

Seeing and Not Seeing Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy

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Abstract

In this introductory essay the author reviews aspects of recent Venezuelan history necessary to understand participation and the public sphere in Venezuela's Bolivarian democracy, emphasizing the political sociology of political representation, participation and discussion. The author seeks to move not only beyond a focus on state structures, but beyond an exclusive focus on bounded political actors, suggesting instead a non-normative focus on concrete forms of communication and interaction in political participation and meaning-making. The chapter ends with a review of "fragments"—descriptions of new forms of communication and interaction that emerge in the chapters of this book, including the uncovering of ignored spaces and hidden histories; transitions in citizenship as new citizens are created and existing citizens are marginalized; new forms of favoritism and corruption; resignifications of democracy; paradoxes of state-sponsored participatory democracy; and new discourses of race, class and reconciliation bread through conflict.

Seeing and Not Seeing Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy

Hugo Chávez's rise to and consolidation of power in Venezuela over the last ten years has set into motion one of the most controversial political processes in recent Latin American history. The structure of the Venezuelan government was transformed by the 1999 constitution. The structure of the economy has been transformed by a far reaching re-nationalization. Popular participation has become an integral part of state policy. And, of course, Venezuela's role in regional geopolitics has moved from faithful ally of the United States to outspoken critic and competitor.

These processes have correspondingly transformed public discourse on Venezuela. While academic political scientists have long been interested in Venezuela as a case study of functioning polyarchy—an elite-pact “second wave” democracy that never broke down in the 1960s and 1970s and which seemed to be surviving the stress of the neoliberal era—other scholarly disciplines as well as the international media were more interested in the Central American and the Southern cone countries that were making halting and conflictive transitions from dictatorship to pluralist democracy.

The lack of social historical scholarship on Venezuela was one of the reasons that Hugo Chávez’s rise to power at the end of the 1990s took so many by surprise. An overwhelming focus on the central institutions of the democratic state left scholars and journalists underappreciative of the extent of discontent and the burgeoning forms of alternative participation growing within Venezuelan society. However, the Chávez period has dramatically increased interest in Venezuela. International journalists cover the Venezuelan governments increasing international profile and do human interest stories on aspects of “the revolution.” Progressive blogs, webpages and listserv discussion groups exchange alternative information and news and organize support initiatives. And renewed scholarly interest has diversified research on Venezuela, complementing the traditional focus on the central institutions of the state with ground-level research on the relational contexts in which politics occurs in everyday social life.

This book seeks to highlight some of the fruits of this new interest by bringing together contributors to two sessions on Venezuelan democracy at the 2006 meetings of the Latin American Studies Association in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The authors represent six different disciplines, multiple methodological approaches, and myriad political

perspectives—from clear Chávez supporter to clear Chávez opponent. Nevertheless, we bear considerable commonality. *Each author shares a common concern for understanding actually existing democracy in contemporary Venezuela through empirical research on political phenomena outside of the central institutions of the state.* There are several aspects involved in this statement that I will take up in turn.

First, each author shares the concern that the liberal democratic concepts through which Venezuelan, indeed Latin American democracy has been analyzed in recent decades have become normative rather than descriptive. The authors in this volume have varying degrees of commitment to liberal democracy, but we all are concerned that, as happened with neoclassical economics, the social scientific concepts of liberal democracy have become normative measuring sticks used to evaluate actually existing processes rather than to analyze them on their own terms. As such, the dynamics and processes of actually existing conditions remain in the shadows and elude our understanding. Readers will in fact find concepts of autonomy, clientelism, transparency and corporatism used throughout the chapters that follow. But these concepts are employed not as evaluative measuring sticks but as starting points for analyses that push beyond them and demonstrate the complexities involved.

Second, while the contributors range from clear Chávez supporters to clear Chávez opponents—and we the editors have not sought to dampen their political inclinations—each is committed to developing their political opinions through empirical research. We have worked hard to avoid the positivistic illusion of “value-free” scholarship at the same time that we have shunned its mirror image that says you must “state your biases” in order to control for them. This latter merely sneaks the positivist

impulse in the back door at the same time that it underestimates the impact of value commitments on research results. The authors in this volume all share a commitment to developing their political positions through engagement with empirical reality, by actually talking with people, spending time in their contexts, and describing this engagement to readers. There is no recipe for political “truth” here. But we see such an empirical commitment as itself a form of democracy as it at least provides an opportunity for readers to see where authors’ conclusions come from and thereby contest their inferences. Such a commitment also works against the logic of political polarization. The latter feeds on abstractions that gloss complex realities. By getting concrete and empirical we seek to destabilize empty polemics.

Third, the authors involved here share a focus on phenomena outside of the central institutions of the state. Political discourse and exchange occurs not only in ministries, congresses and parties, but within and at the intersection of the multiple networks that make up society. Especially within a democratic context in which the government has declared the intention to increase citizen participation in multiple ways, it is essential that our scholarly analyses of democracy move beyond “big politics.” The central institutions of the state are not unimportant—indeed most of the chapters below will make reference to them. But equally important is understanding how collective life is created and recreated within the myriad institutions, spaces and contexts that make up modern societies.

