela; five in Mexico with four times Venezuela’s

113 Ibid.
114 With 320,000 million people, the United States has eleven times Venezuela’s population, but had fewer than 15,000 yearly homicides from 2010 to 2014: a fraction only over 50% of Venezuela’s 27,785 murders in 2015.

population, at 120 million; four in the US (detailed above); three cities each in Colombia and South Africa, with respectively 48 and 52 million people; and the infamous Central American trio of Honduras, with two cities in a country with a quarter of Venezuela’s people, Guatemala with one city and half of Venezuela’s population; and El Salvador: with one city and a fifth of Venezuela’s population. Kingston, Jamaica’s capital city, in the 33rd place completes the list.

However, when we compare those cities’ countries proportionally, Venezuela’s off-the-charts homicide rates reveal a more dramatic reality, for even Brazil’s twenty one cities among the fifty most dangerous worldwide would dwarf at the Venezuelan rate. In 2012, for instance, there were 56,337 murders in Brazil vs. 21,692 in Venezuela.115 With Brazil’s population, total homicides in Venezuela would have exceeded 140,000!116 Admittedly, this would require a perfectly homogeneous homicide rate across each country, but this exercise shows how unique Venezuela’s catastrophe is, and may help explain why lynching has become a daily event.117

Caracas has the highest homicide rate worldwide. There is no other city in the planet, whether Asian, Middle Eastern, African, rich or poor, managed by a government benignly socialist, savagely capitalist, or plainly totalitarian that shares the hellish honor of having 120 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. Thus, the government’s argument that “violence is endemic to the region” is a terrible excuse when most other countries in the region have kept their murder rates under 20 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, and at least half of those countries have kept them under 11, like “left-leaning” Ecuador at 6.3, Uruguay at 7.9, and Nicaragua at 8; and “right-

116 This graphic exercise considers the rates of homicides per total country populations, not cities.
leaning” Paraguay at 7.9; and Costa Rica at 11.\textsuperscript{118} When, in fact, there are even several countries under 5, the murder rate around which both Cuba and the U.S. have hovered during the past few years, such as the “leftist” Bolivia at 4.7 and the alternatively right and center-left-leaning Chile, at just 3 murders per 100,000 inhabitants.\textsuperscript{119} Indeed, even the poorest country in the continent, Haiti, has a 10.2 after a sharp increase since 2007, while in Argentina during the Kirchner years, from 2003 to 2015—an era regularly associated with Chavismo both in form and substance—the murder rate was checked under 9.\textsuperscript{120} Moreover, regarding some of their capital cities, Buenos Aires’ murder rate in 2014 was 5.5; Santiago’s was 3.9; Quito’s was 6; and Montevideo’s 6.4.\textsuperscript{121}

This numerical and eschatological tour through some regions, countries, and cities of our planet demonstrates with mathematical certainty the utter impossibility of anything said by the Venezuelan government to justify the country’s exorbitant homicide rate on account of “regional


\textsuperscript{120} Editorial, “Homicide rates double in Haiti over a 5-year period, UN study,” Jamaica Observer, April 11, 2014, \url{http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/latestnews/Homicide-rates-double-in-Haiti-over-a-5-year-period----UN-study}

\textsuperscript{121} James Bargent, “Why are robbery related killings rising in Quito, Ecuador?” InSight Crime, November 22, 2013, \url{http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/why-are-robbery-related-killings-rising-in-quito-ecuador}

As for Europe, but for Russia, Lithuania, Moldova, and Estonia (with, respectively 9, 6.8, 5, and 4.1) most are at decimal points or under 2 (but Ukraine, Belarus, Hungary, and Latvia in the low middle digits); and all Asian countries but for Myanmar (15.2) and Turkmenistan (12.8) are in the wider but still much lower spectrum between the high digits and the very low decimals regardless of government “system.”\textsuperscript{121} Yet Moscow’s murder rate is 4.6; while in Rangoon, Myanmar’s most populous city (without official statistics), according to the United States Department’s OSAC, “violent crimes and other major crimes are rare,” and most of them happen in remote areas of the country. Regarding Ashgabat, Turkmenistan’s capital and its largest city with nearly one million inhabitants, in the words of the OSAC, “unofficial sources claim that the murder rate in Ashgabat is about one per week,” coming to roughly 5.2: United States Department of State, Bureau of Diplomatic Security, “2015 Crime Safety Reports,” various, OSAC, \url{https://www.osac.gov/pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=17543}
trends,” political challenges, economic conspiracies or historical patterns, because every poorer city in the world is safer, every capitalist, socialist, egalitarian, totalitarian or liberal city is safer, and as far as the early 1980s, Caracas was rightly called by its inhabitants “Heavens’ subsidiary.”

Today, in Caracas only the economic charts of an expected hyperinflation of 18,000% for 2018, those of its health and of its infrastructure crises, of the hyper-devaluation of its bolivar “fuerte:” meaning “strong” (called “strong” when in 2007 Chávez’s government eliminated three zeroes from the old bolivar, after the “strong” devaluation of previous years made it worth less than two thousandths of a U.S. dollar), and of the skyrocketing cost of living when life itself has become worthless, match the steep rise of the murderous race that was lost in the Chavista era.\(^\text{122}\)

To be sure, as The New York Times’ editorial board wrote on May 17 of 2016:

The threats Venezuelans face today are not the result of foreign or domestic conspiracies, but of a disastrous leadership. The country’s health care system has atrophied so severely that scores of Venezuelans are dying every week because of chronic shortages of medicine and ill-equipped hospitals. Violence has soared as armed gangs loyal to the government roam the streets. During the first three months of this year, 4,696 people were murdered in Venezuela, according to the government […] The three-month death toll is higher than the 3,545 civilians killed last year in Afghanistan, a new record. While many Venezuelans got a taste of prosperity in better housing, subsidized food and higher wages when oil prices were high — oil accounts for roughly 96 percent of Venezuela’s exports — the government failed to build anything resembling a sustainable economy.\(^\text{123}\)

However, when the Times argues that “Mr. Chávez and Mr. Maduro made spending on welfare benefits their top priority to keep their base loyal, while neglecting institutional reforms that would have ‘diversified’ the country’s revenue sources and made lasting improvements to


the education and health systems,” they are missing a crucial element, for, as we will read next, if anything is unambiguous in two decades of Chavismo is their distaste for diversification.\textsuperscript{124}

About this point, nearly all of my interviewees coincided regardless of their political affinities, although of course each provided a different judgment according to preference. Tulio Hernández, the intellectual political refugee whom I mentioned, explained it to me this way:

> El otro elemento negativo de estos 14 años es el retorno y la multiplicación de una tara nacional que nos ha hecho mucho daño, que es el estatismo y el paternalismo, y una de las incidencias más grandes es el retorno de la población a las prácticas del clientelismo que a su vez son prácticas de la mendicidad instaladas como forma de sustitución del trabajo […] Como nunca antes somos mono productores, somos un estado rentista, como nunca el Estado es el distribuidor arbitrario de la renta petrolera y como nunca antes se ha incrementado en la gente tanto el sentimiento de que el Estado le debe algo y de que, como el petróleo es propiedad de todos, el Estado tiene obligación de mantenerlo.\textsuperscript{125}

But this, as former minister Soto understands it, is really a matter of interpretation:

> Con el chavismo ha habido tremendo avance. El avance en concreto es: yo no quiero trabajar, pero de todo esto que se reparten denme mi parte. Ciertamente que hay algo cultural que marca la historia de Venezuela, que es el rentismo. Cuando el venezolano entendió o subjetivizó que su bienestar no tenía que ver con el trabajo, allí se produjo una dislocación ideológica tremenda, y tiene 120 años. No es del chavismo, ni del marxismo leninismo, ni de AD ni de COPEI. El venezolano dijo: se puede vivir sin trabajar. ¿Qué es lo que pasa con el rentismo, es decir, con ese vivir sin trabajar? Eso

\textsuperscript{124} Regardless of paying lip service to the contrary. See the following interviews excerpts. In general terms, a rentier state derives all or the majority of its revenues from the rent of its resources to the world market rather than from taxing internal economic factors. López Maya and Panzarelli say: “This enables those who gain access to the state to gain significant power to act arbitrarily or without deference or accountability to the demands and pressures of civil society […] Those who gain power in Venezuela tend to legitimize themselves by employing a nationalist discourse featuring themes of equality and social justice as well as a certain level of mistrust of foreign corporation and powers.” De la Torre and Arnson, Ibid., 241-2

\textsuperscript{125} “Another negative element of these past 14 years is the return to national defects that have caused us much harm, that is, statism and paternalism, and one of the biggest incidences of the return of the population to the practices of patronage, which, at the same time, is the practice of mendicancy established as a work substitute […] We are mono-producers like never before, we are a rentier state, as never before the State is the arbitrary distributor of oil rents and, as never before, the State has reinforced the sentiment that it owes something to the people and that, as oil is everyone's property, the state has the obligation to maintain this practice.”
explica, complejiza, enreda todo. La teoría marxista dice que los hombres, por la industrialización, van a crear una clase obrera que cada día va a ser más explotada y se va a organizar y va a luchar por tomar los aparatos de producción y después se va a liberar. ¿Qué pasa en donde la riqueza sale del subsuelo? Marx no pudo prever eso. 126

Given the calming advantages of having a tighter control of the population (and of their “popular vote” while elections were fashionable) by making most people dependent on one sole employer—and mainly on one product—did not seem to faze most Chavistas regardless of the likely cost, although opinions differed. Tepidly answering a follow-up question, Pellicer adds:

Se han hecho ensayos, pero que no han pasado de ser ensayos. Y siempre fue una línea del propio Chávez. ¿Cómo es que nosotros éramos un país productor de ganado, de café, de caroatas -porque hasta caroatas parece que estamos importando ahora-, y por qué no podemos volver a eso? Entonces, los ensayos que se han hecho son ensayos que tienen que ver con empresas mixtas o con empresas sociales. Y allí están esos ensayos. Yo creo que este es un momento bueno para revisar lo que está pasando con esos ensayos... 127

While Soto, usually the most honestly radical, appears to have a more coherent position:

Un gobierno, si es honesto, decide en qué campo es más productivo. Aquí cuando se invierte la pirámide y dejamos de ser país agrícola y hay solo un 3% de población campesina, todo el que esté hablando de soberanía alimentaria es un farsante, es mentira. Pareciera más honesto decir como dijo Kuwait: yo soy país petrolero y como

126 “There has been tremendous progress with Chavismo. Concretely, the progress is: I don't want to work, but of all that you divide out, give me my part. Certainly, there is something very cultural that marks Venezuela's history, which is rentierism. When Venezuelans understood or subjectified that their well-being had nothing to do with work, a tremendous ideological dislocation took place, and that has been going on for 120 years. It doesn't come from Chavismo, nor from Marxism-Leninism, nor from AD or COPEI. Venezuelans said: it's possible to live without working. What happens with rentierism, in other words, with that living without working? That explains, makes more complex, tangles everything up. Marxist theory states that men, due to industrialization, will create a working class that will be more exploited every day and it will organize itself and fight to take hold of the production apparatus and then will free itself. But what happens where riches ooze from the earth? Marx couldn't foresee that.”

127 “Attempts have been made, but they haven't gone beyond being attempts. And it was a line of Chávez himself: How is it that we used to be a country that produced cattle, coffee, beans – because it seems like we are even importing beans now – and why can't we return to that? Then, the attempts that have been made are attempts that have to do with mixed enterprises or with social enterprises. And the attempts are all there. I believe that this is a good time to review what's going on with those attempts...”
petrolero no me ocupo de la producción de nada, pero tengo petróleo y dólares más que suficientes y traigo de todo: papas, fresas que llegan 24 horas después de cosechadas.  

However, for the opposing María Corina Machado, founder and former president of the Venezuelan civil organization Súmate as well as the highest vote-getter in the National Assembly election of 2010—albeit ousted by the Chavista majority in 2014 for promoting that year’s street protests—this compounded socio-economic catastrophe has a political origin. She said to me:

Una de las cosas que promovió el chavismo fue generar la mayor dependencia posible de toda la sociedad en el Estado, de todos los sectores, empezando obviamente por los sectores políticos, descabezando o minimizando los partidos como organizaciones intermedias, y luego los sectores económicos [...] porque todo espacio que represente autonomía había que liquidarlo. Y en el plano social, lograr que el mayor número de ciudadanos dependiera del Estado, y que dependieran además de una forma humillante, porque no es ni siquiera el empleo público, sino la dádiva, la transferencia directa, absolutamente condicionada no ya solamente a la militancia política sino a la renuncia a tu libertad, a tu libertad de pensamiento y a tus ideales y convicciones. Eso me parece dramático porque lo que se ha tratado de destruir es esa relación esfuerzo-logro, esencial en una sociedad que quiere avanzar y que quiere progresar. Eso en términos negativos, además de lo que señalé antes respecto de la división y de la confrontación en todos los planos que, además, ha generado una sociedad profundamente violenta, porque los incentivos a la violencia son obvios, no solamente más de diez millones de armas ilegales en la calle, 18.000 bandas criminales, tráfico de drogas generalizado -con todos los males que eso va trayendo para destruir y atacar a la familia- y la impunidad, por encima del 97%. Ese es el incentivo directo a la violencia, intencional desde luego.

128 “A government, if it is honest, decides in which field it is most productive. Here, when the pyramid is inverted and we stopped being an agricultural country, and there is only 3% of the population who are peasants, anyone talking about food sovereignty is a fraud, that's a lie. It would seem more honest to say something like Kuwait: I am an oil country, and as such, I don't take up the production of anything, but I have oil and more than enough dollars and I bring everything over: potatoes, strawberries that arrive 24 hours after being harvested.”

129 “One of the things that Chavismo promoted was to generate the highest possible dependence of all society on the state, from all sectors, starting, obviously, with the political sectors, beheading or minimizing the parties as intermediate organizations, and afterwards, the economic sectors [...] because any space that represented autonomy had to be terminated. And in the social sphere, to ensure that as many citizens as possible would depend on the State, and to have them depend, also, in a humiliating manner, because this isn't even about public employment, but rather about alms, about a direct transfer, absolutely conditioned, not just to political militancy anymore, but to one's renunciation of freedom, of one's freedom of thought, of one's ideals and
The deliberate dismantling or replacement of every competing social institution that could not be directly controlled or coopted by Chávez is the most salient structural trait of his first years in government. This fractal pattern of demolition was repeated in every area from the moment the old political parties crumbled after the tsunami that resulted from their disastrous neoliberal policies took Chávez to power. It started with the branches of government responsible for checks and balances by adding an “Electoral” and a “Citizens” power and taking over all five powers; it continued by creating official worker unions, a parallel (second) public health system, by seizing the Central Bank’s autonomous and the oil industry’s semi-autonomous functions, by founding new Bolivarian public universities while defunding the old public ones, just because like the old public health system, their meritocracies would not be coopted; it followed with the expropriation of private industries, agricultural land, and most of the press when not forcing their bankruptcy. And, as the icing on the cake, all conceivable public infrastructure projects—such as convictions. That seems dramatic to me because what has been attempted to destroy is that relationship between effort and achievement, essential in a society that wishes to advance and wants progress. That, in negative terms, apart from what I noted before with regards to the division and confrontation at all levels (which also has generated a profoundly violent society, because the incentives to violence are just obvious, because not only are there more than ten million illegal weapons out in the streets, 18,000 criminal gangs, widespread drugs trafficking—with all the ills that that brings along in order to attack and destroy the family—and more than 97% impunity.) That is the direct incentive for violence; intentionally, of course.”

As explained before, from the three political leaders who capitalized from and helped promote the wave of spontaneous students’ protests in February of 2014, Caracas’ Mayor, Antonio Ledezma and former presidential candidate Leopoldo López (Venezuela’s most emblematic political prisoner after during one of Caracas’ largest protests he was filmed surrendering voluntarily to the government forces) have been incarcerated several years. Machado was charged with treason and impeached by her fellow legislators in the former Chavista-controlled Congress. Although she has been constantly harassed and threatened, she remains free at the date of this text. See: Centro de Justicia y Paz’s Report to the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations: http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared%20Documents/VEN/INT_CCPR_CSS_VEN_20686_E.pdf

With respect to the impunity of which Machado speaks, see figures and footnote on page 54.

Brewer-Carías, Ibid. For a substantially briefer text regarding the private industry, read Juan B. Salas, “Aparato productivo nacional registra caida del 80%,” El Impulso, December 2, 2015: http://www.elimpulso.com/noticias/economia/aparato-productivo-nacional-registra-caida-del-80
the maintenance of our dams and reservoirs—started to be directly assigned to the select circle of Chavistas that for the past eighteen years have been constantly reshuffled to manage all the public and many former private institutions. It is naïve to think that public security could have escaped this fate. But the dismantling of Venezuela’s liberal institutions is also at the core of the country’s impunity, lynchings, endemic corruption, hyperinflation, hyper devaluation, health crisis, emigration, essential goods’ shortages, and of its infrastructural crises and productivity meltdown. The next charts show, respectively, Venezuela’s inflation, from 2009 until 2018 (the IMF’s projection for 2018); its consumer price index and currency exchange rate, from 2003 until 2015; and basic food basket paired with minimum wage, from 2006 until 2016.\textsuperscript{131} \textsuperscript{132} \textsuperscript{133}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{inflation_charts}
\caption{Inflation Rate Annual Percentage Change}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{131} Moisés Rendón and Mark L. Schneider, “Potential Scenarios for Venezuela’s Future,” CSIS, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 20, 2017: \url{https://www.csis.org/analysis/potential-scenarios-venezuelas-future}


“Venezuela was the first nation in the world to be certified by the World Health Organization for eradicating malaria in its most populated areas, beating the United States and all other developed countries to that milestone in 1961.”

Thus read the recent article by The New York Times quoted below. Yet the following graph reproduces the “official” numbers today.