The Rise and Decline of Punto Fijo Democracy

Before proceeding to our case studies of Bolivarian democracy we need to first set the stage by reviewing the series of social and political changes that ripened conditions for the rise of Bolivarian democracy. This is a story that can be had in more detail elsewhere¹ but some preliminary comments are in order. Venezuela's forty year democratic regime running from 1958 to 1999 was based on the "pact of Punto Fijo"—named for the home of twice president Rafael Caldera where it was hammered out—whose overriding goal was to maximize political stability. It did this through an extreme form of representative democracy in which citizen participation was limited to elections in which they chose the president and party that would then, in turn, choose the rest of the politicians that would represent the people—from senators and representatives to local mayors and union leaders. These parties were autocratic and hierarchical, and developed pacts and commissions through which organized political and economic interests were guaranteed a disproportional voice in policy-making.

The most important factor in the Punto Fijo regime's legitimacy was the provision of economic well-being and promotion of societal development. Indeed using its vast oil wealth, the state was able to simultaneously attend not only to the accumulation demands of private capital, but to the majority's demands for social and economic well-being.

Annual growth in the Gross Domestic Product averaged 5% from 1958 to 1980.

Immunization drives and health care development dramatically increased life expectancy, lowered infant mortality, and led to a threefold increase in population between 1950 and 1990. A country that was 50% rural and 50% illiterate in 1950 was almost 90% urban and 90% literate by 1990. In effect, during this modern period Venezuela went from a poor,

unhealthy and uneducated population, to a relatively prosperous nation in full demographic transition.²

Considering that Venezuela maintained political and economic stability through a period in which democracies in Chile, Brazil, Argentina, and a number of other Latin American countries broke down, the achievements of this model were remarkable. Indeed through the end of the 1980s, political scientists considered Venezuela to be a model democracy. Summarizing this literature, Steve Ellner (2003, pp.8-9) says that the it attributed Venezuela's democratic instability to seven basic aspects.

1. A two-party system with minimal ideological differentiation.
2. Political leaders committed to democracy who avoided ultranationalist rhetoric.
3. A mature political leadership that, learning from past experiences, discarded sectarian attitudes and formed interparty agreements.
4. Major parties of muticlass composition with a predominately middle-class leadership.
5. An emphasis on party discipline with the two main parties.
6. A political system sufficiently open to provide attractive opportunities for junior coalition partners and other small parties.
7. Parties that were highly institutionalized rather than vehicles for ambitious leaders.

However, Venezuelan modernity began to unravel in the early 1980s as a drop in oil prices and rising debt burden created a fiscal crisis. While the currency was first devalued in 1983, successive governments postponed structural change as long as

possible, until in 1989, under the guidance of the International Monetary Fund, a severe structural adjustment package was implemented, followed by another round in 1996. The economic figures after 1980 are sobering. Through the 1980s and 1990s, the percentage of the government's budget that went to paying interest on foreign debt steadily increased. Per capita growth for the decade of the 1980s was -3.2%. In the 1990s it was -0.3%.

The reader will notice that each of the seven strengths of Punto Fijo democracy listed above has to do with the central structures of the state or political elites and leadership. However, the real story in the 1980s and 1990s was developing outside of these institutions in the streets among those who bore the effects of this economic decline. The economic decline from 1983 to 1998 spurred a fundamental realignment in social class and political cleavage. In effect, Venezuela moved from a modern conflict between right and left, to a postmodern clash between those with a place in organized, formal society and those without, between those who work in jobs with benefits and legal protections, have legally-recognized property, and enjoy municipal services such as water, telephone and police protection, and those who work in economic activities and live in barrios and rural areas not fully recognized by the state and who do not enjoy full access to the benefits of modern citizenship: job security and protections, professional health care, municipal services and professional police protection.

Between 1981 and 1997 unemployment almost doubled. Even more revealing are the decline of formal employment as well as overall remuneration. While at the end of the 1970s more than twice as many workers were employed in the formal sector as in the informal, by the end of the 1990s the formal and informal sectors were roughly

equivalent. By 1997 real wages for all citizens were, on average, thirty-seven percent of what they were a decade earlier and the poor disproportionately bore the brunt of this decline. While in 1981, the poorest forty percent of Venezuela's population and the richest ten percent earned roughly the same percentage of Venezuela's overall wealth, by 1997, the bottom forty percent earned less than half of what the top ten percent earned.

It is important to note that despite this vertiginous economic decline, human development indicators measuring health, education and consumption of information continued their upward march throughout the 1980s and 90s. And as often happens, an increasingly literate, educated and informed population increasingly demanded reform. Indeed the stated intentions of the designers of the Punto Fijo regime was for it to transition towards increasing citizen participation as societal development progressed. Unsurprisingly, however, democratizing reforms by those with privileged positions of power were slow in coming and limited in scope. An effort to modify or write a new constitution, for example, was repeatedly offered as a campaign promise but never actually made it onto the government's agenda once in office. The two main parties—the social democratic party *Democratic Action* (AD) and the social Christian party the *Independent Political Electoral Organizing Committee* (COPEI)—responded to the challenge by taking a pragmatic turn. Looking inwards, they resisted reform, sought to conserve their power, and in the process sacrificed any efforts at ideological leadership. A continual flow of corruption scandals combined with recurring efforts at neoliberal reform generated, among the populace, a not inaccurate image of professional politicians as focused on their own well being and unconcerned with the plight of the average citizen.