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A similar exercise to compare both Caracas and Venezuela with other cities and countries worldwide could be made for any of the previous categories to demonstrate that Venezuela’s off-the-charts statistics have long surpassed any conventional explanation. As with Venezuela’s homicide rate, their extreme—*incomparable*, truly—nature, reflected in the ghastly repetition of that sideways grin in all related charts, does not speak of the usual “multiple factors” that variously contribute to social and economic crises, but of one same, unique, and main exacerbating cause at the root of a compounded catastrophe. Indeed, when the slant in each graphic is so eerily similar, the realities they depict are but symptoms of a common malady that both foments and transcends each particular reality: Venezuela is also the country with the highest hyperinflation (4,000% in 2017), the highest “unofficial” hyper-devaluation, the highest *official* impunity rate (at 98% according to the prosecutor general’s office!), and the highest “misery rate,” quadrupling the next-worst ranked.\(^{135}\) This oil-rich nation has received over one

trillion U.S. dollars in revenues during the chavista era, yet its poverty rate increased from 55% when Hugo Chávez took power in 1999 to 82.8% in 2016.\textsuperscript{136} His long-time former Economy Super-Minister, Jorge Giordani, and others have accused government officers of pocketing more than $300 billion of crude oil revenues over the past decade alone.\textsuperscript{137} A Chavista assessment!

In the segment of my interviews that inspired this thesis’s title, José León Uzcátegui told me:

\begin{quote}
Yo soy psiquiatra y tengo una especialización de economía petrolera. Un periodista me preguntaba sobre esta doble condición y le decía: nada más natural, Venezuela es locura y petróleo. Claro, no se queda allí. Lo que mejor la define es el capitalismo rentista que el mismo Chávez llamaba socialismo rentista y, como pasa con el socialismo en general, ahora está más claro que antes que no hubo tal socialismo sino capitalismo de Estado [...] Se ha producido un cambio importante en la redistribución de la renta. Eso lo sabe cualquier venezolano, desde los que se han enriquecido a costa de los pobres hasta los pobres que siguen viviendo en la pobreza pero que, desde un buhonero hasta un taxista, esperan una parte del reparto más allá de lo que se haya robado toda la burguesía. [...] Ciertamente, en esta revolución bolivariana ha aparecido una nueva burguesía a imagen y semejanza de la que se construyó en la cuarta república. Sea más o menos cierto, más allá de los discursos, más allá de esa dirigencia que puede ser incapaz, corrupta, mediocre, la gran posibilidad está en el pueblo que entendió y asumió el discurso de Chávez y pudiéramos estar en un proceso de transición hacia otro momento.\textsuperscript{138}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[136]{See the next chapter for a more detailed explanation of Venezuela’s current poverty rates.}
\footnotetext[137]{Eyanir Chinea and Corina Pons, “Venezuela ex-ministers seek probe into $300 billion lost in oil revenue,” Reuters, February 2, 2016: \url{http://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-politics-idUSKCN0VB26F}}
\footnotetext[138]{“I am a psychiatrist and have a Master’s in Oil Economy. A journalist asked me about this double condition and I answered: nothing more natural, Venezuela is oil and madness. Of course,}
\end{footnotes}
But Venezuela transitioned somewhere else. According to a Washington Post editorial:

The country is running desperately short of food and medicine. Venezuelans spend much of their time waiting in lines outside stores, but increasingly the shelves are bare. The head of the national pharmaceutical association appealed for aid to the World Health Organization, saying that distribution of 70 percent of basic medicines was disrupted. The chairman of the largest domestic food producer has said that if the government does not quickly seek aid to import food, it “will cause grave harm to ordinary Venezuelans.”

A second factor proposed by the Chavistas to understand the increment in violent crime is that Venezuela “has become the main transit country for Colombia’s cocaine, which has led to the presence of Colombian criminal networks in Venezuela and the development of organized crime.” However, that argument suffers from mistaking the consequences of a series of deliberate and horrendously executed policies with the causes of violent crime, and points us again to the same responsible party by referring us to the Chavista era. A third, very important consequence whose implications take us closer to our root cause has to do with what has been called “the privatization of security in Venezuela.” This process, by which individuals and the infamous “collectives” take the law into their own hands, is a direct consequence of the power it doesn't stop there. What best defines it is the rentier capitalism that Chávez himself called rentier socialism, and, as it happens with socialism in general, it is now clearer that there was no such socialism before, but rather State capitalism [...] An important change has taken place in the distribution of income. Any Venezuelan knows that, from those who have become rich at the expense of the poor, all the way to the poor who continue living in poverty, but who –from a street vendor, all the way to a cab driver– expect a part of this sharing, beyond what all the bourgeoisie might have stolen [...] Certainly, a new bourgeoisie has appeared in this Bolivarian revolution, in the image and likeness of the one built during the fourth republic. Whether it's true or not, beyond the speeches, beyond that leadership that might be incapable, corrupt, mediocre, I believe that the great possibility lies in the people, who understood and assumed Chávez's discourse, and we might very well be in a transitional process towards another moment.”

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139 The Washington Post, Ibid.
vacuum caused by the “abandonment of state protection and the absence of punishment, rampant corruption in almost all branches of the security forces, a lack of investment in the police force, weak gun control which has led to a proliferation of arms, and a lack of coherent security policy” that manifests in nearly every conceivable area: from routine lynching to extrajudicial killings.\footnote{Andreina Aponte, “In Venezuela, lynchings kill one person every three days. Report,” \textit{Reuters}, December 28, 2016: \url{http://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-violence-idUSKBN14H1PJ}}

A more recent, equally ominous result has been the militarization of repressive security under the so-called “People’s Liberation Operation”—“OLP” by its acronym in Spanish—, that neither “points to a decline in violence in society, but, on the contrary, to an increase.” Adding to the \textit{Masacre de Barlovento}, the \textit{Observatorio Venezolano de la Violencia} estimates that police officers shot dead about 3,800 people in 2016, making the OLP one of the most homicidal forces in the world.\footnote{Reuters Staff, “Venezuela to charge soldiers over 12 deaths in security operation,” \textit{Reuters}, November 27, 2016: \url{http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-venezuela-crime-idUKKBN13M0Z6}} As mentioned, the OVV was founded by the Social Sciences’ departments of Venezuela’s largest public universities to address the vertiginous increment in violent crime in 2005—well into the years of unimaginable riches gained from a stark rise in oil price, the same year that the government stopped providing official figures of violent crime—. They explain:

> The institutional destruction that the country continues to suffer from is the most significant explanatory factor in the sustained increase in violence and crime. The institutions of society, in terms of social life based on trust and governed by rules and laws, is diluted more and more each time to the arbitrary power and the predominance of social relations based on the use of force and weapons.\footnote{Grattan, \textit{Ibid.}}

Other structural and cultural factors that promote mayhem in the region in general could be mentioned, such as a \textit{machista} penchant for violence (partly because of a mistrust or incapacity for the verbal articulation of feelings), alcohol and drug addiction, the lack of opportunities for education and employment, an excess of segregation in the cities, and urban density in the slums, perhaps even the diminished role of religion and the church, but they would be only of academic interest here, for they cannot truly explain Venezuela’s \textit{distinctively} off the charts statistics.
The two best-known principles of criminal investigation are: first, asking, “who benefits?” when a crime has been committed; and, secondly, figuring out if there is a pattern to the crime. If the answer to the first is obvious, I expect to have suggested a “pattern of institutional destruction” that is at the core of most of Venezuela’s off-the-charts realities in this absurdly compounded catastrophe. Together with the abysmal levels of corruption, incompetence, and disrespect for civilian laws of a government essentially militaristic, where obedience rather than efficiency has been the cardinal rule, that pattern should help explain the most recent failed state in our world:

The descent began almost twenty years ago. When Chavez took power in Venezuela in 1999 and launched his so-called “Bolivarian revolution,” he echoed the socialist programs of socialist ally Cuba in investing in poorer communities, running literacy campaigns and setting up health clinics with Cuban doctors. More equality, he hoped, would lead to less crime. [Yet] Chavez criticized the police for being repressive, while his hardcore supporters formed their own armed groups ostensibly to fight crime. Roberto Briceño, a sociologist who heads the Venezuelan Violence Observatory, says the tactic weakened law enforcement and led to increasing chaos on the streets. “There has been a destruction of the institutions, a breaking of social rules,” Briceño says. “There are armed groups the police know they can’t touch.” At the same time, Venezuela has seen the growth of the criminal gangs that plague much of Latin America […] There are drug cartels with links to the security forces, several leftist guerrilla groups, right wing paramilitary forces opposed to the socialist government, and heavily-armed street gangs. This tangle of competing gunmen has proven a lethal cocktail. When supporters of Chavez formed the armed community groups, known as collectives, the socialist government largely tolerated them, rarely seizing their guns or raiding their bunkers. Cienfuegos [not his real name] claims there are now about 8,000 such militants in Venezuela, mostly in the Caracas area, although there is no official registry.145

But as if a humanitarian crisis and having become one of the most violent countries in the world were not enough, this anti-socialist destruction of the country’s institutions has had as well tragically inconsistent consequences. Next, we explore in what ways and how they came about.

Third Chapter
Venezuela’s Crooked Lorenz Curve: Matching Homicides, Inequality, and Corruption

The diverse natures of men, combined with the necessity to satisfy in some manner the sentiment which desires them to be equal, has had the result that in the democracies they have endeavored to provide the appearance of power in the people and the reality of power in an elite.

Vilfredo Pareto

The correlation between high income inequality and a sharp increase in homicides has been well documented by scholarly studies during the past few decades. There is also abundant academic literature that explains this reality’s socio-psychological dynamics. In an ambitious study conducted in 39 countries between 1965 and 1995, World Bank economists Pablo Fajnzylber, Daniel Lederman, and Norman Loayza found that homicides and inequality are positively correlated within countries and between countries. This is a causal interaction. That is, inequality induces homicides. They explain: “income inequality, measured by the Gini index, has a positive and significant effect on homicide rates. By using the corresponding coefficient estimate, we can evaluate the crime-reducing effect of a decline in inequality in a given country.” There are two competing explanations for this correlation and both are consistent in their findings of a robust correlation between homicides and inequality. The first one, from the camp of the economists, explains that “crime rates (in general) depend on the risks and penalties associated with apprehension and the potential gains from crime and the associated opportunity cost.” They

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148 Ibid., 1-2
argue that crime may be more prevalent in poor communities because the distribution of police services and the justice system favor the rich. The second view, from the sociological camp, sees the problem rather as one of “relative deprivation,” and proposes that “inequality breeds social tensions as the less well-off feel dispossessed when compared with the wealthier.”¹⁴⁹ Thus, they maintain that “the feeling of disadvantage and unfairness leads the poor to seek compensation and satisfaction by all means, including committing crimes against both poor and rich.”¹⁵⁰

Without providing official statistics, the Chavista discourse still persuades too many that Venezuela has now at least a more equal and just society. But with a reality so distorted that it is impossible to measure with the usual inequality ratios, I will resort to its homicide statistics to portray how the facts contradict that discourse. I do not pretend that what I have written in this text will show a bulletproof causal interaction between homicides and inequality in Venezuela. Instead, paraphrasing the political scientist James C. Scott’s preface to his Against the Grain: this chapter “aims, at its most ambitious, to ‘connect the dots’ of existing knowledge in ways that may be illuminating or suggestive” of a robust correlation.¹⁵¹ For rather than ameliorating the country’s historical average inequality for Latin America, here I will suggest how Chavismo’s self-styled “socialism” has made of Venezuela one of the most unequal countries in the world.

As we have seen, in Venezuela’s case, poverty cannot explain its skyrocketing crime statistics during Chavismo’s first fifteen years. And the last three years of steadily declining oil revenues, continuing rise in violent crime and drastic worsening of poverty, extreme poverty, and—as we will argue in this chapter—of growing vast inequality do not change this fact:

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 2
¹⁵⁰ Ibid.
In the previous chart, we see how except for the sharp but brief drop in oil prices that occurred between June of 2008 and February of 2009, the period from 1999 to 2014 was marked by a prodigious increase in oil revenues that was strategically redistributed but benefited people of all classes.\footnote{Theodore Cangero, “Venezuela, Socialism, Hyperinflation, and Economic Collapse,” American Institute for Economic Research, AIER, March 1, 2017: \url{https://www.aier.org/research/venezuela-socialism-hyperinflation-and-economic-collapse}} Oil prices \textit{quadrupled} in the fifteen months after Chávez was elected president from its lowest price in a quarter century: from $6.33 in January of 1999 to $25.12 in April of 2000, when he was first reelected.\footnote{“U.S. FOB Costs of Venezuela Crude Oil (Dollars per Barrel),” \textit{U.S. Energy Information Administration}, April 3, 2017, \url{https://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/hist/LeafHandler.ashx?n=pet&s=iue0000004&f=mm}} They kept or exceeded \textit{ten times the price} of January of 1999 from 2006 until November of 2010. \textit{Twenty times} the price of the month after Chávez gained the presidency in 2008 and \textit{fifteen times} the price of January of 1999 between the years 2011 and 2014.\footnote{Ibid.} Adding to that superabundance, Venezuela’s foreign debt increased from about $35 billion in 1998 to $139 billion in December of 2016.\footnote{Foreign debt according to the World Atlas; homicides according to the UN’s UNODC, 2012. See respective footnotes on page 42.} Equally counterintuitive is
that, in these eighteen years, homicides rose in Venezuela only at the pace of its foreign debt, for they nearly quadrupled, from 32.9 homicides per 100,000 people in 1999 to 119.87 in 2016: That is, during the most affluent period in the history of a country that was rich beyond measure by nearly every other developing country’s standard, Venezuela’s homicide rates went through the roof. Meanwhile, its government switched its official statistics for a growing socialist rhetoric.  

In the previous chapter we proposed that the root cause of Venezuela’s aggregate catastrophe has been the systematic dismantling of its democratic institutions—which is exactly the opposite of any other democratic socialism. But if Chavismo gained legitimacy as some sort of social democracy by means of fifteen elections (while oil prices reached or were at their historical peak), in time it portrayed itself as a new kind of socialism that would upgrade the old institutions. In this chapter we explore how the litmus test for any socialism: within-country income inequality, compares with its reality today. Although the last Gini indexes available for Venezuela—from 2006 until about 2011—reflect a decrease in income inequality from 0.5 to 0.4, I will introduce this subject with a chart that we already know, if certainly with a twist.

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Besides being the most homicidal countries in the world, there is another trait shared by this chart’s y-axis list—except for Venezuela, according to its government’s socialist discourse and its non existent statistics. But it is neither the size of their populations nor their degree of economic development—or of global power—but that all are among the most unequal countries in the world. But for South Africa, all are in the Americas. In South Africa’s case, together with Namibia (until 1990 governed by South Africa under its apartheid laws) and their landlocked neighbor, Botswana, these are the only middle-income countries among the thirty-five that compose Sub-Saharan Africa. And the three have alternated the title of most unequal country in the world since reliable data became available in the 1980s. As economist Branko Milanovic explains in his *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization*, “a higher total income allows a part of the population to enjoy much higher incomes without driving everybody else beyond the starvation point. Higher income gives more ‘space’ for inequality to increase.”

Before continuing with the Latin American countries in the previous homicide chart to decipher Venezuela’s reality, the United States provides a key missing element. The U.S. makes the chart with four cities, although those four cities combined make roughly 0.7 percent of the U.S.’s population. But with about 4.4 percent of the world’s population, the U.S. has over twenty two percent of the world’s incarcerated population. Either calculating per 100,000 people or per total populations, the U.S. has by far more prisoners than any other country in the world.\textsuperscript{159}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{prisoners.jpg}
\caption{International Rates of Incarceration 2015 - International Center for Prison Studies (ICPS)}
\end{figure}

But, perhaps more interestingly, when we correlate the steep rise of the U.S. inmate population since 1980, the year when income inequality started a vigorous return in the U.S. after decades, we get a chart that almost mirrors its inequality. That proportion remains when include total correctional population (adding the people in probation and parole), for a total of over 2%

And Namibia, which is also one of the world’s most sparsely populated countries, in its Hardap region has a homicide rate higher than that of Johannesburg: 39.6 per 100,000 people. Botswana, landlocked in Southern Africa, and Lesotho and Swaziland, two tiny countries respectively enclosed and almost totally enclosed by South Africa, fare a little better: the three are among the twenty-five most murderous countries in the world. Petr H., “25 Countries with the highest murder rate in the world,” \textit{List 25 (from United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime)}, January 8, 2015, \url{http://list25.com/25-countries-with-the-highest-murder-rates-in-the-world/}
\textsuperscript{159} International Center for Prison Studies, \url{https://rankingamerica.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/prisoners.jpg}
of the U.S. people!\textsuperscript{160} Both the incarcerated and correctional populations increased fourfold since 1980, and income after taxes for the top one percent also quadrupled (while the bottom quintile’s growth has been just of about 20%, and that of the next three quintiles of roughly 40%).\textsuperscript{161}


The United States, which according to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development’s thirty five members is the group’s most wealth-unequal country (as well as the third most income-unequal after Chile and Mexico), would fare far worse in homicide rates were it not for its well honed, gargantuan policed State.\textsuperscript{162} This is also important because it explains the otherwise odd absence from the chart of two of the six most conspicuously unequal countries in Latin America: Chile and Panama. However, if Panama does not show by cities, it is one of the twenty-five countries with the highest homicide rates.\textsuperscript{163} And the Chilean miracle continues at the expense of being second only to the United States in the OECD’s incarceration rates.\textsuperscript{164}


\textsuperscript{163} Petr H., Ibid.

\textsuperscript{164} Chart “Incarceration Rates in OECD Countries,” May 1, 2014, \textit{The Hamilton Project}, \url{http://www.hamiltonproject.org/charts/incarceration_rates_in_oecd_countries}
The extreme violence among rival gangs, “the maras,” that move between El Salvador and the U.S. afflicting both countries has been the continuation, by other means, not of diplomacy but of the civil war that ravaged El Salvador from 1979 until 1992. Following the war’s devastation, its Gini coefficient has continued a downward spiral: from 53.95 at the end of the conflict to 41.84 (in 2014). Thus, but for the relatively less unequal Jamaica, at the bottom of our homicide chart and with a Gini of 45.5, the rest of the countries shown are the most unequal in Latin America (and after a handful of Sub-Saharan African countries, in the planet); from a highest Gini of 53.7 in Honduras: 53.5 Colombia; 52.9, Brazil; 52.4, Guatemala; (51.7, Panama and 50.5, Chile, neither in the chart) and 45.9 for the second least equal OECD country: Mexico.

It could be argued that our homicide chart represents a sample too small to claim that, after a certain threshold, income inequality in countries above subsistence level translates into either exorbitant homicide rates or a “policed state;” and moreover transpose that equation to prove that Venezuela must be a highly unequal country. Couldn’t it be that, just like Jamaica, Venezuela is an anomaly? But Jamaica is the chart’s outlier because it appears both at the bottom and with just one city. While the other forty-nine most violent cities in the world are all spread among just nine countries, Jamaica, as a country, would never have made it into that chart.