The response of the citizenry could hardly be clearer. In February 1989 President Carlos Andrés Pérez, elected just months before on a center-left, social democratic platform, pushed through a dramatic package of neoliberal reforms designed in collaboration with the International Monetary Fund. Those most affected responded with three days of looting and riots in which hundreds were killed and hundreds of millions of dollars of property damage was inflicted. The *Caracazo*, as the popular uprising has come to be known, marked a turning point for Punto Fijo democracy, initiating its progressive delegitimization. While in the 1988 elections the two main political parties together captured over 90% of the vote, in the 1993 elections that total dropped to 45%. By the 1998 elections it would plummet to 11%. 1992 saw two coup attempts against the Pérez government—the first led by Hugo Chávez. And in 1993 he was impeached on corruption charges, giving way to an interim government. In December 1993, Rafael Caldera became the first elected president to not be affiliated with one of the two main parties. Four years later, the leading candidate for the 1998 elections was Irene Saez, a former Miss Universe³ running as a political outsider.

The decline of Venezuela's development model took a heavy toll on the social democratic discourse through the 1980s and 90s, leading the institutionalized, electoral left to move to the right and become indistinguishable from it. While this happened throughout Latin America, in Venezuela it could hardly be clearer. Indeed the first package of neoliberal reforms was pushed through not by COPEI but by AD in 1989. The second attempt at structural reform was engineered by longtime leftist leader Teodoro Petkoff. Indeed the interests of the two traditional political antagonists became so indistinguishable that in the 1998 elections they eventually supported the same candidate

in opposition to Chávez. This is the setting in which Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian Movement emerge as an electoral force in 1998: a context in which the majority were experiencing ever decreasing socioeconomic prospects, enjoyed virtually no political representation but were increasingly literate and informed.

Participation in Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy

The Chávez government was elected in 1998 on the promise of writing a new constitution that would lay the groundwork for a more participatory form of democracy. The 1999 constitution indeed contains a number of instruments designed to increase citizen participation and government responsiveness such as referenda, the participation of civil society in nomination processes of public officials, and incentives for local organizations that can make demands of the government. The grassroots elements of participatory democracy have clearly succeeded in mobilizing and attending to long neglected sectors of the population—as will be readily apparent in the chapters that follow. The government has symbolically and materially supported movements that were already forming in the late Punto Fijo democracy, such as the Urban Land Committees (which work for the normalization of property titles and rights in informal squatter settlements), Technical Water Committees (which work to establish regular water service to their neighborhoods), and popular media outlets. And its social policy increasingly works through “missions” by which health and education services, as well as wholesale food items are brought to people in residential location. Finally, the government's domestic economic policy is focused on socializing production through cooperatives,

profit-making enterprises owned by their employees. They are given preference in government contracts, as well as access to preferential loans.

In classic liberal political theory, “civil society” consists of organizations that are independent from the government. In this way they have the autonomy to counter, challenge and make government accountable, as well as to push for new policies that a government in power would not create on its own. However, as we will see below, when Venezuela’s Bolivarian government speaks of participatory democracy, it starts from a neomarxist view that sees civic autonomy as a fiction that favors the hegemony of dominant interest groups at the same time that it leaves the majority passive. In this perspective it is the government *itself* that needs to organize, facilitate and even fund such popular mobilization in order to democratize society. From their perspective, this is justified because “civil society” became strongly class determined during the forty years of Punto Fijo democracy. Indeed the opposition movement frequently refers to itself as “*la sociedad civil*.”

The Chávez government has clearly succeeded in mobilizing and incorporating people—many of whom have never participated in an extra-household initiative before—and this is one reason for its enormous popularity. While this is clearly a victory for the neomarxist rejection of civic autonomy and efforts to politically mobilize civil society, there is no clear indication that the classic pitfalls pointed out by liberal political theory have been overcome. This latter would predict that Venezuelan participatory democracy will fall to the “iron law of oligarchy” whereby this mass mobilization will channel into the development of centralizing, corporatist government in which power will increasingly flow away from people and towards the executive branch. The authors in

this volume do not resolve this dilemma but empirically examine it in order to provide readers elements with which to draw their own conclusions.

Conflict and Polarization

Radical change, of course, usually leads to radical conflict. The two and a half year period from December 2001 to August 2004 saw an intense and protracted struggle between the Chavez government and opposition political and economic forces. These are events that have received ample attention elsewhere⁴ and I will not go into detail here. Passage, towards the end of 2001, of forty-nine reform laws radicalizing the government's efforts at change created a sense of urgency among the opposition and the first nationwide work stoppage in December of 2001. This, along with Chavez's declining approval ratings spurred in the opposition movement a sense of legitimacy and overwhelming confidence of victory. In April of 2002 an oil strike and march resulted in violence near the presidential palace which led to a coup, thirty-six hour interim government and counter coup two days later. Attempts at reconciliation were largely successful and, over the next two years, opposition efforts focused on a recall referendum to oust Chavez, while government efforts focused on avoiding it. The deadlock over a referendum led the opposition to initiate another national work stoppage in December 2002 that lasted two months and was anchored by striking oil workers. Here again the government ended up on top, in the process regaining control over the governments primary source of revenue by firing about half of the state oil company's 30,000 employees. Throughout 2003 and 2004 attempts to exercise the right to a recall referendum were scuttled by errors and technicalities leading to frequent conflict in the

streets. This period of conflict ended when the opposition successfully gained a recall referendum but fell flat in the run up to it, resulting in a resounding victory for the Chavez government.