Venezuela, per contra, appears first in the chart by city, and with eight of the fifty most homicidal cities in the world, second only to Brazil’s twenty-two. There is another dual link between homicides and income inequality that is out of the scope of this thesis. Namely, that over two thirds of homicides happen in the cities’ slums, partly as a form to gain or maintain social status by violent means; and that in Venezuela’s slums, killings while “resisting arrest” swelled in 2016 from 65% to 80%, together with extrajudicial killings. According to every academic research, Venezuela’s homicide rates alone contradict the Chavista discourse of having created a more equal society. Rather than ameliorating Venezuela’s average inequality for Latin America, Chavismo’s “socialism” made of the country one of the most unequal, and it appears that one of the poorest, in the world: the next maps illustrate the latter point. I will conclude with how a Chavista oligarchy ran with the money both under the radar and off-the-charts.

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World Wealth Levels in Year 2000

Wealth per capita ($):
- Under 2000
- 2000 to 9999
- 10000 to 49999
- Over 50000
- No data

Figure 3
World wealth levels 2012
Source: Jacques Decaux, Rodrigo Luibera and Anthony Bromiley, Credit Suisse Global Wealth Database 2012

World wealth levels, 2016

Wealth per adult (USD):
- Under USD 5,000
- USD 5,000 to 25,000
- USD 25,000 to 100,000
- Over USD 100,000
- No data

Source: Jacques Decaux, Rodrigo Luibera and Anthony Bromiley, Credit Suisse Global Wealth Database 2016

http://publications.credit-suisse.com/tasks/render/file/index.cfm?fileid=AD783798-ED07-E8C2-4405996B5B02A32E
According to the UNU’s World Institute for Economics Research, still in the year 2000 Venezuela was one the wealthiest countries per capita in Latin America. Even after the crisis that brought Hugo Chávez to power, the country was in the “$10,000 to $49,999” group of per capita wealth with countries like Finland, Saudi Arabia, and New Zealand. In the following two charts, by the Credit Suisse Research Institute, we see how after a decade of superabundant oil revenues, by 2012, the country was of average wealth, comparable to Russia, Eastern Europe, and China. By 2016, Venezuela was ranked in the “Below USD 5,000” category, at the levels of India, the poorest Asian and Latin American countries, and Sub-Saharan Africa excluding Southern Africa.

How could over one trillion dollars from oil revenues be squandered, or merely disappear in fifteen years in a country with a tenth of the United States’ population? For the specialists in income distribution, the name of Vilfredo Pareto holds a special place. Branko Milanovic, former lead economist in the World Bank’s research department, says: “[Pareto] was the first economist to have been seriously interested in empirical analysis of inter-personal inequality,” rather than in the fixed social classes of landowners, capitalists, and labor that had been compared up until that time.¹⁶⁹ Although his across the board generalization of an immutable 20/80-distribution has been widely discredited in modern economics, two of his theories do apply to the Venezuelan case.¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ “More than a hundred years ago the Italian economist and sociologist Vilfredo Pareto made the famous observation that 20% of the population owned 80% of the property in Italy. Later on, he created a mathematical formula to describe the unequal distribution of wealth in his country, which is known as the Pareto distribution. In the late 1940s, business-management consultant J.M. Juran generalised Pareto’s findings into the 80-20 rule, which is also known as the Pareto Principle. Here are some examples of the Pareto Principle as it applies to various situations: 80% of the revenue comes from 20% of the customers, 20% of products yield 80% of sales, 20% of society hold 80% of its wealth and so on.” Rosie Dunford, Quanrong Su, Ekraj Tamang, and Abigail Wintour, “The Pareto principle,” The Plymouth Student Scientist, 2014, 7, (1), 141.
The first is his 20/80-distribution as it relates to Chavismo in a sui generis way. For if after World War II the efficiency of social institutions (and of social expectations in a newly polarized world) to achieve a more democratic redistribution of income spread to most of the West—and, in Latin America solidly to Venezuela thanks to its wealth and to the exclusive partnership that its oil guaranteed with the U.S., Chavismo is at its core a movement against modernity. Disguised as a progressive discourse, it displaced the old elite—Pareto’s theory of the “circulation of elites”—first by votes and, only after taking over the old institutions with its military-civilian alliance, by sheer power. 171 This is clear these days of canceled elections, the shutting down of congress, the proscription of opposition leaders and of intensified repression. 172

Pareto died less than a year into Mussolini’s regime; whether he would have agreed with Fascism, as his detractors assert, or not, his observations of how the dynamics of power operated in most of the world until the first two decades of the twentieth century—regardless of political system—apply to Chavismo today. But sadly, in Venezuela’s case not only most of the old elites were either displaced or assimilated; in 2016, the ravages of Chavismo’s institutional destruction achieved its “Pareto Principle:” After years of strangling and expropriating private industries and farm lands that were later abandoned, just when the country must import nearly everything but is bankrupted, the UPI reports that: “Venezuela's Living Conditions Survey found that nearly 75

171 “It is just a minor simplification to say that Pareto thought that there was an iron law of income distribution, namely that inequality did not change whatever social system was in power. It gave consistency to his theory of the circulation of the elites, because whatever elite be in power (land-owning, capitalist or bureaucratic), income distribution would be the same although the people who would be rich or poor would be different.” Milanovic, Ibid.

172 See the concluding postscript for an updated account of these events until August of 2017.
percent of the population lost an average of at least 19 pounds in 2016 due to a lack of proper nutrition […] and 82.8 percent of Venezuelans are considered poor due to their income.”

But if all that Chavismo’s “socialism” has achieved is to recreate a crude 20/80 Pareto distribution by squeezing 80% of the former middle classes into the bottom levels of poverty, the Gini index could still indicate a reduced inequality as long as there has been a decrease in all declared incomes. For its part, the Palma index, which I present below, only considers the ratio of the richest 10% of the population’s share of gross national income divided by the share of the poorest 40%. But if we were to apply only that ratio to the current Venezuelan reality, we would neglect precisely 80% of the people that suffered a cataclysmic shift as to their formerly more homogeneous share, which is why José Gabriel Palma excludes them. He elucidates:

There is a high degree of homogeneity across regions/countries regarding the share of income that the middle and upper-middle classes are able to appropriate. This is most striking among rich countries — i.e., no more diversity here, as in the Gini and top and bottom deciles. Moreover, Eastern Europe and countries of the former Soviet Union are no longer outliers; and South Africa and Brazil (as well as Latin America’s median country, Peru) are close to India, Uganda (Sub-Saharan Africa’s median country), and Thailand (East Asia-2 median country) […] The other major stylised fact is that the share of this half of the population is about half of national income […] perhaps rather than ‘middle classes’ from now on this group should be called the ‘median classes’ […]

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Due to the lack of official statistics, the study, called ENCOVI, is a household survey of 6,430 families conducted by the Central University of Venezuela, the Andrés Bello Catholic University, the Simón Bolívar University and the Fundación Bengoa Food and Nutrition Group with other non-governmental organizations. Emphasis mine.

change from the ‘heterogeneity’ at the top to the ‘homogeneity’ in the middle is abrupt, taking place as soon as one moves from the distributional scene of D10 to that of D9. \footnote{José Gabriel Palma, “Homogeneous middles vs. Heterogeneous tails, and the end of the ‘Inverted-U’: the share of the rich is what it’s all about,” Cambridge Working Papers in Economics (CWPE) 1111, January 2011, p. 17: http://www.econ.cam.ac.uk/research-files/repec/cam/pdf/cwpe1111.pdf}

In fact, as Palma sums up: “half of the world's population (the middle and upper-middle classes) have acquired strong ‘property rights’ over half of their respective national incomes.”\footnote{Ibid., 1. Emphasis mine.} He explains this as a “a centripetal force [that] leads to growing uniformity in the income-share appropriated by deciles 5 to 9.”\footnote{Ibid.} Confirming this, even during the severe crisis that affected Venezuela from the mid 1980s until the turn of the century, income poverty spread to its bottom six deciles (although income in general eroded). But with 82.8% of the population income poor today, even a part of D9, the “well-to-do,” has been impoverished. Thus, considering only the ratio of the richest 10% of the population’s share of gross national income divided by that of the poorest 40% simply cannot reflect the collapse in income that desolates 82.8% the country.

In Venezuela, only D9, that second richest ten percent composed by some surviving medium-size entrepreneurs, the highest-paid professionals and the landlords of at least a handful of properties can be considered “middle class” in one of the most unequal countries in the world. And, at over 80% of income poverty, D9 is also vanishing.\footnote{In statistical terms, no decile can ever “vanish,” but all deciles can indeed be “flattened.”} That staggering slant that we have found in many of its charts is perhaps a ghastly resemblance of Venezuela’s true Lorenz curve.\footnote{In the red line of the graph, we can see eight “flattened” deciles. Although wholly unrelated as indexes go, this is a simile between the sharp slant that replicates in the graphs shown in the second chapter and the true slant of what a very unequal society looks like using a Lorenz Curve.}
But ratios can be revealing as well because of what they cannot account for. If efficiently implemented, *Chavismo*’s proclaimed social investments would have reduced inequality in ways difficult to measure by the Gini index. However, with a hyperinflation of 4,000% in 2017 (The IMF projects it will be of 13,000% in 2018), other than for the few and disappearing subsidized staples that can be found—normally under extreme hardship—the most basic needs have reached astronomical prices for all but the ultra rich.\(^{180}\) This has the obvious effect of increasing income inequality in ways that the Gini was not designed to detect; and these two distortions do not cancel each other out either, because extreme poverty affects now half of the Venezuelan people, of which eight deciles (82.8%) are income-poor today. Regarding the Palma ratio, this poverty happens in a country where due to its hyperinflation the highest salaries pale when compared to the untraceable incomes that result from trading preferential dollars and a monopoly of imports.

purchased with them, their distribution, and many times their illegal resale or re-export at huge profits; and from the allocation of money for “social investments” and infrastructure in a country where the treasury is managed by what a couple of my interviewees termed a “mafia State.”

Maria Corina Machado explained this to me in a way that we can no longer ignore:

Este es un régimen que está concentrando toda la propiedad y las decisiones en un grupo cada vez más reducido de personas, con un comportamiento muy preocupante porque, para mí, se asemeja cada día más no a Cuba sino a Rusia, donde tenemos una mafia State [in English]. Esto no es la operación de un sistema capitalista, con el cual, incluso, podamos tener todos nuestras diferencias. Quiero hacer la diferencia para describirte lo que yo creo que va a ocurrir en Venezuela. En la esencia de un régimen liberal hay competencia, hay reglas de juego claras, hay estado de derecho, hay independencia de poderes a los efectos de hacer respetar los compromisos. Esto no es lo que existe en Venezuela hoy en día. Lo que hay dramaticamente se asemeja cada día más a la operación de las mafias que han ido ocupando instituciones y donde las reglas no son las establecidas explicitamente, transparentemente, en un contrato como es la Constitución o como son las leyes de la República. Por eso se ha convertido en lo que está pasando.

The astronomical difference between the long-held lowest official exchange rate of 10 bolivars per U.S. dollar, until January 26 of 2018 (there are still two rates), and its black market value of 266,630.08 bolivars per U.S. dollar, that same date, brings to mind the “wheat and

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181 And in a continent where, as Palma argues: “according to ECLAC (2010a) income tax evasion […] fluctuates between 40 per cent and 65 per cent, equivalent on average to 4.5 per cent of GDP.” Ibid., 35. One can only imagine the numbers in today’s fully rentierist Venezuela.

182 “This is a regime that is concentrating all property and decisions on an ever-shrinking group of individuals with a very alarming behavior that I find every day more, not like Cuba, but like Russia. Here we have a mafia State. This isn’t the operation of a capitalist system, with which we all could have our differences. I want to point out the difference in order to describe to you what I believe will happen in Venezuela. In the essence of a liberal regime, there’s competition, there are clear game rules, there is rule of law, there is independence of the branches of government to make sure agreements are respected. This is not what exists in Venezuela today. What we have looks dramatically more and more, every day, like the operation of mafias that have occupied institutions and where the rules aren't those explicitly, transparently, established in a contract like the Constitution or the laws of the Republic. That is why it has turned into what is going on.”
chessboard problem.”

“If a chessboard were to have wheat placed upon each square such that [starting with one grain in the first] it would double the number of grains on each subsequent square, how many grains of wheat would be on the chessboard at the end?”

The short answer is: “about 1,645 times the global production of wheat in 2014.”

A shorter one would be: “enough to ruin the richest country on earth.”

In a smaller scale, that is how many privileged government officers, civilian and military, have benefited for years from their ever-growing centrifuges of “small” transactions. But what follows is how the government operated with the Brazilian Odebrecht in just one of scores of “big” transactions assigned without public bidding:

Entre 2010 y 2014, Corpoelec tomaba el monto de la factura de OIV en dólares y lo convertía en bolívares a la tasa del cambio preferencial [then of 4.30]. Luego se sumaba a la factura en bolívares. El total se desglosaba en dos partes, 80% y 20%. El primer monto se reconvertía en dólares (a tasa preferencial), y el segundo se mantenía en bolívares. Así, una factura de 2,3 millardos [2.3 billion] de bolívares y 18,8 millones de dólares se convertía en una de 491 millones de bolívares y 456,9 millones de dólares. “fueron más de 1.000 facturas que pasaron así”, relata el ingeniero de Odebrecht […] “Todo el mundo sabía que eso permitiría más robo”, recuerda otro ingeniero. “Pero arriba se dijo que se firmaba. Corpoelec tenía a Chávez presionando encima, había elecciones y mucho dinero […] “Por esa vía se pagaron 1.000 millones de dólares, buena parte en comisiones para la gerencia del proyecto de Tocoma”, agregó.

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183 Editorial, “Gobierno elimina el tipo de cambio de 10 bolívares por dólar,” El Interés, January 29, 2018: [http://elestimulo.com/elinteres/gobierno-elimina-el-tipo-de-cambio-de-10-bolivares-por-dolar/](http://elestimulo.com/elinteres/gobierno-elimina-el-tipo-de-cambio-de-10-bolivares-por-dolar/)


185 Ibid.

186 “From 2010 to 2014, Corpoelec [Corporación Electrica Nacional, a fully integrated state power corporation] would take the sum of OIV’s bill [OIV Consortium, constituted by Odebrecht Venezuela, Impreglo, and Vincler] in dollars, and convert it to bolivars at the preferential exchange rate [4.30 at the time]. Then, they would add this to the invoice in bolivars. The total would be broken-down in two parts, 80% and 20%. The first sum would be re-converted into dollars (at the preferential rate), and the second would be left in bolivars. Thusly, an invoice for 2.3 billion bolivars and 18.8 million dollars would become one for 491 million bolivars and 456.9 million dollars. ‘It was over 1,000 invoices that were processed like this,’ says Odebrecht’s engineer […] “everybody knew that that allowed for even more stealing,’ recalls another engineer. ‘But the word from above was to sign. Corpoelec had Chávez breathing down their
The day I write this, “Tacoma” is a still unfinished hydroelectric power plant, one of 23 incomplete giant projects directly assigned by Chávez to Odebrecht. About a related situation, Andrés Oppenheimer, a journalist recipient of multiple awards, reports: “Venezuela’s PDVSA is likely to have funneled $11 billion in illegal payments to government officials and their allies during the same period, according to an October 2016 investigation by Venezuela’s opposition led National Assembly.” Indeed, there are dozens of bank accounts, a few in the billions of U.S. dollars and many more of lesser millionaire sums, that belong to both former and current Venezuelan government officers or their front men that have been well-documented from Switzerland through Andorra to Panama, and in other fiscal paradises as well as in the U.S. It should not take a lot of effort to project some “wheat and chessboard” numbers to understand.


how the “Socialism of the 21st Century” was Chávez’s most ingenious myth besides his own persona. Thanks to millions of devoted believers and the nation’s money, he made it catch fire in the continent and among many progressive scholars, while making of a developing nation that just decades ago was one of the richest in the world not only a poor country today, but also one of the most income-unequal on earth. Or, as the director of the Adrienne Arsht Latin American Center – Atlantic Council, Jason Marczak, argued: “This is a country that was an economic star in the region, and now we have a country with sub-Saharan conditions in our hemisphere.”

Concluding Journalistic Postscript: About Political Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity

*Would it not be easier for the government to dissolve the people and elect another?*

Bertolt Brecht

*Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power's disappearance.*

Hanna Arendt

Amid declining oil prices and shortages of basic food and supplies, for the first time in sixteen years, on December 6 of 2015, the opposition won parliamentary elections in Venezuela. It won overwhelmingly; with 74.3% of voter participation, the opposition’s bloc, the *Mesa de Unidad Democrática* (MUD), obtained 112 seats vs. 55 of the official PSUV, a two-thirds supermajority to legislate.  

An internal scuffle to reject the results was quashed late that night, when the minister of defense gave a then rare press conference surrounded by his high command to guarantee that, whatever the results, the popular will would be respected. Well after midnight, the government recognized its parliamentary defeat and swiftly maneuvered to neutralize it.  

Less than two weeks later, days only before handing over the *Asamblea Nacional*, the still Chavista-controlled body elected 13 Supreme Court justices and 21 acting judges to replace those whose terms were to expire under the newly elected parliament, violating in the process all the legal terms and procedures mandated by the Constitution. In turn, in January, that newly appointed *Tribunal Supremo de Justicia* declared the National Assembly outside the law after disqualifying the three legislators from the opposition block that represented the aboriginal

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peoples—exactly the number that granted the opposition a supermajority—alleging that they had committed fraud to win the elections. However, no remedies were provided (not even a new election in that state) and the Tribunal Supremo de Justicia declared the new Asamblea Nacional in contempt, voiding all its legislative and political attributions as well as its role of comptroller by instructing all government officers that had been summoned to investigate embezzlement and other crimes to disregard the new Asamblea’s requests.\(^ {194} \) On January 15, the Tribunal Supremo granted President Nicolás Maduro emergency powers to rule by decree.\(^ {195} \) On October 20th, the Consejo Nacional Electoral, a Chavista-appointed “Electoral Power,” cancelled the presidential referendum on the grounds of four complaints filed by Chavista officers in regional criminal courts questioning the validity of signature recollection.\(^ {196} \) Two days earlier, it had suspended gubernatorial elections stating that it was a priority to resolve the economic crisis.\(^ {197} \) In the meantime, Maduro stated publicly that there would be no new elections until they were certain that they could win: “Cuando haya elecciones que el CNE las convoque, no sé cuándo, en qué


\(^{195}\) “For 60 days,” renewed for another 60 days in March and again in May for the rest of 2016. It is still in place. Alfredo Meza, “Maduro declara la emergencia para poder gobernar por decreto 60 días,” El País, January 16, 2016: https://elpais.com/internacional/2016/01/15/actualidad/1452875022_531694.html


año; cuando volvamos a llegar al campo electoral debemos tener asegurada la victoria.”