The tension, acrimony and communication breakdown characterizing this period can be understood by looking at the political actors involved, as well as some of the conditions of inequality in Venezuela's urban centers.

The Bolivarian coalition that accompanied Chávez in his ascent to power and has functioned to consolidate his government can be broken down into three main groups. First are the core members of the movement—both inside and outside of the government—who tend to be strongly ideological in their rhetoric (in part as a contrast to the pragmatism of the former bipartisan coalition). Their common denominator is a heavily nationalist discourse with internal variety deriving from varying combinations of Marxist and militaristic views of governance. Second are significant numbers of center-left professionals trained in new forms of management and community participation who simply want better government than what the previous democratic regime provided. These segments are not strongly ideological and receive the Bolivarian movement's ideological rhetoric with a mixture of amusement and concern. The third, largest sector consists of the masses of impoverished Venezuelans subsisting in the informal sector. These supporters are also not strongly ideological. Rather, their support is based upon a perception, and in many cases lived experience, that, for the first time, they have a government that prioritizes their plight and fights for their interests.

However, the core of the Chavez movement is ever increasing as more and more popular organizations and movements are drawn into the government's influence through

the latter's support for their ideas and projects. The extraordinary resources available to the government because of high oil prices overwhelm the resources that can be raised by these groups through other means. As such, popular organizations find themselves caught in a competition with each other for government support and resources. In this competition many of them work hard to demonstrate their loyalty to the revolutionary process and to find innovative ways to condemn and blame the opposition for the shortcomings of Bolivarian democracy. And this competition often spills over into mutual accusations as rival groups accuse each other of tenuous revolutionary commitment, closet-elitism, individualism and other "capitalist" values. At the same time, this process has generated many grassroots level leaders who speak on behalf of neighborhood committees, community councils and other groupings, and who base their authority not on formal claims to representation but on their constituents' support. This complex mixture of new organic leaders, grassroots populists, and crass opportunists is one of the factors making it difficult to render facile judgments about Bolivarian democracy.

The opposition coalition, on the other hand, consists mainly of those who have (or at least had) a solid place in formal society. This includes not only traditionally conservative sectors associated with industry, commerce and construction, but the reformed left including the academic and media establishment, as well as unionized white collar state employees. Their critical discourse focuses on threats to liberal democracy such as declining freedom of the press, politicization of education, the state oil company and other public institutions, threats to private property, increasing exclusion from the benefits of the state, as well as supposed government incompetence. A long series of

missteps and political defeats from 1998-2006 have left the opposition movement, by 2007, weakened and regrouping. Their persistent overconfidence and miscalculation during this period can be understood as a consequence of two factors: the spatial character of inequality in Venezuela, as well as the decline in opposition political parties after 1998.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century Venezuelan cities developed accentuated spatial divisions between areas of affluence with residential gated communities, private clubs and beautiful shopping malls, and areas of exclusion characterized by self-constructed houses and housing projects with few services, no green space, and teeming informal economies occupying public spaces. One of the most interesting characteristics of this spatial segregation is the asymmetric mobility between sectors. While many of the middle and upper classes have never in their lives set foot in a popular barrio, most residents of areas of exclusion spend large amounts of their working hours in areas of affluence. To put this in numbers, we could say while approximately sixty percent of Venezuela's urban population circulates in the full range of urban spaces and have continual personal experience with radical inequality, the other forty percent circulate and live only in their own spaces and have only a diffuse sense of the magnitude and character of the inequality that surrounds them.

In addition, political sentiment in the popular barrios tends to be more diverse than in affluent neighborhoods. Data from the 2004 recall referendum show that while in areas of affluence anti-Chávez sentiment routinely surpassed ninety percent; in the popular barrios, support for Chávez only occasionally reached seventy percent (see López Maya 2005). These trends persist and make evident that residents of the barrios have to

come into contact almost continually with members of opposing political stripe both in their neighborhoods and in their places of work. In the affluent sectors, in contrast, virtually all political discussion occurs in an echo chamber, either within a context of consensus among equals, or within a dyad of inequality framed by the employer-employee relationship.

Finally, it is important to mention that the implosion of the two main political parties in the late 1990s left opponents to the Bolivarian government without adequate political representation. In this vacuum the role of political mediation and representation was taken up by the Catholic Church, the mass media, sectors of the armed forces, as well as aspiring political leaders with minimal organizations. In each case, rather than fulfilling the traditional role of political parties in moderating and transforming constituents' political demands into realistic and effective proposals, these types of institution and leader tend to radicalize them as they jockeyed for position and or use discourses typical of their traditional role. As a result, the opposition movement has consistently done a good job of mobilizing its base, but not of grabbing the center. Overstatement, rumor and misinformation succeed in mobilizing affluent sectors of Venezuela's urban centers, but tend to leave international allies impatient, and Venezuela's impoverished majority angry.