He also promised they “would win with guns what they could not by votes.”

Despite the growing clamor, just as it had happened whenever opposition governors and mayors had been stripped of any real power by defunding their local governments and/or creating parallel jurisdictions run by Chavista loyalists, on the domestic front the country seemed to return to the watchful control of the Chavista Executive and its still subservient Judiciary, Electoral, and “Citizen” branches.

Internationally, however, but also with grave repercussions for the country, the Chavista government faced a predicament. According to the Venezuelan Constitution, only the National Assembly has the power to authorize—and thus make binding—any international agreements entered by the government, including as well those related to its foreign debt. Adding to the dire economic crisis caused by the sharp drop in oil prices that started in 2014, countries that were already reluctant to continue lending money to the Chavista regime realized that there would be no legal way in the future to enforce any agreements entered with the Venezuelan government if the Asamblea Nacional did not first approve them. On March 30th of this year, after over one

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201 “Por qué el máximo tribunal de Venezuela asumió las competencias del Parlamento?” Sputnik Mundo, March 31, 2017: https://mundo.sputniknews.com/americalatina/201703311068008088-venezuela-politica-tsj/
year of clashes between the branches of government led by the Executive and an emasculated Asamblea Nacional, the Tribunal Supremo assumed the Parliament’s functions and cancelled the immunity of its representatives. Two days later, on April 1st, the resulting outcry forced Maduro to “ask” the Tribunal Supremo to “reconsider” their ruling, which they partially reversed the next day, but that blunder caused the first significant schism within Chavismo, and its consequences have brought the country to the forefront of the international news as I write this postscript.202

It is out of the scope of this thesis to analyze the extreme levels of viciousness that the Venezuelan security forces and Chavismo’s paramilitary colectivos have exerted since April of this year to suppress months of daily multitudinous protests. Still, a few references are necessary before I can conclude. In its draft resolution of August 9 to suspend Venezuela from the Human Rights Council due to “gross and systematic violations of Human Rights,” the UN expresses:

“Alarm” by the findings of the team deployed by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, which documented the Government of Venezuela’s widespread and systematic use of excessive force and arbitrary detentions against demonstrators, and patterns of other human rights violations, including violent house raids, torture and ill-treatment of those detained in connection with the protests; security forces firing tear gas and buckshot at anti-Government protestors without warning; the systematic use of disproportionate force by security forces, mainly the National Guard, the National Police and local police forces, to instill fear, crush dissent, and to prevent demonstrators from assembling, rallying and reaching public institutions to present petitions; the role of pro-Government armed groups, or armed colectivos, who routinely break into protests on motorcycles, wielding firearms and harassing or in some cases shooting at people, leading to at least 27 deaths (of a total of 124); the arbitrary detention of more than 5,051 people from April through July of this year, with credible reports of cruel, inhuman or

degrading treatment by security forces of such detainees, amounting in several cases to torture, using tactics such as electric shocks, beatings, including with helmets and sticks while handcuffed, hanging detainees by the wrists for long periods, suffocation with gas, and threats of killings, and in some cases threats of sexual violence against the detainees or their families; and the targeting by security forces of journalists to prevent them from covering demonstrations, including by shooting at them with tear gas canisters and buckshot, despite being clearly identified, and by detaining and threatening journalists, and on several occasions stealing their equipment; [the UN welcomed] the Declaration of Lima of 8 August 2017 by Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay and Peru, which determined that Venezuela is no longer a democracy, and that the so-called National Constituent Assembly is illegitimate; condemned the systematic violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms, violence, repression and political persecution, the existence of political prisoners and the lack of free elections under independent international observation; expressed concern about the humanitarian crisis; and condemned the refusal of the Government of Venezuela to allow food and medicine to enter the country. 203

In its article, “Venezuela: Lethal violence, a state policy to strangle dissent,” Amnesty International establishes a pattern: “These violent acts have targeted dissident demonstrations but also private homes in several states across the country, which again demonstrates the generalized nature of this strategy of violence.” 204 And as to this premeditated policy, they document how:

Both the illegitimate use of force in all its dimensions, and the development of state mechanisms of persecution against the population, are framed within a discourse of incitement to violence that has been promoted and used by the Venezuelan government to legitimize violence as the standard response to any form of dissent. In particular, calls by senior officials including President Nicolás Maduro himself, addressed to both state security forces and pro-government civilian groups, promote the use of force and identify dissidents as terrorists, enemies and traitors to the motherland […] The illegitimate use of force against the population on a recurrent basis, the creation of state mechanisms

dedicated to violent repression, and the repeated discourse of incitement to violence by the government - indicate a premeditated policy to violently neutralize any dissent.205

More concretely, in the presentation of its “Venezuela: Video footage exposes brutal repression,” Human Rights Watch describes how security forces terrorize the population:

Security forces have used a variety of riot control munitions – pellets, marbles, teargas canisters, and other so-called non-lethal cartridges – in response to demonstrations. In several cases these munitions have been used inappropriately, at too close a range or directly targeting people, causing deaths or severe injury […] Security forces have also shot toward demonstrations from rooftops and run over demonstrators with an armored vehicle. In many cases, the victims clearly posed no imminent threat and offered no resistance. Some were not even participating in demonstrations. Security forces have fired teargas canisters directly toward demonstrators, health workers, and the Red Cross building in Caracas, and into malls, homes, universities, and health facilities.206

By July 31st, from 5,051 civilian detainees of whom 401 were minors, 609 had been tried in military courts accused of treason and rebellion, according to the U.N.’s High Commissioner for Human Rights, which reports cases of forced disappearances.207 And of the 1,383 people that remain in jail, the Venezuelan Penal Forum and Human Rights Watch have reported in a joint statement that 609 are political prisoners.208 For some opposition leaders, there are over 1,000.209

205 Ibid.
209 Ibid.

This brief review would not be complete without mentioning the government’s response to try to dodge the accusations of political crimes and of crimes against humanity, for, knowingly or unwittingly, it has had the nearly universal effect of turning Venezuela into a pariah State. On July 30\textsuperscript{th} of 2017, Nicolás Maduro’s government held elections to create a “National Constituent Assembly” decreed by him without a prior referendum. The process has been condemned in the strongest terms by the Secretary General of the Organization of American States, Luis Almagro, and 15 of its members, by the European Union at large and even by countries traditionally neutral like Switzerland and Norway.\textsuperscript{210} This is how the U.S. Department of State described it:

The process was rigged from the start, from the irregular manner in which the election was decreed to the government’s refusal to permit voters to object to plans to rewrite the constitution. The balloting itself was further designed to fill the National Constituent Assembly with Maduro loyalists. In a country suffering from malnutrition, the regime threatened that those who did not vote would lose access to food, pension, or employment benefits. Finally, the election lacked credible international observation.\textsuperscript{211}

But besides revising the Constitution of 1999, the immediate goals behind having a new Constituyente were clear to many: first, to find an alternative to legitimately supersede the Asamblea Nacional elected by over 14 million people on December 6 of 2015; secondly, to remove the powerful Chavista Attorney General, Luisa Ortega Díaz, who had denounced the Tribunal Supremo’s constitutional coup d’état to usurp the Asamblea Nacional’s functions, and who later became a thorn in the government’s side during the protests by condemning the violent


\textsuperscript{210} Editorial, “Más de 40 países están en contra de la constituyente,” Runrunes de El Nacional, August 30, 2017: http://runrun.es/nacional/319659/mas-de-40-paises-estan-en-contra-de-la-constituyente.html

repression by security forces and paramilitary colectivos as well as the military trials of civilians and cases of political prisoners; and, finally, to contrive a new form of electoral legitimation.

The first two proposals were unanimously approved during the Constituyente’s very first session, even before voting on the new body’s procedures and objectives: Ortega was dismissed, accused of fomenting violence, and both she and her husband, a congressman, were accused of extortion.\textsuperscript{212} That same day, the National Assembly’s attributions were transferred to the new Constituyente (which, according to Chavismo’s second-in-command, the former National Assembly’s President, Diosdado Cabello, “would govern Venezuela for up to two years before presenting the country a new constitution that would allow for elections”).\textsuperscript{213} And on August 12\textsuperscript{th}, after four months of the reported horrors against the population, and after breaking 21 constitutional articles to come into being by means of the biggest electoral fraud documented in the country, an again unanimous Constituyente brought forward the twice postponed regional elections, but not before vetoing the Mesa de Unidad Democrática from nominating candidates in seven states.\textsuperscript{214} Indeed, Cabello threatened, only with a “certificate of good conduct,” granted by the spurious Constituyente, would the opposition’s candidates be allowed to participate.\textsuperscript{215}

\begin{footnotesize}
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Adding to this electoral reality, according to the Venezuelan Penal Forum, to date at least 16 of the most popular opposition governors and mayors have been either imprisoned or barred from public office, or else have fled the country to avoid persecution.\footnote{Lorena Quintanilla Muñoz, “Once alcaldes de oposición han sido suspendidos por el TSJ,” El Impulso, August 3, 2017: \url{http://www.elimpulso.com/home/once-alcaldes-oposicion-suspendidos-del-cargo-tsj}} For her part, after her own cinematographic escape via Aruba in a speedboat, the former Attorney General and her husband form part now of the over two million people who compose the Venezuelan diaspora.\footnote{Alejandra Torres Reyes, Pablo de Llano, Ana Marcos, and Cecilia Ballesteros, “El chavismo lleva al exilio a más de dos millones de habitantes,” El País, August 12, 2017: \url{https://www.msn.com/es-es/noticias/internacional/el-chavismo-lleva-al-exilio-a-m%C3%A1s-de-dos-millones-de-venezolanos/ar-AApVL15}\n\footnote{Foreign Staff, “Deposed Venezuelan prosecutor Luisa Ortega flees country in dramatic speedboat journey,” The Telegraph, August 19, 2017: \url{http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/08/19/deposed-venezuelan-prosecutor-luisa-ortega-flees-country-dramatic/}}

According to her statements in Brazil, she fled the country with multiple dossiers of government officers and their front men who she had been investigating for corruption and other charges.\footnote{César Crespo, “Luisa Turns on the Fan, to Little Effect,” Caracas Chronicles, August 24, 2017: \url{https://www.caracaschronicles.com/2017/08/24/luisa-turns-on-the-fan-to-little-effect/}}

During the spring protests, Pedro Trigo, the renowned Spanish-Venezuelan theologian, author of over fifty books and articles, explained \textit{Chavismo}'s transformation after Chávez died as follows:

\begin{quote}
Aunque la pretensión de Chávez era totalitaria, no llegó a serlo de hecho. Mientras se mantuvo la bonanza petrolera y el carisma del líder, la propuesta totalitaria fue ganando terreno a la medida de su capacidad para configurar lo que decretaban. El problema fue que esa capacidad brilló por su ausencia […] De la revolución no existe ni la sombra. Pero subsiste el copamiento del espacio por parte del “proceso” para lucrarse, es decir, mafiosamente. Si no hay ya ninguna pretensión alternativa, ya no hay totalitarismo. Pero si la anarquización está copada por el gobierno, que se lucra de ella e impide cualquier vía alternativa, y sobre todo que funcionen los mecanismos institucionales, que son los canales de la democracia, ante todo las elecciones, pero también la Asamblea Nacional, es que estamos en una dictadura. Como la gente está hambrienta y enferma y amenazada siempre por la inseguridad impune ¿cómo se va a oponer al gobierno? […] La inmensa
La mayoría de la gente está en contra de él; pero él sigue controlando todos los espacios y desplaza sin contemplaciones a quien pretende ocuparlos. Es una dictadura.219

Chávez was not, as many in the opposition argued, wearing a democratic mask to preach the virtues of social justice. He was in fact the first politician in Latin America who effectively articulated the scandalous inverse correlation between poverty and democracy in the continent at a time when the neoliberal policies had all but buried that discussion. But Chávez amalgamated a genuine and at times positively transforming “love for the people” with a totalitarian conception of power, essentially militaristic although equivocally respectful of democratic forms: he was indeed the mask of a totalitarian process that tried to seize a whole country by the relentless dismantling of its institutions. Yet, for this to happen, Chávez first had to pocket the country’s electoral majority, which he achieved by “naming” its obscene class-divide as one between a glorious “people,” mostly poor and all Chavistas, and everyone else, who then became the traitors, oligarchs and right-wingers of Chavismo’s socialist discourse. But Chávez also needed abundant money, and, paradoxically, he could never achieve his totalitarian goals while oil prices allowed him to generously redistribute it. This was not only out of ineptitude, as Trigo explains, but also, and mainly, due to what economist José Palma has found as a constant in much of the

219 “Although Chávez's aspiration was totalitarian, it never became a reality. While the oil boom and the leader's charisma were in full swing, the totalitarian proposal kept gaining ground to the extent of its capacity to adjust to what was being decreed. But this capacity was conspicuous for its absence […] Not even a shadow remains of the revolution. But the occupation of spaces by the “process” in order to profit, that is to say, as a mafia, subsists. If there can no longer be any alternative aspiration left, totalitarianism is no more. But if the turn into anarchy occupies the government, which profits from it and impedes any alternative way, and, above all, impedes institutional mechanisms, which are the channels for democracy – of elections, above all, but also the National Assembly – [it means that] we are in a dictatorship. Since the people are hungry and sick, and always threatened by crime and impunity, how are they going to oppose the government? […] The vast majority of the people are against it, but it remains in control of all spaces and displaces anyone who intends to occupy them without hesitation. It is a dictatorship.” Pedro Trigo, s. j. “Venezuela, ¿del totalitarismo a la dictadura?”, América 2.1 (originally in Teología Hoy), May 30, 2017: http://americanuestra.com/pedro-trigo-s-j-venezuela-del-totalitarismo-la-dictadura/
world: In Venezuela, too, the middle classes had acquired strong “property rights” over half of their national income. Despite the ruin of most of the country’s private industry and agriculture, while money was still abundant there was a relatively fluid market for the professionals of the public and private sectors and medium and small commerce owners and workers: they and their families were variously middle-class. However, less than three years of meager oil revenues and the corrupt diversion of much of that revenue into the “Boligarchy’s” pockets have been enough to reveal the across-the-board devastation and plunder of the country’s economy. What a failed totalitarian and coup d’état leader could not achieve by design, to own a country, is now being openly sought by force. Chavismo, today, is a dictatorship. Ironically, the dangerous mix of humanitarian catastrophe and violent repression that is spiraling out of control under Chávez’s anointed heir, Nicolás Maduro, was best forewarned upon Chávez’s death by one of the de facto powers behind the throne in Venezuela, Diosdado Cabello: “Yo les digo, señores, ustedes tenían que haber rezado mucho para que Chávez siguiera vivo, señores de la oposición, porque Chávez era el muro de contención de muchas ideas locas que a veces se nos ocurren a nosotros.”

And just as the Chavista regime and too many scholars worldwide keep blaming it all on an economic and informational war promoted by El Imperio and the right wing, and the world’s right wing keeps denouncing Venezuela’s socialism for all its plagues, the Chavista people will always have Maduro, Cabello, and whomever they felt that betrayed Chávez’s legacy to blame.

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220 “I tell you, gentlemen, you should have prayed a lot for Chávez to stay alive, gentlemen of the opposition, because Chávez was the wall of contention for many crazy ideas that sometimes occur to us.” Jesús Chua Espinoza, “Ese Chávez que llamaban loco era el ‘único cuerdo’ ¡No se equivoquen!” Aporrea, March 23, 2013: https://www.aporrea.org/actualidad/a162059.html
Appendix

About my Interviews and the Interviewees with summaries in Spanish of all interviews

Following, I briefly introduce my interviewees in the order in which we met. After that, I offer in Spanish the script of questions that guided my conversations to further explore and support many of the arguments of this thesis. I interviewed the same number of public figures both from the government and from those who opposed it. Still, from each “side” of this artificially contrived polarization, two of my interviewees were decidedly critical both of the government and of the opposition. Due to their historical value, I have also included summaries in Spanish, of roughly 1,200 words each, of all ten interviews, but I present them in counterpoint rather than in the order of our meetings. The full interviews are available upon request both in transcripts and recordings. Speaking with notables from the two sides while making them aware of my intentions was itself a daunting challenge. With the country deeply divided after the failed coup d’etat of 2002, and thus deeply paranoid not only of “the enemy” but of being perceived as “collaborators,” for over a decade most public figures had limited their interviews to their own partisan channels, or, with luck, to those they considered potential sympathizers. My questions were basically the same for all my interviewees, adjusted to their circumstances, but they did require some careful wording and fine-tuning. After the list of my interviewees, I present my script for those in the opposition.