In the chapters that follow—especially in the section on public culture—we will see this polarization as it appeared in multiple communicative spheres as well as some of the effects it had in the government's communication policy.

Democratic Participation and Communication

Before looking more concretely at the individual chapters it would be worthwhile to take a step back and review some recent directions in the literature on civil society and the public sphere. Interest in civil society has recently undergone a boom with the simultaneous rise of the third wave of democracy, combined with the decline of welfare-states in the Western world. The primary reference, of course, is Alexis de Tocqueville, whose 19th Century *Democracy in America* portrayed an autonomous and independent civil society as one key to democratic vitality. The Tocquevillian perspective crosses ideological lines as it forms the baseline of conservative thought running from Almond and Verba (1963), Samuel Huntington (1968) and more recently Robert Putnam (2000), to leftist perspectives running through Jurgen Habermas (1989) to Cohen and Arato (1992). The fundamental assumption of all of this work on civil society is the idea that it is autonomy from the state and the economy that promotes participation, or at least, the right kind of participation for democratic governance.

However, ground-level ethnographies and social historical work have begun to nuance our understanding of the dynamics of civil society beyond these broad perspectives. On the one hand, scholars have shown that forms of participation that would probably be excluded as civil society because of their lack of autonomy can contribute to democratic processes either in the short or long term. On the other hand, there has been considerable work that has pushed through the concept to show that not all “civil society” actually contributes to the democratic well-being that Tocqueville and others have in mind.

In his study of clientelism in Argentina, Javier Auyero (2000) argues that we need to get beyond the “metonymic prison of clientelism.” By this he does not mean that we

forget its utility as a concept, but that we need to see it as a starting point not an end of the analysis. In his study he makes great effort to look at clientelism from the perspective of the client and thereby understand this phenomenon and the conditions of actually existing Latin American democracy. His portrait shows the subtle mechanisms through which poor people use clientelism to address their needs at the same time that it facilitates the power of the powerful. Historical sociologist Carlos Forment (2003) has likewise pushed beyond stereotypical notions of the Latin America's (un)democratic heritage. In the first volume of his historical investigation of civil society in Latin America, he puts forth copious evidence of a robust civil sphere in Latin America, including independent newspapers, discussion groups and associations throughout the 18th and 19th Centuries. However, he points out that these groups took an authoritarian state for granted and did not translate their democratic culture towards the state level. A robust democratic culture was developed but remained at the social level.

In a very different context, Eiko Ikegami (2005) speaks of “civility without civil society” in Japan during the Seventeenth through Eighteenth Century. Here the Samurai warrior class tightly controlled any manifestations of political organization that could threaten their power. However, the development of spaces of aesthetic discourse and artistic production provided a space in which people could have free political discourse free from their duties within networks of state power. The development of this civic culture later was engaged in processes of democratization. In a quite similar argument, author of chapter X in this book, Sujatha Fernandes (2006) analyzes “artistic public spheres” in contemporary Cuba, arguing that they provide forums of vigorous democratic debate in a context of restricted political liberties.

Careful ethnographic work has sought to unpack what is actually involved in civil society and democratic life. Paul Lichtherman (2005) has examined Tocqueville's writings and pushed beyond simple readings in terms of "social capital." He suggests that Tocqueville's analysis is better thought of in terms of a social spiral in which people and groups from dissimilar social strata come to communicate in open-ended ways. In his work on religious groups grappling with welfare reform, Paul Lichtherman shows that simply working on behalf of the disadvantaged does not necessarily generate this "social spiral." Indeed, in most of the cases he reviewed no such social spiral was generated. Rather, it only resulted from cases in which there was real contact and real two-way communication. Robert Fishman (2004) has made a similar argument in his work on the labor movement in Spain. He shows that the type of contact union organizers develop with intellectuals impacts the nature of the democratic discourse they develop.

In his ethnographic study of one of the most successful experiments in participatory democracy in Latin America, Gianpaolo Baiocchi (2005) argues that classic emphases on the autonomy of civil society from the state makes the effectiveness of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre impossible to understand. Here civil society acts in collaboration and concert with the municipal government rather than independent from it. He argues that it is precisely the interconnections between civil society and the state and the dialogue and debate that flow through them that permit democratic accountability. In other contexts as well, social movement scholars have shown that it is difficult to understand the success of outsider social movements unless we look at their connection to organizational insiders (Binder 2003).

Social scientists have also increasingly broken down the assumption that mobilization into voluntary organizations produces democratization, civic engagement, tolerance and justice. Peruvian sociologist Luis Pasara (1991) has provocatively argued that we need to rethink the romantic idealization of “new social actors” in Latin American democracies as such a perspective tends to leave out skinheads, neonazis, maoist guerrillas, drug traffickers and crime networks. These groups are all independent from the state and demonstrate admirable organizational skills. Yet it would be hard to describe them as contributing to democratic well-being.

In the US context, Kathleen Blee (2002) has used the tools of social movement research to analyze the mobilization of and participation in white supremacist groups. All of the same tools are applicable as these groups use selective incentives and recruitment tools and seek to impact the state through a repertoire of tactics (violent and non). And in his examination of interwar Italy and Spain, Dylan Riley (2005) develops a neogramscian theory of the “civil foundations of fascism.” He argues that whether voluntary civil associations lead to civic engagement (liberal democracy) or mass engagement (as in fascism) depends on the nature of the class struggle and knowledge production of the national political context (Riley 2005).

This literature, in effect, challenges and deepens the Tocquevillian tradition of analysis of civil society. Several of these authors are influenced by Antonio Gramsci’s work on civil society, including Fishman, Riley, Fernandes and Lichterman. While often thought of as the Tocqueville of the left, Gramsci also had a grounding in the strand of right wing Italian thought running from Machiavelli through Mosca to his contemporary Robert Michels (Riley and Fernandez 2006, Levine 1995). This tradition of analysis

focused on many of the informal mechanisms of social stability as well as the unintended consequences of democratic structures. In doing so they underlined the necessity of elite control and the inevitable limitations of democratic change.

Gramsci incorporated these ideas into his reworking of Marxist theory but inverted them, making them into critical elements of his conception of hegemony. By the later Gramsci meant that the dominant powers of any society exercise control not only through coercion but through consent, through numerous informal mechanisms through which the status-quo is rendered inevitable. Gramsci saw the institutionalized separation of the state and the civic sphere characteristic of liberal democracy as a guarantor of hegemony as it kept culture parochial and reduced participation (Riley and Fernandez 2006). While Gramsci incorporated these dimensions of right wing thought his project was to look for ways to overcome this separation and thereby increase political participation, most particularly, the mobilization of the masses. The best known way, of course, is through the role of organic intellectuals (see Fishman). But he also sought a collapse of the state and civic sphere through a politicization of civic associations. Indeed he recommended that a radical party have a “totalitarian policy” that would seek to fulfill all the needs that existing civil organizations fulfilled and or absorb them into the unitary regulation of the party (Gramsci 1971, 265). As Riley and Fernandez write “The striking piece of Gramsci’s argument here is that ‘totalitarianism’ is understood as potentially democratizing precisely because it destroys the autonomy of the ‘civic sphere’ and politicizes areas of life that had previously existed outside of politics” (Riley and Fernandez 2006, p.10). Needless to say, this is an argument about levels of political participation and not about the direction this mobilization will take. Indeed Riley’s larger

project is to show how, in the case of Italy, high levels of civic participation lead to the mass mobilization and eventually fascism.

Taken together, these new directions in the literature on civil society and the public sphere give us some direction in understanding the Venezuelan case. First, it makes clear that we need to move past the exclusively normative focus on civic autonomy. We need to look at autonomy versus incorporation in terms of the type of interaction and communication involved, and the relational contexts that articulate power. Second, it underlines the need to move past a number of confluences that run through analyses of civil participation. First, we need to move beyond the confluences between autonomy and participation—Riley and Fernandez, following Gramsci, show that autonomy does not vary directly and may even vary inversely with levels of political participation. Put differently, an autonomous civic sphere may limit participation while a politicized and partisan civic sphere may increase it. Second, we need to move past the assumption that deepened participation means “democratic deepening,” or can be assumed to contribute to the “quality of democracy” or any other positive social outcome. Finally, we need to remain sensitive to Gramsci’s starting point that power, both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic, works beyond coercion and beyond the explicit and intentional actions of political actors and the state. We need to be attentive to the circuitous flows of cultural discourses, assumptions, and articulations that constitute social power.

Such attention, of course brings us to the contributions of post-structural analysis of power and culture—an extensive literature that cannot be reviewed here. Here I will simply suggest that our analysis of participation and public sphere in Venezuela can

benefit from following the approach Jeffrey Rubin (2004) has called “seeing and not seeing.” In it he combines the traditional political science focus on bounded, coherent actors, with a post-structural emphasis on the discourses, meanings and representations out which they are made. “This means acknowledging the existence, force, and cohesiveness of political actors, though simultaneously recognizing something else at play in them, the mixture of fragments and pieces...[that] enable us to understand where political actors or forces come from and how they change, indeed what they are and what multiple capacities they have” (Rubin 2004, p.109). Understanding these fragments and pieces is key to understanding how the efforts of bounded social actors actually concatenate into everyday democratic politics. In the following section I will review a number of fragments that emerge in the empirical chapters of this book.

Emerging Fragments

Contemporary Venezuela provides scholars with a considerable challenge as it is a context of rapid change whose direction is unclear; social actors and organizational structures appear and disappear with frightening speed. To adequately analyze it, not only do we need to move beyond the central institutions of the state, and the focus on autonomy in the associative sphere, we need to push beyond an exclusive focus on discrete actors and traditional spaces of politics. Indeed, given the fluidity of the context it seems likely that the most stable aspects of the present through which the future will be constructed are likely to be new discourses, representations and social articulations. In the chapters that follow we will see the uncovering of ignored spaces and hidden histories; transitions in citizenship as new citizens are created and existing citizens are

marginalized; new forms of favoritism and corruption; resignifications of democracy; paradoxes of state-sponsored participatory democracy; and new discourses of race, class and reconciliation bread through conflict.