221 On a curious note, on July 29 of 2013, during the week I conducted my last three interviews, former ambassador, congressman, and journalist Vladimir Villegas, since May of that year news director of Globovisión TV, conducted the first interview in his now popular program, Vladimir a la 1, a space where, for the first time in over a decade, public figures from both the government and opposition started granting interviews in the same show. See “Un año de Vladimir a la 1,” El Nacional, July 29, 2014: http://www.el-nacional.com/noticias/opinion/ano-vladimir_113131
List of Interviewees

Américo Martín: Lawyer, politician, prolific author and editorial journalist, former presidential candidate and guerrilla leader during the sixties. He was the founder of the leftist MIR party: http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Am%C3%A9rico_Mart%C3%ADn


Rafael Uzcátegui: Chief Research Coordinator of PROVEA (Venezuelan Program of Education-Action on Human Rights), one of Venezuela's most prominent Human Rights NGOs; author of the book Venezuela, Revolution as Spectacle (translated into English) and coeditor of the only anarchist publication in the country: http://libcom.org/blog/book-review-venezuela-revolution-spectacle-rafael-uzc%C3%A1tegui-09092011

Héctor Enrique Soto: Minister of Culture until 2011, former Vice Minister of the Secretary of the Presidency and of the “Human Development” Vice-Ministry of Culture; founder of Misión Cultura in 2005: http://www.aporrea.org/ddhh/n115737.html

María Corina Machado: Founder and former president of the Venezuelan civil organization Súmate. In February of 2010, Machado resigned from Súmate and announced her candidacy for the September 10 elections for the National Assembly of Venezuela; she was elected as the highest vote-getter in the national elections (and was recently impeached): http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mar%C3%ADa_Corina_Machado
Stalin Pérez Borges: National Coordinator of the pro-government UNT, *Unión Nacional de los Trabajadores* (national trade-union confederation); editor of the journal *Marea Socialista*:

José León Uzcátegui: Current Director of *Barrio Adentro* (social welfare program with over 7,000 centers nationwide to provide healthcare in poor communities), former Health Vice Minister with an M.A. in Economy, an M.D in Psychiatry, and a Ph.D. in Social Sciences:
http://www.aporrea.org/actualidad/a168442.html

Margarita López Maya: Historian, Academy Member of the Universidad Central de Venezuela and the Center for Development Studies with expertise in contemporary history and sociopolitical analysis of Venezuela. Visiting fellow at various universities overseas, including Oxford, Columbia, and Notre Dame University, and former editor of the Venezuelan Magazine of Economics and Social Sciences of the Universidad Central de Venezuela:
http://www.wilsoncenter.org/staff/margarita-lopez-maya

Tulio Hernández: Arguably one of the handful most influential intellectuals for the opposition. A sociologist expert in Culture, Communication, and Politics, Academy Member and international consultant for cultural and urban politics, he is also a well-known cinematographer:
http://www.el-nacional.com/autores/tulio_hernandez/

Luis Ugalde S.J., President of the “Association of Universities Entrusted to the Society of Jesus in Latin America,” former Dean of Venezuela's Catholic University; author of numerous books and essays; member of the *Academia de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales*.
Interview Questions in Spanish

1.- El título aún tentativo de esta tesis es “Venezuela after Chávez: Politics and Propaganda”. Sin embargo, más que pretender una cándida revelación de las diferencias entre cada discurso electoral y los diversos sustratos ideológicos, digame usted: ¿cómo cree que ha cambiado la conciencia política venezolana durante los últimos tres lustros?

2.- ¿Cuáles son algunas de las discrepancias entre política y propaganda en cuanto al gobierno y la realidad que vive el país? ¿Cuál es la más grave? ¿A qué las atribuye?

3.- Si algo signa al Chavismo desde sus orígenes ha sido sus contradicciones, muchas de las cuales se pueden entender a partir del caos político en el que se hundió el país ante el agotamiento de un sistema que dejó de satisfacer a sus electores. A pesar de ello, el discurso absolutista y plebiscitario de Chávez, y la reacción de una oposición venezolana rígidamente liberal, en lugar de explorar las iluminadoras ambigüedades de esta mutación política las han ignorado. Esto a mi parecer ha empobrecido el discurso político (Y a esto cabría agregársele un cierto totalitarismo académico de izquierdas que desde el exterior descalifica como neoconservadora hasta a la oposición más de izquierdas que se le hace al gobierno). Ante este diálogo de sordos, ¿cómo se hace aún política en Venezuela?

4.- La amalgama de movimientos sociales y políticos que en su momento se aglutinó en torno al chavismo encuentra hoy equivalencias en la Mesa de Unidad. Ante esta nueva crisis de legitimidad, la oposición busca formar causa común en torno a candidaturas de consenso, ¿cuáles serían, en lo social, económico y político, algunas discrepancias que usted prevé deberán dirimirse de resultar exitosa la estrategia unitaria de la oposición?

5.- Esta es una investigación que se realiza desde los Estados Unidos. Como tal, el tema bilateral me interesa especialmente. Me llama la atención que el desmedido recurso discursivo que utiliza el gobierno sobre el “imperialismo norteamericano” encuentra un similarmente asombroso “vacío de discurso” en la oposición frente a una realidad económica y geopolítica que a lo largo de más de ciento cincuenta años ha implicado más de cincuenta intervenciones
militares norteamericanas y la “administración” de muchos de nuestros países como sus virtuales protectorados. Más recientemente, el proceso de globalización sugiere otra virtual norteamericanización del planeta. Si bien una de las primordiales contradicciones del chavismo ha radicado en su furibundo discurso antiimperialista versus su total complacencia con una apertura petrolera que, en los hechos, casi ha devuelto al país al “fifty-fifty” de antes de la nacionalización de la industria, ¿cuál debería ser, a su entender, la política del “petroestado” venezolano? Más aún, ¿es este petroestado rentista, importador de casi-todas-las-cosas –bien sea desde Latinoamérica, el “Imperio” o La China– el único paradigma viable para Venezuela?

6.- En el mismo sentido, ¿cuál cree usted que debería ser la política exterior venezolana en cuanto a la consolidación de los bloques regionales que ha fomentado el chavismo?

7.- En las últimas ofertas electorales de Henrique Capriles Radonski, se percibe un acercamiento que parece genuino con muchas de las políticas sociales rescatadas por el gobierro Chavista. Pero, más a fondo, cabe preguntarse con la historiadora Margarita López Maya: ¿hasta qué punto podrá negociar la oposición con un proyecto de “Estado Comunal” que con sus múltiples perversiones de control parece bastante enraizado?

8.- Dice Fernando Mires que “El gangsterismo político es signo de que el populismo ha entrado a su fase terminal, la que, como ocurre con algunas enfermedades agónicas, también podría ser duradera”. Ante la progresiva falta de legitimación del actual gobierno y su total renuencia a dejar el poder, ¿cómo se puede hacer aún política con efectividad?

9.- ¿Podría genuinamente referirse a algunos de los logros del chavismo, planificados y/o accidentales, que usted cree sería indispensable incorporar en cualquier futuro gobierno?

10.- A su entender, ¿cuáles son las tres peores plagas originales del chavismo que se deberán erradicar en un futuro gobierno? ¿Por dónde deberemos comenzar para lograrlo?
1,200-word summaries of all the original interviews in Spanish: a counterpoint

Tulio Hernández

El venezolano se ha convertido en un ser más anómico. Es un fenómeno muy extraño porque, por un lado, la ciudadanía está más politizada que nunca, entendiendo por politización no necesariamente militancia sino interés, preocupación, seguimiento de la vida política, pero, por otro lado, la conducta, los valores, lo que se hace evidente en una salida a la calle es que el venezolano, incluyendo todas las clases sociales, es alguien cada vez menos apegado a las normas, alguien que se rige cada vez más no por un sentido de destino común sino por un sentido de pertenencias parciales y con un gran desapego por lo público. Por ejemplo, puedes entrar a un barrio, a una casa, y está limpiecita, bonita, pero en la entrada puedes conseguir toda la suciedad del mundo porque la gente no siente que eso es parte de sus responsabilidades.

Creo que esto, además, tiene que ver profundamente con la polarización, la polarización política que genera mecanismos de solidaridad mecánica y mecanismos de desprecio automático de acuerdo a las pertenencias políticas de cada quien. El daño más fuerte de todo esto es que la gente pertenece primero a un bando que a un país, que a una nación, que a una comunidad nacional, y ese daño se mantiene en el otro elemento, que yo creo que no es que nació pero que se ha acrecentado en estos 14 años, que es la introducción del odio en la vida pública, del odio político, del odio ideológico e, incluso, de uno que estaba soterrado pero que se ventiló abiertamente que es el odio étnico, que es una sobrevivencia de la era colonial que la democracia no tuvo ni el tino ni la inteligencia ni la valentía de abordar. Y el otro elemento negativo de estos 14 años es el retorno y la multiplicación de una tara nacional que nos ha hecho mucho daño, que es el estatismo y el paternalismo, y una de las incidencias más grandes
es el retorno de la población a las prácticas del clientelismo que a su vez son prácticas de la mendicidad instaladas como forma de sustitución del trabajo y de la productividad. Entonces, yo diría que aquí hay un círculo perverso: como nunca antes somos mono productores, somos un estado rentista, como nunca el Estado es el distribuidor arbitrario de la renta petrolera y como nunca antes se ha incrementado en la gente tanto el sentimiento de que el Estado le debe algo y de que, como el petróleo es propiedad de todos, el Estado tiene obligación de mantenerlo [...] Lo que ya veníamos arrastrando desde los finales de la década de los noventa, que no era una crisis política cualquiera sino una ruptura civilizatoria, el choque entre dos modelos o dos maneras de estar en la modernidad o de estar en el siglo XXI, se aceleró, se radicalizó, y yo creo que éste es un país roto, fragmentado por una población que ya se acostumbró a vivir en medio del horror, de la emergencia, de la improvisación, en medio de la idea de que el futuro no es más que una tela opaca, que nadie puede imaginar el futuro. Esto que estoy describiendo es, para mí, como una sociedad de posguerra. Es decir, en estos 15 años no hubo en Venezuela una guerra civil en el sentido clásico como la que ocurrió entre sandinistas y contras en Nicaragua, como la que ocurrió en España entre la falangistas y republicanos, y no hubo tampoco un proceso autoritario como el de Chile o el de Argentina, pero sí ocurrió ya una guerra profunda que fue una guerra simbólica, una guerra afectiva, en el orden del lenguaje, que ha dejado, como todas las guerras, un país devastado, un país moralmente en ruinas, donde hay una gran sufrimiento de tipo político, término que tomo de la sociología brasileña, usado para referirse a un sufrimiento producto generalmente de guerras o de grandes confrontaciones que la persona no puede digerir afectivamente porque no está codificado como tal. Se sigue pensando que lo político es algo exterior a la subjetividad a la afectividad. En casos como el de Venezuela, donde durante 14 años hubo un secuestro de la psique colectiva, es la diferencia entre darle cien
cachetadas a un niño o decirle repetidamente eres un imbécil, eres un imbécil. Probablemente se tengan los mismos resultados [...] Esa es la percepción que tengo, con un agravante, que en esta guerra la sensación es que nadie ganó, no hay triunfadores, los dos lados están adoloridos, el lado que gobierna dice que entre el imperio y la oligarquía le han impedido hacer la revolución, y el otro lado se siente perseguido, aplastado, perseguido, discriminado, ofendido, humillado. Entonces, lo que ha ocurrido en el país es una alianza perder-perder.

La obra más acabada de Chávez es él mismo, es decir el haber construido rápidamente en el imaginario una figura, una leyenda, un liderazgo carismático en los términos de Max Weber, y con ese liderazgo haber sido el activador también de una afectividad adolorida que era la de los pobres venezolanos que se sintieron postergados, y no solo los pobres, la clase media baja también, la clase media que se había sentido defraudada. Ahora, cómo se produce en la práctica eso, porque no hay discurso que tenga eco sin beneficios concretos, es decir si no hay una relación costo beneficio. Bueno, en una gran inclusión que se produjo en Venezuela, pero esa inclusión se produjo a través del mercado. Es decir, los barrios están igualitos, tienen las mismas carencias. Probablemente lo único nuevo fueron las misiones que hacían sentir a la gente que se les estaba prestando atención directa, pero la verdadera gran inclusión fue la redistribución del ingreso que permitió que mucha gente se incorporara al consumo, sobre todo al consumo de determinados bienes eléctricos, electrónicos, del hogar, y al consumo de ropas de marcas y al consumo globalizado. Esa inclusión a través del mercado es realmente la única transformación profunda porque, a juzgar por el aparato económico, esto es un capitalismo de estado con un mercado tradicional de sociedades mono productoras [...] Y lo que sí hay, que es la otra forma de inclusión, es eso que tú llamas un estado paralelo, que es más parecido a un campamento, a una emergencia, a un operativo que a una institución sólida; por consiguiente,
es un estado que se desmorona apenas le quitas el dinero, porque no hay organización. Esto es lo que me hace suponer que una transformación del país va a tener más dificultades. Es decir, volver a un mínimo de normalidad democrática, volver a un juego del pluralismo, consolidar las instituciones, va a tener más resistencia en el orden de la cultura política de la gente y en el orden de las nuevas economías, sobre todo la economía generada por el narcotráfico y todas las otras formas de ilegalidad, el contrabando en la frontera colombiana, la corrupción cotidiana.

Aquí puedes traer a administrar a Santa Teresita de Jesús, pero con esa cantidad de dinero no solo se pervierte, sino que el Estado es más poderoso que la sociedad, hay una inequidad y hay un desequilibrio, hay un falla de origen para hablar en términos de video, porque un dirigente político que gobierne un Estado que es más poderoso que el resto de la sociedad estará siempre tentado al autoritarismo y a la corrupción.

**Héctor Soto**

Con el chavismo ha habido tremendo avance. El avance en concreto es: yo no quiero trabajar, pero de todo esto que se reparten denme mi parte. Ciertamente que hay algo cultural que marca la historia de Venezuela, que es el rentismo. Cuando un país comienza a vivir de algo que sale del subsuelo y que no está vinculado al trabajo, entonces hay una desviación ideológica. Es muy difícil así abordar las preguntas que creo que vas a hacer sin establecer una relación entre los dos grandes programas mundiales de los últimos 200 años, que son todas las corrientes colectivistas -entre ellas el marxismo o el socialismo, el socialismo de Estado, la socialdemocracia.- y los programas individualistas -el fascismo, el capitalismo, el neoliberalismo- todo eso a la luz de un país que se hizo rentista, es decir de un país que desvinculó por razones históricas el bienestar del trabajo. Cuando el venezolano entendió o
subjetivizó que su bienestar no tenía que ver con el trabajo, allí se produjo una dislocación ideológica tremenda, y tiene 120 años. No es del chavismo, ni del marxismo leninismo, ni de AD ni de Copei. Aquí hay una deformación. El venezolano dijo: se puede vivir sin trabajar. ¿Qué es lo que pasa con el rentismo, es decir con ese vivir sin trabajar? Eso explica, complejiza, enreda todo. Vamos a poner dos extremos: la teoría marxista que dice los hombres, por la industrialización, van a crear una clase obrera que cada día va a ser más explotada y se va a organizar y va a luchar por tomar los aparatos de producción y después se va a liberar. Pero ¿qué pasa en donde la riqueza sale del subsuelo? ¿Qué pasa? Marx no pudo prever eso [...] Él lo que vivió fue la sociedad industrial, la revolución industrial, las máquinas, pero no se equivocó cuando dijo que lo económico determina lo socio histórico. Cuando te digo que en Venezuela cuando aparece el petróleo y se puede vivir sin trabajar te estoy hablando de la deformación del rentismo. A eso contribuye también el carácter de país tropical. Usted no puede vivir en pantalones cortos todo el año en Europa ni en los Estados Unidos. Aquí sí.

¿Qué está pasando en Venezuela? Hay una polarización. ¿Qué es eso que se llama polarización? ¿Es de ideología? Yo pienso que no. Yo pienso que nadie está diciendo la verdad y nadie está trabajando por construir la fundamentación teórica que dice estar defendiendo. Ni el chavismo ni eso que llaman la MUD. En general, todos los políticos que hablan por la televisión, que es nuestro gran medio de comunicación, todos mienten en relación con la ideología. El asunto de la ideología entra para mí dentro de un esquema muy básico, muy cartesiano, pero que me permite explicar muchas cosas. En el mundo político hay tres vértices para decir si uno es de izquierda, de derecha o de qué. El primero es el papel del Estado, el segundo es el del individuo y el tercero el del colectivo. Son como tres categorías que yo arbitrariamente utilicé para explicar mi posición. Parto primero del concepto de ideología -que
es una organización de ideas-, luego lo político -cómo te organizas-, luego lo programático -qué haces en el día a día-. Yo creo que la revolución bolivariana teóricamente se inscribe en este vértice que es el colectivismo. En el colectivismo yo ubico un montón de doctrinas que creen que todos mis actos deberían tener una consecuencia positiva para alguien más y, en consecuencia, se revierte para mí. Eso es teórico. Allí entonces yo ubico el socialismo, el socialismo de Estado, el comunismo, el anarquismo, el socialismo en todas sus formas. Cuando el Estado es lo único, estamos hablando de fascismo. Este es mi punto de vista. Y en el individualismo hay también un montón de doctrinas respetables: el cristianismo, el liberalismo, el capitalismo, el neoliberalismo, que es la fase superior del capitalismo. Teóricamente el chavismo se ubicó aquí y yo me compré esa idea. Ahora ¿qué está pasando en Venezuela? Esto desaparece. Aquí no hay ningún debate ideológico. Aquí lo que hay es una lucha por los poderes donde hay dinero. Algunos compañeros están luchando por esas organizaciones llamadas ministerios, etc. de buena fe, para trabajar por los demás, por los pobres, y otros no. Y yo creo que en la derecha también pasa lo mismo, pero me cuesta admitir que haya alguien de la derecha luchando por los pobres.

Chávez entra en una gran confusión ideológica porque la vida no le da tiempo. Cuando Chávez asume el poder creo que tiene 42 años, un muchacho, y entonces empieza a leer tesis colectivistas, tesis individualistas. Cuando Chávez tomó el poder comenzó a hablar del tercer camino, de Toni Blair, y de repente cuando se está muriendo está marxista leninista radical. Creo que Chávez fue víctima de la social democracia internacional que dirige Ignacio Ramonet, que es algo parecido al tercer camino que piensa que a los pobres hay que darles un poquito pero no tanto. Chávez claudicó, siendo un gran hombre. Chávez es un fenómeno, un extraordinario ser humano. Estuve trabajando cinco años con él, tres muy cercano. Lo tuve
cercano y hablamos mucho. Pero los que estaban en Miraflores, y no voy a decir quiénes son, empezaron a meterle en la cabeza una serie de ideas y Chávez fue el brazo ejecutor para liquidar las Mesas Técnicas de Agua, los Comités de Tierra urbanos y la Misión Cultura que se convirtió en una cosa política de 20.000 personas. ¿Pero por malo? No, por chisme, porque son organismos autónomos. Estaba confundido. Cada semana le entregaban un libro, la primera de Hollowey, la siguiente de Neri, uno era anti estado y el otro pro estado. Chávez hizo un gran esfuerzo. De militar empezó a leer y leer y entre estas tres doctrinas hubo una confusión que le metieron personas con nombre y apellido. Que la historia sepa que Chávez hizo un enorme esfuerzo. Si no fuera sino porque logró que el petróleo se distribuyera mejor, ya qué más le vas a pedir. ¿Le vas a pedir doctrina ideológica? La vida biológica no da tiempo para hacer tantas cosas. Que quede claro que yo reconozco en Chávez una gran intención, pero una gran confusión ideológica: mucho o todo el poder para el pueblo organizado o poder centralizado; marxismo leninismo clásico, el partido, o las comunas. El decidió. Y decidió con todo. Eliminó la Misión Cultura: son demasiado inteligentes y soberbios, prepotentes y autónomos.

Chávez mató, liquidó, eliminó, exterminó, en poco tiempo, en dos años de ejercicio, a los pendejos, a los idiotas. Hoy en Venezuela, 2013, no hay pendejos. En Venezuela todo el que se despierta en la mañana y sale a estudiar, a trabajar, sabe para quién trabaja, para quién estudia y para quién hace cosas. Eso es bien importante porque en un pueblo en donde la política era algo solo de unos cuantos, de un 10%, de una gente que dirigía pase lo que pase, hemos pasado a una situación en la cual todo el mundo en Venezuela sabe para qué trabaja, para quién trabaja, para qué intereses. Creo que ese es un logro de Chávez, y quisiera recordarlo por ahí.
Américo Martín

Aquí se habla de revolución, pero cómo va llamarse así si lo que ha hecho es aniquilar las fuerzas productivas. Hasta etimológicamente es un contrasentido. Revolución es avanzar con doble rapidez […]

Hay un detalle en lo que dices que me gustaría destacar. Este gobierno se declara estatista y, en función de eso, estatiza todas las empresas básicas, además de la cementera, una serie de empresas alimentarias y otras. Nacionaliza toda una serie de empresas para encargárselas al Estado. Aquí está el primer problema, que es un debate que se está dando incluso con el Partido Comunista cubano hoy, que es confundir estatismo con socialismo. Si confundes estatismo con socialismo pasas por alto una cosa elemental: el Estado genera una clase nueva que es la que administra las empresas que antes eran administradas por el empresario privado, pero estos te administraban basados en el interés del lucro y la competencia -y en la competencia por mayor tecnología y mejores formas de administración- pero estos no tienen competencia. Estos son malos administradores. Son empresarios privados pero sin las competencias de los viejos empresarios privados. Eso se ha traducido en una decadencia de la producción de las empresas estatales. Venezuela está importando todo: cabillas, cemento, todo. Eso fue el primer error, confundir estatismo con socialismo.

Partamos de esta base: Chávez representó la idea del cambio pero no supo materializarla ni ideológicamente ni en obra, sino en una apariencia de realizaciones. Las estatizaciones, por ejemplo. Efectivamente, despojó empresas que funcionaban bien pero que eran de empresarios privados, burgueses, y las puso en manos de funcionarios del partido que hablaban de revoluciones. Luego optó por las cooperativas. Ideó un socialismo de cooperativas. Con todo lo impulsivo que era, y es por eso que los académicos del Norte lo adoran, se dedicó a crear cooperativas. Hizo más cooperativas que nadie en el mundo. Tenía un dineral para intentarlo.
Pensaba que crear cooperativas era sencillamente reunir un grupo de personas y darles el financiamiento. Creó un banco para financierles. Ese banco naturalmente hacia préstamos que no recuperaba, nadie controlaba aquello. En fin, se volvió un derroche enorme y el 80 y más por ciento de las cooperativas desaparecieron. Del dinero nunca se supo. Quedaron algunas convertidas en falsas cooperativas. Para aprovecharse de las excelentes condiciones financieras y crediticias que se les ofrecían muchas empresas se inscribieron como cooperativas y les sacaron provecho. Ese fue un momento en el que se dieron cuenta de eso. Pararon. Fue cuando Chávez dijo que las cooperativas eran otra forma de capitalismo. Nunca recuperaron el dinero. Quedaron solo las que ya funcionaban de antes, y funcionaban bien, porque la idea de las cooperativas era una buena idea, pero no para convertirlas en lo que Chávez creía, en la base para la creación de una sociedad socialista de cooperativas destruyendo la iniciativa privada, la empresa privada. Todo eso fue un fracaso tremendo pero dejó la idea de que Chávez era partidario de las cooperativas. Luego creó las empresas de producción social, no basadas en el espíritu de lucro, para competir con las empresas privadas basadas en el espíritu del lucro. El resultado fue otro fracaso. No queda ni una de esas empresas. Luego la administración de las empresas estatales y de las estatizadas, con cogestión para darles participación a los trabajadores. La experiencia resultó trágica. Finalmente todas las empresas estatales están destruidas, incluso una que era una joya, Minerven. No vamos a decir que todas las empresas del Estado están condenadas al fracaso. Pdvsa funcionaba muy bien como empresa del Estado. La idea no es si es del Estado sino en manos de quién va a funcionar. Esa es la primera idea. Y la segunda es que si el Estado se vuelve empresario tiene que hacerlo en los términos de correr riesgo, no de financiar saldos rojos [...]. De allí que estamos en esa economía que nadie entiende cómo teniendo un financiamiento tan monstruosamente alto de dólares y divisas para
una población pequeña, de veinte y pico millones de habitantes, la agricultura se haya reducido a la cuarta parte de lo que era, se han aniquilado la mitad de las empresas industriales que habían, todas las industrias del Estado se cayeron, estamos importando gasolina.

He llegado a la conclusión de que los que realmente entiendan que esto es una farsa, profundamente, son los que vienen del socialismo -marxistas, socialistas- porque nosotros fuimos formados en varias ideas simples pero exactas. Marx decía que el socialismo implicaba un desarrollo descomunal de las fuerzas productivas. Precisamente ¿de qué surgía el socialismo? Lo dice en el prefacio de La crítica de la economía política. Dice que hay un momento en el que las fuerzas productivas se han desarrollado mucho pero que las relaciones de producción privadas asfixian ese crecimiento. Entonces, cuando las fuerzas productivas revientan esas relaciones de propiedad privada es cuando viene la revolución. Es decir, lo que viene es un desarrollo libre de las fuerzas productivas a tal grado que se producirá una súper abundancia de bienes materiales y espirituales y llegaremos al comunismo, porque el comunismo se basa en el principio de que a cada cual según su necesidad y de cada cual según su capacidad, es decir que aunque tú tengas menos méritos que otros pero tengas más necesidades te dan más. Ese es el comunismo basado en una solidaridad absoluta, pero para que eso sea así se requiere que haya una súper abundancia tal de bienes materiales y espirituales que cada quien reciba de acuerdo con sus necesidades. Esa es la ilusión del marxismo y del comunismo. Y Marx decía que eso iba a ocurrir al desaparecer la propiedad privada sobre los medios de producción, porque entonces los trabajadores van a desarrollar libremente, sin la interferencia de las relaciones de propiedad privada y el derecho privado, la capacidad productiva. Es entonces cuando dice: de allí daremos el salto del reino de la necesidad al reino de la libertad. Partamos de este hecho: socialismo equivale a desarrollar las
fuerzas productivas, porque un socialismo que empobrece las fuerzas productivas es un retroceso en nombre de la caridad social. Si dejas de producir, la torta es cada vez más pequeña. Sin embargo, hasta muy entrados los años sesenta, todavía el Partido Comunista Soviético tenía la idea de producir más que los Estados Unidos y aspiraba a desarrollar una capacidad productiva bruta superior a la de los Estados Unidos y, después, una capacidad productiva neta, per cápita, también superior a la norteamericana. Con el tiempo se dieron cuenta de que eso no caminaba y el socialismo se reconstruyó sobre otras bases, sobre la idea de que lo material no importa, de que lo que importa es la solidaridad, el amor entre la gente, etc. Se construyó sobre otros ideales, pero no sobre la base principista de Marx.

Pero la intención de que hay que empoderar a la gente, hay que hacerle participar activamente en la construcción de una sociedad, que la construcción de una sociedad no es un grupo de personas que se van a reunir para decidir por los demás. No, así no. Así no va a funcionar jamás. Dentro de tus propias reflexiones tú tienes que establecer la fuerza de participación de la gente. Esa es una reflexión que se la debemos a Chávez. Yo lo reconozco púbicamente.

José León Uzcátegui

Yo soy psiquiatra y tengo una especialización de economía petrolera. Un periodista me preguntaba sobre esta doble condición y le decía: nada más natural, Venezuela es locura y petróleo. Claro, no se queda allí. Lo que mejor la define es capitalismo rentista que el mismo Chávez llamaba socialismo rentista y, como pasa con el socialismo en general, cuando se creía en el siglo pasado que el capitalismo había llegado a su fin, que casi las dos terceras partes del mundo eran socialismo, se reveló, y ahora está más claro que antes, que no hubo tal socialismo
sino capitalismo de Estado, es decir otra manera, ya no es la propiedad individual de los medios de producción sino la propiedad del Estado, puesta a su vez en manos de los particulares, de la nomenclatura, de la burocracia.

Con la muerte del presidente Chávez, que mucha gente afirmaba que no existe chavismo sin Chávez, creo que hay elementos que considerar. El primero es que el chavismo como una propuesta político ideológica que presentara el rumbo de un socialismo, de lo que Hugo Chávez llamó el socialismo del siglo XXI, forma parte de la crisis teórica del pensamiento revolucionario. Es evidente el fracaso del socialismo real por lo menos en lo que conocemos del siglo XX. Y colocar el socialismo en el siglo XXI no ha resuelto para nada qué entender, por ponerle un número más. Allí sigue habiendo un problema que no es venezolano. Es un problema de la crisis del pensamiento de la izquierda a nivel mundial. No es el marxismo en crisis. Es qué se entiende hoy en el mundo por una propuesta postcapitalista, porque en términos globales no hay duda de que el capitalismo nos condujo a este estado de insania mental colectiva idealizada. La locura. Es que estamos al borde de un precipicio. Frente a eso, el pensamiento teórico de otra alternativa todavía no está claro. De manera que Chávez hizo un extraordinario esfuerzo...

En algunos momentos de su discurso hacia referencia a Mariátegui, en otros a Gramsci, en otros a Trotsky. Es sorprendente de dónde sacaba el tiempo para leer, para asimilar, para elaborar, pero no es verdad que hay una propuesta teórica que nos permita una carta de navegación para una propuesta postcapitalista, para no llamarla socialista. Y eso ya es un problema severo. Que no es culpa de Chávez, no es culpa de nadie, sencillamente es un problema mundial. No hay hoy en el mundo una alternativa postcapitalista clara. Todos los esfuerzos que se han hecho en el Foro Social Mundial han sido parte de esos intentos de reconstruir, de recomponer, de plantear, de definir hoy qué entender por una propuesta
postcapitalista. He ahí un primer problema muy claro: no tener un norte claro. Así que el Plan de la Patria, que es nuestra carta de navegación, combina propuestas absolutamente contradictorias porque incorpora propuestas de política participativa y ecosocialista al mismo tiempo que un modelo industrialista, extractivista, desarrollista, de la misma cosa a la que se enfrenta el buen vivir cuando señala que el modelo que se nos vendió duró 500 años, cuando el mundo entero hizo del progreso y del desarrollo una razón de ser de la existencia. De ese modelo lo único claro es que no es. Lo que no está claro es cuál es el que es. El segundo problema tiene que ver con el Estado Latinoamericano. Nosotros seguimos hablando de estados nacionales de modo que Bolivia es un estado nacional, y Argentina, etc. Eso no tiene nada que ver con el estado nacional europeo. Hasta los términos, las categorías que utilizamos no son...y eso tiene una gran importancia porque Venezuela, -adicional a lo que eso significa en términos de Latinoamérica- tiene una especificidad que se la da el petróleo. Se trata de un estado rentista donde el trabajo no es el valor fundamental para construir la sociedad. Es al contrario. Eso lo sabe cualquier venezolano, desde los que se han enriquecido a costa de los pobres o de los pobres que siguen viviendo en la pobreza pero que, desde un buhonero hasta un taxista esperan una parte del reparto. La economía venezolana es imposible entenderla si no es por el capitalismo rentista. Y ese es un segundo componente bien importante. No solamente no tenemos un modelo claro de hacia dónde vamos, sino que tenemos un tipo de economía con una especificidad que limita terriblemente cualquier intento de transformarla y mucho más de una propuesta como la del buen vivir que es, en mi opinión particular, la que más se asemeja a una sociedad humana, porque en esta sociedad no hemos alcanzado la condición humana. Seguimos viviendo en la pre humanidad. Y en Venezuela tenemos esos dos componentes: la falta de un proyecto y la existencia de un capitalismo rentista, adicionalmente con los males del estado
latinoamericano: el patrimonialismo, el prevendarismo, el clientelismo, la corrupción. Y eso desde México hasta la Patagonia. Nuestros estados funcionan de esa manera y Venezuela también y a eso se añade el capitalismo rentista. Eso genera un tejido social que tiene dificultad para conformarse, para constituirse. Es por eso que me asombro de cómo se ha cambiado en estos 14 años [...] y Chávez en eso fue el actor fundamental, el gran educador, fue una relación que llega a la devoción, pero que ciertamente -más allá de los dirigentes del partido, del gobierno, de si son corruptos o no, si lo practican o no, si creen en ello o no, más allá de esa dirigencia- la gente común se apropió de ese discurso, lo entendió, lo asumió. Yo, que me recorro el país por razones profesionales, políticas y morales, puedo decir que lo que conocí no tiene nada que ver con lo hay hoy. Y eso evidentemente muestra la gran potencialidad. Yo participé en el segundo gobierno de Rafael Caldera. En ese gobierno del llamado chiripero yo fui director de salud de Caracas, del área metropolita, Sucre, Baruta, El Hatillo, Chacao, Distrito Capital y la Guaira, que todavía no era estado Vargas. En ese momento el discurso que hacíamos es: Caldera es la posibilidad de un paso al futuro porque permitió la derrota de AD y Copei. Y luego, cuando aparece Chávez y todo lo que ha representado, volvimos a pensar: Chávez es, de nuevo, la transición. Alguien podría decir que la transición para volver al pasado. Lo que sí es cierto es aquí en Venezuela pensar que volvamos a lo que vivimos en el derrumbe de la cuarta república -para compartir contigo que la primera parte de la cuarta república fue de avances y logros en términos de lo que vino después del perezjimenismo- es imposible. Se ha producido, para comenzar, un cambio importante en la redistribución de la renta, más allá de lo que se haya robado toda la burguesía, sea cierto o medio cierto. Ciertamente en esta revolución bolivariana ha aparecido una nueva burguesía a imagen y semejanza de la que se construyó en la cuarta república. Sea más o menos cierto, más allá de los discursos, más allá de esa
dirigencia que puede ser incapaz, corrupta, mediocre, creo que la gran posibilidad está en el pueblo que entendió y asumió el discurso de Chávez y pudiéramos estar en un proceso de transición hacia otro momento.

Luis Ugalde

Hace 14 años se empezó con utopías y esperanzas máximas, con la creencia de que bastaba tener buena voluntad y querer al pueblo para hacer buena gestión y curar los males del país. Chávez, con su magia comunicacional, con su audacia verbal y con su condición militar encarnadora del poder de imposición armada, resultaba para muchos ideal para castigar a los que traicionaron al pueblo y colmar las esperanzas de éste.

Nadie pone a su familiar enfermo grave en manos de un médico que sea locuaz, prometedor y compasivo con el enfermo, si no es competente. Pero en política somos muy propensos a creer en la ilusión de las promesas. Chávez no sólo es promesa, es también ingresos diez veces superiores en manos del gobierno dispuesto a darlos a sus seguidores incondicionales en un trueque de dinero y ayudas a cambio de fidelidad política clientelar. En estos años ha concentrado todos los mecanismos del poder y sometido al Ejecutivo los poderes Legislativo, Judicial, militar, comunicacional, policial y de propaganda, que en una democracia están separados y se necesitan desconcentrados.

A medida que se desgastan las promesas, queda en evidencia el desastre de la gestión y se reducen los dólares disponibles que se creían ilimitados, queda la distorsión de la realidad y el descaro propagandístico manipulado por el control y la hegemonía comunicacional y la represión con leyes hechas a la medida de las solicitudes del Ejecutivo o elaboradas por éste.
Esta segunda etapa, que va avanzada, es la que llamo de “cinismo” por cuanto que ya ni los dirigentes, ni los seguidores creen en el paraíso prometido, ven que el modelo cubano es fracaso y esfuerzo inútil y se han topado con su propia improvisación e incompetencia en diversas áreas; lo que lleva a los de arriba a mayor corrupción millonaria en previsión del futuro, y a los de abajo a fingir lealtad si a cambio se reciben dádivas. No están exentos de este cinismo-pragmatismo empresarios y gente de corazón antichavista, pero que “por ahora” ven buenas oportunidades de enriquecimiento [...] Cada vez es más distante el discurso socialista de la realidad en la que los pobres sobreviven; nacen y crecen nuevos ricos en la medida en que estén más cerca del poder. Cada vez más se conjugan los verbos en futuro (“haremos”) en todas las áreas en las que, en el tiempo equivalente a tres gobiernos democráticos, ya se debía haber hecho [...] Lo primero que debe distribuir el Estado es la capacidad productiva para que con ella todos los venezolanos tengan poder, organización y acceso a los bienes y servicios que necesitan. Exactamente el camino contrario al que ahora se quiere: instauran una sociedad estatista donde en educación, economía, comunicación, salud... sólo haya un empresario, el Estado, pues la empresa privada tiene el pecado original de la ganancia y de la mal explicada plusvalía. Para que haya sociedad civil autónoma hace falta una economía autónoma y millones de personas cuya producción y productividad no dependa directamente de un gobierno-Estado con interés y enfoque de control y dependencia, al estilo cubano-soviético [...] Es lamentable el Estado Comunal en el que hacen una pinza de poder la cúpula del Ejecutivo y las comunas que dependen de él y se le someten. Ese Estado Comunal implica, por ejemplo la implantación de Consejos Educativos en la Escuela y Consejos Obreros en las fábricas con la idea de “todo el poder para los soviets”, es decir, todo el poder para los consejos, con lo que se anula el poder pedagógico de la dirección académica escolar o la gerencia empresarial. Esto elimina los
sindicatos autónomos del poder gubernamental central, los municipios y todas las otras formas
de descentralización y autonomía de la sociedad. No olvidemos que la Unión Soviética
nominalmente era República de Consejos, como fachada de la República del Partido Comunista
único, mandado por el vitalicio Secretario único del Partido.