The uncovering of ignored spaces and hidden histories. As informal barrios have become a central focus on the State's social policy, they have gained an unprecedented visibility. Part of the government's social policy with respect to local forms of participation has been for these groups to document these local histories. Sujatha Fernandes' and Naomi Schiller's chapters show how community media are uncovering hidden or ignored realities and histories provide space for critical discussion of non-elite, unofficial histories. Spaces that were formerly portrayed in the media only in terms of being a social problem now are being portrayed and discussed by their own inhabitants. Documenting and writing local histories has also become a central part of the work of the Urban Land Committees as they seek to normalize their neighborhoods. Smilde and Pagan show how Evangelical Protestants, long working and organizing in the shadows of formal society and official power, have been thrust into the spotlight with President Chávez adopting their concepts and praising their efforts. Of course, we cannot assume these histories begin with the Chavez government. Alejandro Velasco documents the trajectory of alternative histories in the Western Caracas barrio of *23 de Enero* and focuses on how they challenge the official Bolivarian myth of a passive, disarticulated public heroically mobilized by the Bolivarian movement. Instead he suggests a narrative in which the Bolivarian movement grew out of and rode upon decades of popular activism.

Transitions in citizenship as new citizens are created and existing citizens are marginalized. One can certainly debate whether or not the Venezuelan transition amounts to anything more than a move from one form of limited democracy to another or whether it is destined to repeat the errors of populisms past. But it is indisputably clear that Venezuelan society is undergoing an extensive change of political elites. There is a corresponding change in citizenship as formerly marginalized sectors of society become the central focus on the government and are receiving full benefits of the rights of modern citizenship: municipal services, formal employment, social protections and public education. For all its defects and whatever its outcome, the Chavez government clearly represents an original attempt to address the new inequality of Latin American society in which the distinction between formal and informal has replaced the distinction between right and left.

This transition presents problems in more than one way as formerly marginalized people and groups suddenly find themselves tied to the center of power. Velasco shows some of the ironies in this as radicals from the 23 de Enero, a Chavez stronghold, need to affirm that “we are still rebels.” Garcia discusses the issues of incorporation confronting the long-marginalied CTUs that are now expected to give unqualified support to the President. Fernandes and Schiller present similar dilemmas in the ascendancy of community media and speculate on whether and how they contest the government. Smilde and Pagan tell of the conflict produced by the increasing marginalization of the Catholic hierarchy from power and the dilemmas and conflict created by the new ascendancy of Evangelical Protestants. Margarita López Maya and Luis Lander highlight the importance of the national campaign for identification. Dismissed by Chavez

opponents as an attempt to stack the voter rolls in the government's favor, they portray it as a central aspect of new citizenship.

Several of the articles in the section entitled "public culture" reveal the dismay and frustration among the formerly-dominant social sectors at the new ascendancy of formerly marginal peoples and ways of being. In Acosta's review of the telenovela *Cosita Rica*, the character Olegario is a revealing image of the way dominant social sectors view Chávez and the newly ascendant political class. Equally, Duno's review of media images of Chavez supporters demonstrates the civilization/barbarism dualism through which formerly dominant social sectors see their opponents. The conflict between media producers in Schiller's piece on community television demonstrates the way newly ascendant media opinion-makers are seen as illegitimate by the traditional journalists employed by private media journalists. Nichols' piece on poetry circles also reveals the frustration that openly politicized uses of artistic forms like poetry produces among people raised on the notion of autonomous, non-political "civil" society.

New forms of favoritism and corruption. Venezuela has long been a country where elected leaders of a petro-state reward supporters and punish opponents. While this formerly happened in the context of a two-party contest, it currently happens between those who support the revolutionary government and those who oppose it. Kirk Hawkins analysis of the missions examines the evidence for systematic distribution of state benefits. However, he questions whether this is best viewed as clientelism or the result of a charismatic populist interaction in which those who support the Chavez project are favored and those who are favored support the Chavez project without, thus far, the need for any strings attached. Smilde and Pagan's piece on Catholicism and Evangelicalism

show a Catholic Church falling out of favor with a government that holds the purse strings and Evangelical churches being rewarded for their support with government financial support. This works both ways. Carolina Acosta broaches the way the government has clamped down on the private media in the case of Venevision and its novela *Cosita Rica*.

Resignifications of “democracy” The neoliberal era marked a bifurcation of Venezuelan discourse on democracy. On the one hand, from the original discourse that combined liberal and social discourse of democracy, in other words democracy “of the people” and “for the people,” in the neoliberal era the State shed its commitment to the latter in favor of the former, and the discourse of liberal democracy became the undisputed idiom of public debate. The popular sectors, on the other hand, never forgot decades of discourse of social democracy and saw the state’s retreat as a betrayal. Chávez came to power prioritizing social democracy and articulated a long present but only marginally articulated discourse of participatory democracy, in other words democracy “by the people.” As Lopez Maya and Lander argue in their chapter, the 1999 constitution included a mixture of mechanisms of representative and direct democracy. Dan Hellinger’s chapter demonstrates that the current disdain for representative democracy and praise for participatory democracy is more pronounced among the cadre of organic intellectuals than among the people themselves. His analysis of public opinion shows important class differences but remarkably high approval for norms of tolerance associated with liberal democracy in the both the barrios and middle class *urbanizaciones*. This point of view provides important context for the findings of

Hawkins regarding clientelism as well as some of the attitudes revealed by Fernandes's chapter.