Hay una evidente crisis de legitimidad en la calle. Con la inflación, escasez, inseguridad y mega
corrupción gubernamental cada vez más a la vista, el malestar está en la calle y la dificultad
está en lograr combinar audacia con prudencia, radicalidad con gradualidad. Se puede ser
rápido y radical en el rechazo de lo que hay, pero la construcción es lenta y exige cambios
profundos. La oposición necesita combinar la emotividad e indignación desbordante en el
malestar actual con las vías democráticas para el cambio de régimen y la construcción eficiente
y democrática del futuro. Además hay millones de venezolanos que creyeron en este régimen y
sus promesas que deben ser acogidos para hacer políticas que no terminen en promesas y humo
[...] pero al mismo tiempo mucha gente se siente impotente ante el poder omnímodo y busca
salvadores. El trabajo está en crear equipos y que entre los diversos líderes haya acuerdos para
que no terminen prevaleciendo los personalismos y las ambiciones.

La peor plaga, que además es muy contagiosa, es que la población se crea que somos un
país “inmensamente rico”, por tener mucho petróleo, y que por tanto no es necesario el trabajo
creativo para producir riqueza nacional y riqueza familiar, sino que la tarea del gobierno es
distribuir la riqueza que ya existe. Así Chávez se convirtió en predicador y distribuidor de esta
enfermedad nacional heredada. A cambio sólo pedía incondicionalidad y fe en su visión y amor.
Esta demagogia lleva a despreciar la educación de calidad, el profesionalismo y la eficiencia
productiva, a nombrar incompetentes, siempre que sean incondicionales políticamente. Crea
además la ilusión y el deseo de acceder al consumo abundante de bienes superiores importados
sin pasar por la producción de los mismos o de los equivalentes, que se transan en el mercado. 

Cuesta salir de la ilusión de que en Venezuela se puede dar la revolución del consumo sin la revolución de la producción, pues ésta está fuera y nuestros dólares son ilimitados para importarlos […] El petróleo debe convertirse en medio de producción de ciudadanía responsable, de poder social y de poder económico-productivo, distribuido en toda la población. Lo que se distribuye en directo no son los bienes de consumo, sino el equipamiento de cada uno para la capacidad productiva. Con ello se distribuye el poder (no se concentra, ni se desarrolla la dependencia de indigentes) productivo cada vez más autónomo frente al Estado y al partido o grupo que tiende a apropiarse del Estado y someter la población. También el hecho productivo, apalancado inicialmente por los ingresos petroleros, se vuelve cada vez más autónomo y autosostenido […] Otra plaga es la ilusión mesiánica de que hay acceso a la felicidad por la vía de creer en el mesías político, fértil en imaginación y promesas, pero anti modelo en la responsabilidad de gestión pública, eficiente, honesta. Hay que generar más poder-capacidad en toda la población para que haya menos poder-dominación de un caudillo mesiánico y de una camarilla única que se apropia del Estado, es decir de las leyes, de las armas, del pensamiento y de la información- indoctrinación […] Uno de los daños mayores que hemos heredado es que el mesías no creía en la democracia y sobre todo descalificaba a todos los que no fueran seguidores y dóciles a él. Sin reconocimiento desde el Estado de la dignidad y razón de los que opinan de otra manera, no es posible la democracia.

Stalin Pérez Borges

Yo pertenezco al partido (PSUV), a una corriente, como dirigente sindical. Ahorita soy del Consejo Consultivo de la nueva Central de Trabajadores. Yo me desprendí de Chávez y en
privado me he burlado del socialismo tropical, socialismo bucal, pero no creo que haya socialismo. El capitalismo está muy arraigado en Venezuela, pero hay un proceso revolucionario en marcha. Ha habido cambios importantes dentro de la sociedad. De hecho, el gobierno ha hecho conquistas sociales y democráticas [...] Antes de Gómez, la guerra en este país se daba por la tierra. Primero por parte de los militares que venían desde la época de Bolívar, después la Guerra Federal. Después de Gómez, las peleas, la lucha de clases, han sido por la renta petrolera. Por muchos años Venezuela ha sido el primer país exportador de petróleo y de allí viene la renta, que no es cualquier renta. Exactamente qué es lo que hizo Chávez. Una redistribución distinta de la renta petrolera. Y lo hizo es inversiones sociales. Aquí los pensionados del Seguro Social, después que habían pasado una cantidad de años trabajando en una empresa pública, les costaba mucho cobrar la pensión a la que tenían derecho. No hablo de la renta o parte de la renta, porque de hecho les habían descontado mientras trabajaban, hablo de la pensión, para disfrutar de la cual algunas veces les costaba. Eso cambió con Chávez. Hoy hay casi dos millones de pensionados, personas que llevan el salario mínimo a sus casas. Antes tampoco era salario mínimo, era la mitad o menos del salario mínimo. Hoy en día en una familia, en un país pobre, en una casa debe haber uno o dos viejos que se mantienen, que por lo menos llevan ese ingreso mensual fijo. Esa es una cuestión muy importante. Yo no digo que PDVAL resuelva el problema del abastecimiento, de la comida de todos. Estoy convencido de que no pero, en ese sentido, muchas familias se benefician de lo mucho o poco que pueda vender PDVAL. En muchos barrios existe el comedor popular que existía cuando los gobiernos de AD, pero eran escasos. En este sentido yo creo que sí ha habido un cambio. Eso no significa que sea socialismo. Y en el caso de la matrícula de estudio también. Un cambio muy importante.
Hay que ser serio. Eso, por ejemplo, la gente que está con la oposición no lo ve. No miran los alcances de esos beneficios, que no son cualquier cosa.

En lo de la democracia participativa, yo creo que sí ha habido avances importantes, democráticos. Chávez, de alguna manera, aunque le acusan de intolerante, aceptó críticas. Chávez tuvo un proceso de aprendizaje. La constitución es obra de Chávez casi de puño y letra, menos el preámbulo que dicen que es de Gustavo Pereira. Lo demás, artículo por artículo, si no lo escribió, lo revisó. Allí, viendo la Constitución, que es lo que rige el país de verdad, aunque tú podrías observar la relación entre el discurso y la práctica. Ese discurso es muy democrático.

Sin embargo hay que mencionar casos como el del Centro Internacional Miranda, integrado por intelectuales de Venezuela y del exterior. El instituto se dedicaba a hacer charlas, sobre todo con ponentes internacionales. Hubo un seminario en el los que intervinieron consideraron que Chávez tenía el problema de que se metía en todo. Hablaron entonces del hiperliderazgo. A Chávez eso le pareció una ofensa y una desconsideración y se molestó mucho. Y a Nicolás Maduro también. Los dos declararon en términos tremendos contra este grupo de intelectuales, muy ligados por cierto al proceso venezolano. Ahí tuvimos que hacer una campaña declarando que era cierto lo que decían y que aun si no existiese ese hiperliderazgo no se justificaba la reacción. Eso provocó que la dirección del Centro Internacional Miranda fuera cambiada. Y fueron varios incidentes de este tipo, de críticas a Chávez, de observaciones al gobierno y nunca pasó. Hablando de democracia participativa, Chávez dijo en algún momento –siendo la Constitución democrática hablando de democracia participativa- que los sindicatos no podían ser autónomos, no podían ser independientes. Eso fue por el 2007. Y su argumento lo planteó sobre los escritos de Rosa de Luxemburgo contra Lenin y contra Trotsky. Que los sindicatos tenían que disciplinarse, que la lucha de los sindicatos no era, en fin... Nosotros dimos una
repuesta, pero no se pudo. Citamos a Rosa de Luxemburgo, que se equivocó en ese punto y después ella reconoció. Chávez lo fue olvidando y después modificando su discurso. En el caso del Centro Internacional Miranda llegó a reconocer, ya cuando comenzó su enfermedad, que él había cometido el error de haber respondido a los intelectuales. Les dio la razón después, en público. En el caso de nosotros nunca nos dio la razón públicamente, nunca reconoció, pero después los discursos fueron distintos.

El chavismo tiene un gran componente militar, desde los oficiales que se alzaron el 4 de febrero y el 11 de noviembre con Chávez. Muchos de ellos son corporativistas, antisindicales. Ahora mismo, muchos con conciencia antisindical. Esa es una de las discusiones que hay ahora en el movimiento obrero. Otra parte del retroceso de lo que se había avanzado con Chávez es que en algunas empresas del Estado se mantiene eso que tú llamas corpoestado, estado corporativo o, como uno decía antes, capitalismo de estado. Pero en medio de ese capitalismo de estado había cosas positivas. No era como antes que la presencia del trabajador en las empresas, con AD y Copei, se daba a través de lo que le llamaba un director laboral, alguien que nunca rendía cuentas. Ahora no. Se dieron empresas que ponían a los trabajadores a dirigir. Pudo haber resultados negativos en algunos casos, como en el de Sidor, donde se formó una mafia alrededor de los trabajadores que fueron nombrados, incluso en casos en los que los trabajadores estuvieron de acuerdo y aprobaron su nombramiento, pero en otros casos fue positivo.

Al principio de Chávez también se desarrollaron algunas iniciativas (de movimientos sociales). Ahora lo que tiene que surgir son movimientos autónomos. Con Chávez vivo, y fue un error de Chávez, del gobierno de Chávez, todo se fue corporativizando, institucionalizando. Todos los movimientos. Incluso el estudiantil que surgió a raíz de cuando le quitaron la
concesión a Radio Caracas. Los terminaron institucionalizando, les quitaron su independencia. Y en el sector campesino también. En el movimiento sindical no tan así, aunque tiene un sector que sí. Con la Unete lo quisieron hacer pero nunca lo lograron. Nunca perdió su independencia. Muchos compañeros y yo logramos que se mantuviera. Entonces, lo primero que tiene que surgir ahora son los movimientos independientes, autónomos, que se incorporen a las cosas progresivas que hay que hacer en el proceso. La pregunta sería: ¿creemos nosotros que el gobierno va alentar y les va a dar cabida? No sé. Lo que observo es que hay mucha preocupación, pero está muy nuevo para hacer una caracterización ya cerrada. Decirte que los va a permitir o no los va permitir, no sé. Yo creo que hay que esperar. Estamos preocupados porque hasta el momento no los ha permitido. Las primeras señales son que nos lo va permitir, pero no es una caracterización cerrada, pudiese cambiar.

**María Corina Machado**

Efectivamente, yo creo que nuestro país ha cambiado en estos años en muchas cosas, algunas alarmantes. Voy a comenzar con lo negativo para cerrar con lo bueno. Yo pienso que las causas de ese agotamiento del sistema previo fue la forma progresiva como se incrementó el populismo -como mecanismo no solo de campaña política sino de gestión pública-, el clientelismo, la corrupción, y el rentismo desde luego. Fue el momento en el que Venezuela vivió una crisis de ingreso petrolero y por eso, entre otras cosas, se da ese quiebre, porque el modelo ya no daba, desde la perspectiva rentista quiero decir, y el centralismo. Yo creo que el año 89 y el ejercicio de descentralización son unas de las cosas más importantes que nos han ocurrido en las últimas décadas desde la perspectiva política en Venezuela. Ahora ¿qué ocurrió? Lejos de corregir estos males, el modelo los acentuó y es evidente que había una vocación de control del poder desde el
primer día, más o menos explícita o más o menos consciente en sus miembros, no quiero
generalizar, pero sí, evidentemente, en una parte muy importante de sus promotores. Desde el
primer día, cómo empiezan a ponerse en práctica algunas acciones no solamente de orden
jurídico institucional, pero en el propio discurso político, fomentando la división y la
confrontación sobre la base de todos los criterios imaginables, no solamente lo típico económico
de la lucha de clases sino también en las diferencias religiosas, regionales, generacionales, algo
verdaderamente peligroso pero obviamente intencional y bien pensado de parte de quien lo
diseñó en un primer momento y de quien lo impulsó en sus diferentes etapas. Entonces yo te
diría que una de las cosas que promovió fue generar la mayor dependencia posible de toda la
sociedad en el Estado, de todos los sectores, empezando obviamente por los sectores políticos,
descabezando o minimizando los partidos como organizaciones intermedias, y luego con los
sectores económicos. A mí me pasó mucho que recorriendo el país, como siempre hago, la gente
habla. Se me acerca un productor un campesino: María Corina, mi finquita era la más
productiva, era la que estaba mejor preparada, con más inversión, entonces ¿por qué me la
expropiaron? Le contesto: precisamente por eso, porque todo espacio que represente autonomía
había que liquidarlo. Y en el plano social, lograr que el mayor número de ciudadanos
dependiera del Estado, y que dependieran además de una forma humillante, porque no es ni
siquiera el empleo público, sino la dádiva, la transferencia directa, absolutamente condicionada
no ya solamente a la militancia política sino a la renuncia a tu libertad, a tu libertad de
pensamiento y a tus ideales y convicciones. Eso me parece dramático porque lo que se ha
tratado de destruir es esa relación esfuerzo-logro, esencial en una sociedad que quiere avanzar
y que quiere progresar. Eso en términos negativos, además de lo que señalé antes respecto de la
división y de la confrontación en todos los planos que, además, ha generado una sociedad
profundamente violenta, porque los incentivos a la violencia son obvios, no solamente más de
diez millones de armas ilegales en la calle, 18.000 bandas criminales, tráfico de drogas
generalizado -con todos los males que eso va trayendo para destruir y atacar a la familia- y la
impunidad, por encima del 97%. Ese es el incentivo directo a la violencia, intencional desde
luego. En lo positivo, yo siento que ha surgido, como en todo momento crítico para una sociedad
en una encrucijada histórica, ha surgido una genuina conciencia y reflexión sobre lo que somos
y lo que queremos ser como sociedad, como república, como bien dices. Entonces has visto unas
demostraciones sin precedentes en América Latina de movilización política consciente, más o
menos espontánea en algunos momentos, más dirigida en otros, pero en todo caso muy clara de
lo que está en juego. Yo presiento que si de algo debemos sentirnos orgullosos es de que ha
quedado claro que, a pesar de todas las fallas, males e insatisfacciones que pudo generar la
democracia en su sistema, quienes crecimos en democracia e incluso quienes crecieron en esta
neo dictadura, como yo la llamo, tenemos un ADN democrático muy marcado, muy claro, que es
lo que nos ha hecho resistir y que va a hacer que todo esto termine de salir, porque
evidentemente hemos demostrado su ilegitimidad, no solo de origen sino también de su forma de
actuar.

Este es un régimen que está concentrando toda la propiedad y las decisiones en un grupo
cada vez más reducido de personas, con un comportamiento muy preocupante porque, para mí,
se asemeja cada día más no a Cuba sino a Rusia, donde tenemos una mafia state. Esto no es la
operación de un sistema capitalista, con el cual, incluso, podamos tener todos nuestras
diferencias. Quiero hacer la diferencia para describirte lo que yo creo que va a ocurrir en
Venezuela. En la esencia de un régimen liberal hay competencia, hay reglas de juego claras, hay
estado de derecho, hay independencia de poderes a los efectos de hacer respetar los
compromisos. Esto no es lo que existe en Venezuela hoy en día. Lo que hay dramáticamente se asemeja cada día más a la operación de las mafias que han ido ocupando instituciones y donde las reglas no son las establecidas explícitamente, transparentemente, en un contrato como es la Constitución o como son las leyes de la República. Por eso se ha convertido en lo que está pasando. La anarquía y la corrupción han ido permeando todo los planos, no solo de la institucionalidad sino de la vida misma en Venezuela, y eso es algo enormemente peligroso [...] Si tú me dices una palabra que resuma lo que este gobierno y este modelo nos ha hecho a los venezolanos, yo te digo: nos ha humillado. Cuando tú ves una mujer tiene que hacer cinco horas de cola para comprar harina y leche, pero además solo puede comprar un paquete, y que en el Táchira te ponen un chip para la compra de gasolina, o te marcan un número en el brazo como si fueras un animal, o a un oficial venezolano al que le da órdenes un oficial cubano. Aquí nos han venido humillando uno tras otro tras otro a cada uno de nosotros. ¿Que hay algunos que están haciendo muy buenos negocios? Allá ellos con su conciencia, pero más temprano que tarde, como ocurrió en el 2002, que más allá del desastre, de los puntos de vista de las decisiones políticas del liderazgo político de abril de ese momento, eso fue una insurrección civil, pero además hermosísima. Yo estuve en esa marcha a Miraflores y estuve orgullosísima de haber estado allí y yo reivindico todo lo que fueron las movilizaciones en ese día. ¿Que si estoy de acuerdo con lo que hizo el liderazgo? Evidentemente no, pero por eso te digo que esto no es un problema de la gente, aquí estamos enfrentando un problema de liderazgo político, de no entender claramente cuál es el modelo y qué requiere para enfrentarlo, porque un sistema neo dictatorial no lo puedes enfrentar solamente en los términos institucionales y con las reglas de juego que ellos ponen. Tú tienes que meterle la presión de la gente, que es lo único que realmente tenemos nosotros: el poder de la gente.
Rafael Uzcátegui

Pareciera que hay como un enfrentamiento entre dos relatos. Yo me mato cada vez que escucho de parte de los opositores eso de que éramos felices y no lo sabíamos, lo cual es un poco mitificar un pasado que no fue mítico, y el inverso del otro relato de que tenemos patria, de que hoy somos un país soberano. Yo pienso que hay que discutir mucho cómo se han dado las luchas del pueblo venezolano y cuál es el devenir histórico y cuáles han sido las diferentes conquistas y las bondades y contradicciones de los diversos gobiernos, que las han tenido, incluyendo éste. Quizás eso nos permitiría tener un área discursiva común para poder sentarse. Yo creo que es muy importante ahora, es complicado. Ahora es imposible volver al punto de los noventa que era un punto interesante porque era toda la época de la crisis económica, luego la crisis social del caracazo, el desplome del modelo de la alternancia del puntofijismo y que parecía que había la irrupción de nuevos factores sociales que iban a plantear nuevas ideas políticas y quizás también la superación de la cultura política vinculada a la renta petrolera, pero eso lamentablemente no ha sido así. Chávez, por supuesto que tenía sus virtudes propias, específicas, como político, como hombre político, pero él fue también, en mi valorización, la revitalización de toda una cultura política venezolana. El supo darle de nuevo un impulso al movimiento fundacional Simón Bolívar y al tema de la cultura petrolera, de la riqueza mágica, de la riqueza petrolera, todas esas cosas que nos han ido modelando como país. Ahora tenemos diez años de una discusión que no se ha dado en ningún lado. No hay espacios de interlocución. Muchas de las agendas de discusiones que quedaron a medias en la década de los noventa se perdieron entre gente que trabajó mucho tiempo en reivindicaciones puntuales, como el movimiento de mujeres o el movimiento ecologista, que hoy no se pueden sentar juntos porque
están en lados opuestos de la polarización, y eso ha hecho que como sociedad hayamos retrocedido muchísimo en el tipo de demandas compartidas que tenemos.

Creo que, en general, ha habido mucha mezquindad política e intelectual dentro de los sectores opositores. Valoro el arrojo político que han tenido líderes como Capriles o como Henry Falcón que han hecho alguna diferencia, pero en general la masa crítica opositora en una masa crítica conservadora y si pudieran y tuvieran la oportunidad volverían a la Constitución del 61 de un solo plumazo. Creo que eso es parte de la tragedia: no entender en qué país hemos estado, cuál es el problema que aquí seguimos teniendo. Chávez representó tendencias y tensiones que ya existían en la sociedad venezolana. Chávez no las inventó. Y esas contradicciones y tendencias van a seguir estando si no se resuelven de alguna manera. Lo que me parece preocupante es que el proyecto opositor sigue estando basado en un país gran exportador de recursos energéticos (y) creo que el chavismo ha elevado exponencialmente el sectarismo político y los fantasmas propios de la ideología de izquierda, como la de acusar de contrarrevolucionario a cualquiera que tenga un nivel de disentimiento. El madurismo penaliza no solo la disidencia de los opositores sino también la opinión disidente dentro de sus filas. Y eso le ha permitido que las buenas ideas que algunos sectores han intentado implementar no caminen, porque ha habido buenas intenciones en los grupos bolivarianos y muchas de esas cosas no han tenido el nivel de desarrollo esperado por el nivel de sectarismo y de exclusión mutua que hay ahí. Es eso, hay esa necesidad de entender la diversidad como un valor y no como una amenaza.

Yo creo contigo que esta es una polarización construida a cuatro manos. Y que además la polarización se debe a odios mellizares por su forma similar de hacer política en los dos sectores. Creo que sí, la polarización permite que sean dos cúpulas, para llamarlas de alguna
manera, las que pueden capitalizar la vida política del país y que no permitan el surgimiento de diferentes opciones que desborden los canales institucionales de los partidos políticos y que, independientemente de que sea el gobierno el que esté hablando permanentemente de repolarizar, ha sido una estrategia que le ha dado cierto beneficio a los viejos políticos para mantenerse dentro del discurso opositor. Cuando uno comienza a hacer comparaciones de lo que sucede en Venezuela con cosas similares como las que están pasando en Bolivia, en Ecuador, en otros países, uno percibe en estos países que hay un tercer sector, pero una oposición de izquierda, una oposición diferente al gobierno de Evo Morales o de Rafael Correa. Eso no se ha dado acá no solamente por la polarización sino porque el venezolano hace política en función de la renta petrolera, una política mágica también. En verdad, la gente creía la frase de Chávez de que yo quiero que Chávez se vaya y Chávez se va a ir mañana. Y eso depende de que siempre hemos creído que tenemos una riqueza que esa ahí, en el subsuelo, algo mágico que lo sacamos y somos millonarios sin esfuerzo.

Maduro está absolutamente consciente del problemas de convocatoria que tiene, y es por eso que ellos no están muy seguros -como Chávez sí lo hacía y tenía la capacidad de hacerlo- de hacer permanentemente esa medición de calle. La oposición tiene ahora mismo ese problema, pero por otras razones. Entonces, lo que quiero decir es que dentro del chavismo popular había como una relación especial con el presidente, que es una relación que todavía muchos sectores opositores no han entendido, porque era una relación de sintonía, de carisma, sí, pero no era de sumisión completa como alguna gente lo plantea […] Si creo que hubo la intención de montar un proyecto autoritario, de características totalitario, pero creo que hubo mucha resistencia de la gente, que es una resistencia que habría que saber medir y que es muy subjetiva incluso, porque sí, la gente se inscribía en la Misión Vivienda, la gente marchaba cuando tenía que
marchar, pero cuando ya recibía la gratificación dejaba de asistir, dejaba de ir a las reuniones de los consejos comunales. Es decir que el proyecto como se quería promocionar desde las bases nunca se logró porque la gente no llegaba a fanatizarse al grado que se deseaba.

Yo sería partidario de pensar, te hablo a nivel muy personal, de que sería posible un proceso de transición negociada en base al respeto de la oposición a lo que está expresado en la Constitución, un texto que significa un acuerdo social muy importante en función de demandas positivas en la sociedad venezolana. La oposición la atacó durante mucho tiempo y ahora tímidamente la defiende y ya el chavismo casi no habla de ella. Yo sí estaría de acuerdo, hasta que tengamos un nuevo pacto social, de trabajar en función de los acuerdos que están allí en la Constitución del 99. Creo que fue un logro haber puesto la necesidad de la inclusión en el centro del debate político, igual que la necesidad de la participación, y todo esto independientemente de cómo se materialice en lo político. Creo que por lo menos Capriles está consciente de que no puede dejar afuera la atención a la pobreza, a la participación, y creo que esas son herencias del proceso bolivariano.

Luis Pellicer

Te lo digo con Tusídedes y con Manuel Briceño Guerrero: Hay hombres que empalman su corazón con el corazón colectivo y las circunstancias históricas para lograr grandes hazañas y grandes hechos. Si esos hombres siguen vivos en la memoria del colectivo, en el corazón del colectivo, serán capaces de seguir... Lo que llamamos aquí corazón es la afectividad y el raciocinio. Eso fue Bolívar, y eso debe ser Chávez para nosotros [...] No estoy tan de acuerdo con que son los movimientos sociales los que traen a Chávez al poder. Esos movimientos colaboran con el empoderamiento de Chávez y con el surgimiento de ese nuevo movimiento, el
MVR, y otros, pero ni aquí había suficiente organización social ni suficientes grupos organizados como para hacer eso. Los había pero no en la proporción para que digamos que esos fueron los movimientos que llevaron a Chávez al poder. Creo que el fenómeno de Chávez es muy diferente a una cosa de movimientos sociales que logran tomar el poder a través de un líder y un sistema. Creo que se trata más bien de un movimiento popular, en términos de un pueblo conectado con ese líder. Es decir, aquí lo que había y lo que sigue existiendo es la conexión entre el líder y un pueblo y una masa [...] Una aspiración social posiblemente, y seguramente diría yo, ciega, que además no es nueva, una aspiración que tiene más de 200 años que llega al poder sobre todo a través del liderazgo de un líder.

Aquí yo creo que lo que ha pasado es que el partido no se ha ocupado de las labores que debe cumplir un partido. Y la primera de las labores que debe ejercer un partido es la conciencia de esas masas, que si tú las sigues dejando en una condición amorfa, sin ideología, con toda y la conciencia social e histórica que tiene el pueblo venezolano hoy, después de 14 años, creo que todavía hace falta mucha formación, no solamente del pueblo sino también de los dirigentes [...] El PSUV o el MVR en su momento fueron partidos que fueron creados para el cambio social, para la revolución. Yo creo que si hay una falla en el partido nuevo no es ideologizar, en términos marxistas de crear falsa conciencia, sino en crear conciencia social de la realidad. Y eso no es únicamente que la gente se lea el Manifiesto Comunista ni nada de eso, sino que esté consciente de los problemas. Por ejemplo, el espíritu de las comunas, de los consejos comunales. Es decir, es el partido el que tiene que estar en las comunidades haciendo ese trabajo ideológico, que no es la misma cosa sino que la ideologización para crear la conciencia social de que hay una lucha, un reclamo, de que hay una corresponsabilidad y que esa corresponsabilidad no quiere decir que la gente de la misma comunidad tiene que ponerse a
hacer el trabajo, de acomodar las cloacas, etc. sino que tienen que tener conciencia de que para que la quebrada esté limpia tienen que mantenerla limpia [...] Hay una cosa que es muy grave, que es o la vergüenza o el miedo a ideologizar a la población. Y eso empieza con la educación. Decirles: nosotros estamos en este proyecto y este es el proyecto y yo cambio la historia escrita al proyecto. ¿Cómo? Sin decir mentiras. No tengo por qué decir mentiras para eso. Tú no vas a decir que la encomienda era una manera de que los señores encomenderos protegieran a los indígenas y les dieran comida, vestido, la religión y el lenguaje a cambio de su trabajo. No. Tú tienes que decirme que hay explotación. Eso es descolonizar la memoria y descolonizar la cultura. [...] Es más importante la revolución cultural que el que le entregues una canaimita (una computadora) a la gente. Tú entregas una canaimita a los niños pero si en esa canaimita no hay contenidos que le den cuenta de la realidad que ha vivido el país, de nada vale.

Estamos en un sistema capitalista. Entonces, yo me manejo con la fórmula capitalista en el mundo global haciendo unas excepciones que tienen que ver con los países hermanos como lo hizo Chávez y que han redundado en el éxito de la política exterior venezolana durante los14 años y que ha sido uno de los mayores éxitos. Hay cosas que hay que ponderar en el asunto. ¿Para quién gobierna y como redistribuye la riqueza? Porque el problema es que sabiendo o no de economía uno dice: durante 40 años se repartió la renta petrolera; entonces ¿seguimos en una Venezuela rentista? El punto es cómo se distribuye esa renta. ¿Se distribuye para los grandes capitalistas que quiebran las empresas y el Estado tiene que asumir la deuda privada como deuda pública? Eso creo que es una de las mayores estafas que ha hecho el sistema durante los 40 años de la democracia representativa.

Yo creo que se han hecho ensayos, pero que no han pasado de ser ensayos. Y siempre fue una línea del propio Chávez. ¿Cómo es que nosotros éramos un país productor de ganado, de
café, de caraotas-porque hasta caraotas parece que estamos importando ahora-, y por qué no podemos volver a eso? Entonces, los ensayos que se han hecho son ensayos que tienen que ver con empresas mixtas o con empresas sociales. Y allí están esos ensayos. Yo creo que este es un momento bueno para revisar lo que está pasando con esos ensayos, si es por ahí que debemos ir o si debemos pensar en otras alternativas [...] ¿Cómo hacemos para que esto no siga pasando y qué es lo que tenemos que hacer? No es que te lo diga yo. Puedes escuchar a Chávez en las últimas alocuciones y sobre todo en esa que se conoce como El Golpe de timón. Es clarísimo. Chávez, sin ningún tapujo, sin ninguna mentira, está diciendo: miren compañeros, esto no puede mantener así; o buscamos nuevas fuentes de producción y de ingreso o este modelo es inviable. No lo digo yo. Lo dijo Chávez [...] El pueblo está seguro de que tiene el poder. Y cambió desde el 89. En el 89 el pueblo salió y le dijo no al paquetazo. Sabía que si salía tenía poder suficiente para tumbar gobiernos, para cambiar la política. Ahora el pueblo después de 14 años no solo está consciente, y no va a salir así no más sino que va a salir con mayor organización, porque salió en el 2002. No fue cualquier cosa lo que ocurrió en el 2002 y salió más organizado, con mejores conexiones con sectores de poder, con los militares, etc.-.Y en esta circunstancia el pueblo va a salir con mayor conciencia política y social, con mejor percepción de lo que está pasando, independientemente de que sepa o no que están bajando los precios del petróleo, que las variables económicas, etc. Entonces se van a sentar a discutir y preguntar por qué no está llegando. Uno de los cambios radicales en todo esto es que tú no le puedes decir al pueblo que se está yendo para los bolsillos de los ricos de este país. No, no es que está yendo para los ricos, sino que ahora ya no alcanza.
Margarita López Maya

Yo creo que la contribución del chavismo en lo que está pasando en América Latina ha sido muy importante. Yo creo que Chávez fue el primero que puso la agenda de los pobres sobre la mesa en lugar principal y dijo: si no hacemos igualdad, aquí no hay democracia y no hay nada. Cuando él lo dijo en los años 98 y 99 eso era absolutamente contracorriente en América Latina y ahora es absolutamente de consenso, de derecha y de izquierda, Santos repartiendo tierras en Colombia, Lula y Roussef pasando los pobres a ser clase media en Brasil, Chávez con su discurso súper radical y todos de alguna manera. Aquí no está pasando lo que está pasando en Europa. Aquí la idea es: hay que distribuir, porque la sociedad latinoamericana es profundamente desigual, profundamente racista, profundamente segregacionista en lo social, marcada por la injusticia. Por eso es que no ha habido democracia. Es un poco la lógica que ha marcado el destino de América en el siglo XXI y el legado de Chávez allí es importante. Ese fue un legado importante y él hizo el esfuerzo para que, además, se diese un diálogo entre estos países que no se hablaban. Hoy la relación que hay entre los gobiernos es muy diferente a la que había antes, incluso porque hay una camada de dirigentes que se han mantenido mucho rato en el poder. Se abrieron vasos comunicantes en esas naciones que pueden ir a otra cosa y el tema de la inclusión se volvió un tema importante de México para abajo. Cómo va a incidir eso en el planeta no lo sé porque venimos de un boom de materias primas en toda América Latina y eso está llegando a su fin. Claro, es más grave para Venezuela porque su materia prima es el petróleo. Cuando venga el tiempo de las vacas flacas no sé si esto va a retroceder.

Yo tuve la impresión cuando Chávez ganó que había la posibilidad de ir hacia una nueva etapa. Estábamos arrastrando desde hacía 20 años una crisis estructural por el agotamiento de un modelo, de un proyecto socio político que había dado lo que había podido dar -país
industrialista, democracia representativa, etc. Ante la incapacidad de inventarse una cosa para seguir después de la nacionalización petrolera, pensábamos que había que ir a otro proyecto, buscar un proyecto económico y político para una sociedad ya más compleja, más moderna. Cuando Chávez apareció fue el proyecto de la democracia participativa que era una demanda de la sociedad, porque a través de la reforma política se va a entrar a la reforma económica. Ya se habían rechazado políticas neoliberales, pero no se había encontrado cuál era el modelo alternativo. Pero en la medida en que se avanzó en estos 14 años eso se desdibujó completamente. Y nosotros estamos viviendo la continuación de la misma crisis, pero, por supuesto, ya no con 20 años sino ahora con 35 años, y esta crisis está llegando a unos niveles gigantescos: en la exacerbación del rentismo, en la falta de productividad, en la anomia de la sociedad, en el retroceso de la modernidad del venezolano. Nosotros nos despertamos, nos volteamos y resulta que no logramos resolver esa crisis y ahora está peor. En términos económicos está peor, en términos sociales hay una descomposición brutal porque al no resolver la crisis económica la estructura que teníamos se ha ido desmoronando. Puede ser que hoy haya más empleo formal pero ¿cuál es la calidad de ese empleo en relación a los 80 y los 90? Son empleados del Estado, son funcionarios públicos, aparte de que sigue habiendo como 45% de empleo informal. Yo diría que en eso no es original el chavismo. Lo original fue que intentó salir de esa crisis y no pudo. Lo buscó por otros medios y fue por eso que yo lo apoyé. La idea era: si tú rompes el monopolio de estos dos partidos y acceden nuevos actores al poder, acceden nuevas ideas, nuevas iniciativas, hay una energía social con la democracia participativa donde la gente comienza a moverse, a movilizarse, e incluso todas esas modalidades participativas que se hicieron en los barrios, bueno, es posible solucionar los problemas. Se habría adelantado en la solución de muchos problemas, y de hecho algunas cosas sí se han resuelto, en los barrios por
ejemplo. Pero cuando Chávez se voltea y dice: no, ahora vamos para el socialismo y esto ahora es unas comunas y un territorio y un Estado paralelo, y anda gastando los reales en dos estados -uno que está tratando de destruir y otro que está tratando de surgir-, pero además con una nómina gigantesca, todo montado sobre el ingreso fiscal petrolero. El modelo productivo nunca se supo cuál era [...]

La originalidad es que maduró la idea de la participación, ahora irreversible. La gente siente que hay ese derecho y siente que con los partidos no basta para que haya democracia, y que además de esos partidos tiene que haber otra cosa, otros canales para comunicarse con el poder y que esos canales pasan por sujetos colectivos, además del ciudadano y del derecho al voto. Y que la gente puede resolver sus problemas organizándose y cogestionando con el Estado. Puso la idea de la democracia participativa sobre la mesa. El primer gabinete de Chávez era como un laboratorio. Tú entrabas y vibraba. Ahora se ha vuelta puramente gobiernero.

En Venezuela, de verdad, yo sí pienso que somos muchísimo más gringos que buena parte de América Latina. Acuérdate que nosotros tenemos un siglo de petróleo y eso marcó en nosotros el american way of live. La democracia representativa nuestra está muy marcada por lo que fue la democracia norteamericana, la Alianza para el Progreso de los sesenta, pero antes de eso también. Durante la Guerra Mundial nosotros fuimos grandes aliados petroleros de los Estados Unidos y eso significó una relación con las élites. Allí hay demasiadas cosas. El consumismo venezolano es muy gringo. Y tú ves que las élites chavistas de hoy hacen lo mismo. No hay sino que ver esas cosas que han estado saliendo de los bolichicos de Miami, etc. Ellos lo que quieren es estar allá. Les gustan los aviones gringos y los yates.

Lo peor de esto ha sido la impunidad, la destrucción de las instituciones liberales básicas para la legitimidad de la democracia, la autonomía, la independencia de los poderes
públicos, esta cosa del desprecio hacia lo institucional, de que la ley no importa. Antes se hacían 
las cosas con pena. Tú utilizabas los recursos públicos, pero sabías que eso era un delito.
Comprabas a los jueces, llamaba la Tribu de Morales Bello a los jueces, pero sabían que eso 
era un delito. Pero ahora con la idea de democracia burguesa, eso no importa. Y esta cosa de la 
violencia en la Asamblea Nacional, que le rompan la nariz a una diputada y la tiren al piso 
como hicieron con María Corina Machado y que no solo no se disculpen sino que digan, como 
Iris Valera, que se lo tenía merecido. El desprecio a la institucionalidad, a las instituciones 
liberales básicas para convivir en democracia, eso es para mí lo peor, porque ¿cómo vuelves a 
construir a partir de eso?
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