The paradoxes of state-sponsored participatory democracy. State efforts to mobilize popular sectors presents a paradox. On the one hand, in conditions of radical inequality, relying on autochthonous, independent participation in civil society simply perpetuates this inequality. On the other hand, mobilizing popular sectors through the resources of the state undermines the autonomy that is at the heart of the protagonistic role that civil society is supposed to provide. The article on the CTUs by Maria Pilar Garcia demonstrates precisely this dynamic. The CTUs received substantial support from the government, but their freedom of action seems to be waning. The contributions of Fernandez and Schiller on new forms of popular media also look at this dynamic but are relatively more optimistic with regard to the autonomy of this participation. Margarita Lopez Maya and Luis Lander take on these issues systematically in their look at the institutionalization of participatory democracy, the transformation of social policy, and the government's efforts at representative democracy. Whether the Chávez government controls the popular movements it has helped mobilized or whether it is being supported only as long as it facilitates them is an open question. In her study of the development of popular mobilization in Peru, Susan Stokes (1995) showed how the Velasco military regime in late 1960s and early 1970s mobilized popular sectors with a discourse very similar to what we see now with the Chávez government. However, when they failed to follow through with their promises, mobilized popular sectors got away from them and themselves became protagonists of the military government's downfall. Naomi Schneider and Alejandro Velasco suggest the same could happen in Venezuela.

New discourses of race, class and reconciliation bred through conflict.

Venezuelans are more conscious than ever of racial and class tensions as the long-standing myths of “racial democracy” and of a peaceful, class conflict-free nation have been shattered by acute political conflict. Cities like Caracas have become spatially segregated as never before as members of the popular classes increasingly occupy public spaces and members of the upper-middle and upper classes increasingly spend their leisure time in shopping malls and other private spaces. The article by Luis Duno demonstrates the racialization of the political conflict. The character of Olegario in *Cosita Rica* clearly demonstrates the class-based disgust oriented towards Chavez. Fernandes’ examination of Radio Negro Primero and its program “for Blacks only” demonstrates an increasing recognition of racism and race-based organization. It also puts forward the question of reverse-discrimination versus classic liberal principles of universal inclusion.

Nevertheless, new discourses of reconciliation have appeared such as in the love affair between Juancho and La Chata in *Cosita Rica*. This discourse contrasts love with politicization and leads to the conclusion that if we get beyond politicization “we all fit here.” Smilde and Pagan look at one case of a community media outlet’s role during the 2002 coup. For professional and religious reasons Jesuit radio network Fe y Alegria refused to participate in the media blackout organized by the interim Carmona government in which the private media did not cover the protests and street uprisings but put cartoons and nature programs on the air. The role of community media in turning back the coup has taken on mythic proportions and, as can be seen in Fernandes and Schiller’s chapters, still provides the guiding sense of purpose and values for those involved in community media.

The Structure of This Book

This book is divided into two parts, the first, entitled “popular engagements.” We prefer to “participatory democracy” as the latter is a key partisan term used by the Chavez government itself. Furthermore, we think “engagement” more accurately describes the complex interaction between Venezuela’s popular sectors and the state. Who leads and who follows is often difficult to unpack, but the effort in itself reveals the multiple layers of discourse.

The second section, entitled “public culture” provides case studies revealing how various manifestations of culture have themselves become contexts of political engagement. Rather than a world apart abstracted from the fray of politics, or as a reflection of it, these cultural domains are a form of political participation. These contexts of public interaction and discourse importantly contribute to the emerging fragments described above.

We end without a conclusion which we think only appropriate for a political process in state of perpetual change and whose direction is undetermined. Each of the chapters of the book provides empirical analysis of the dilemmas, debates, achievements and failures of Venezuela’s contemporary political process, and we hope this analysis continues with our readers. Only uncompromising interrogation of data and arguments will permit us to examine contemporary efforts to upset social hegemonies while remembering the nightmarish lessons of illiberal experiments past.

Notes

¹ A good place to start is with Jennifer L McCoy and David J Meyers. 2004. *The Unraveling of Representative Democracy in Venezuela*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. McCoy, and Steve Ellner and Daniel Hellinger. 2003. *Venezuelan Politics in the Chávez Era: Class, Polarization and Conflict*. Boulder, CO: Lynn Rienner Publishers. Each analyze the transition between democratic regimes and provide extensive bibliographies. Good Spanish-language sources include Margarita López Maya. 2005. *Del Viernes Negro al Referendo Revocatorio*. Caracas: Alfadil, and Luis Salamanca. 1997. *Crisis de la Modernización y Crisis de la Democracia en Venezuela*. Caracas: UCV-IL-DIS.

² “Demographic transition” refers to the process whereby a nation moves from the premodern situation of high fertility and mortality to the modern condition of low fertility and mortality.

³ It should be pointed out that she also had a master’s degree in political science and was a highly successful two-term mayor of one of Caracas’s municipalities. Most relevant here is that her lead in the polls evaporated when she accepted the support of the social Christian party COPEI.

⁴ See McCoy and Myers 2004, Ellner and Hellinger 2003, López Maya 2005, as well as Márquez and Piñango 2003 and Petkoff 2005.

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