Stumbling Blocks to Belief: Legitimacy, Social Imaginaries, and the Problem of Community in Venezuela

Tony Spanakos
Fulbright Scholar/Profesor Invitado
IESA, Caracas

Montclair State Unviersity
New York University

Paper Prepared for
II Jornadas de la Sección de Estudios Venezolanas
Asociación de Estudios Latinoamericanos LASA
26 y 27 de Mayo de 2008
Hotel Tamanco, Caracas, Venezuela

April 2008
Draft Version
Please do not cite without author's permission
Comments are welcome
spanakos@gmail.com

Abstract:
Government legitimacy is based on both performative and normative elements. The performative element of legitimacy dominated during the Punto Fijo period (1958-1998) and the collapse of legitimacy was due to long-term economic stagnation. This produced a crisis which allowed priority to shift towards more normative elements, particularly issues of representation. It is on this basis that the final Punto Fijo governments were most widely discredited and on which president Chávez was able to construct a new set of regime expectations.
This paper explores the issue of legitimacy by using the concept of social imaginary. It is argued that the social imaginary that prevailed under Punto Fijo was one where society was conflict-free and multi-class parties redistributed petroleum rents in an environment of sustained economic growth. The breakdown of this social imaginary allowed muted minority voices to be not only heard but amplified as Chavismo promoted a social imaginary of class-conflict, agonistic social relations, and manipulative political parties. This social imaginary speaks of inclusion but invariably depends on a concept of 'community' which is partial, creating a level of resentment and disenfranchisement which threatens legitimacy. At the same time, images of polarization and a conflict-driven social imaginary may be hegemonic, but there are tensions and strong remnants of previous systems which explains why Venezuela is not nearly as 'on the brink' as it often appears.

The explanation for the scarcity of basic foodstuffs (milk, beef, chicken, sugar, rice) in Venezuela in the first trimester of 2008 was either to be located in the government's policy of controlling food prices or the greed of capitalists who were keeping goods off the market in another effort to topple the government of Hugo Chávez. While both arguments could find some evidence in reality to sustain their claims, both could find certainty in the particular social imaginaries which shape the ideas and actions of distinct groups in Venezuelan society.

This presentation of the Venezuelan social imaginary is a simplification, of course, but the truth is that while Venezuelans may live in a complex world full of contradictory elements, they tend to understand their world through an imaginary that largely justifies apparent contradictions and disqualifies alternative opinions. The social imaginary that shapes the perceptions and actions of Venezuelans is one which the unrealistic encourages acceptance of information from within group sources and rejects credible information from outside group sources.

The view that businessmen are hording goods or preventing them from coming to market is remarkably similar to the social imaginary of rural French protestors in the 18th century. They saw "[p]ublic officers who failed in their duty were seen less as inept than as enemies of the common people. This explains how easy it was during the Revolution to explain shortages in terms of an aristocratic plot. Not foul-up but ill will is responsible for misfortunes" (Taylor 2004, 130). He continues analyzing their imaginary writing: "First, it leaves very little place for impersonal mechanisms. It had no place for the new conception of the economy, where shortage and glut are explained by a certain state of the market, which in turn can be affected by events in distant land. If prices rise, it's because the engrosser is hiding stocks to exact a higher tribute from us" (Taylor 2004, 130). These heterogeneous understandings that prevailed at the time of the French Revolution and the inability to find consensus about institutional forms of representation of the nation contrasts with the American Revolution where broad consensus did exist and was able to successfully create a new, stable regime based on an innovative sense of legitimacy. The opposition to the Chávez government does see 'impersonal mechanisms'—like a market—and believes that price controls will produce scarcity and inflation. But, far from being wholly dispassionate, they do tend to blame this, as much else, on 'Chávez', a person, not a set of policies. Or, rather, they blame it not so much on Chávez the person but who Chávez is within their social imaginary, a role that elicits responses often as visceral as those sited above.

The problem of polarization in Venezuela has received considerable attention (Cannon 2004, Ellner 2008, Moleiro and Duque 2006). What has received less attention is that the co-existence of mutually disqualifying social imaginaries prevents the establishment of an inclusive concept of community which, in turn, retards the development of regime legitimacy. The prevailing imaginaries of the Punto Fijo and (1958-1998) and the Chávez era (1998-) limited the possibility for regime legitimation because of the concept of political community they assumed. The Chavista aim to expand and deepen political community (to 'democratize' democracy, to 'include the excluded') faces an obstacle in the very social imaginaries that it promotes and provokes. At the same time, the hegemony of the current social imaginary shares space with the previous one, offering contradictions and, potentially, spaces for consensus building.

No *kratos* can see, understand, and respond perfectly to all parts of the *demos.* But legitimacy in democratic regimes can not be considered consolidated when large parts of the *demos* believe that the *kratos* willfully ignores, marginalizes, and provokes

them[1]. Poor economic performance may have led to decreased support for the Punto Fijo regime, but it was the belief that those governors stole from the people that encouraged the popular protests which weakened in the regime in the 1980s and 1990s. Poor economic performance may have lowered popular support for the government of president Chávez, but it was the belief that the government of Chávez was one of vengeance that fueled the many actions against the government between 2001-2004. The contestation and delegitimation of these regimes was linked not only to performance but they way that performance was read (who benefited/lost, was it zero- or positive sum) and the understanding of representativeness that was to be found in the social imaginaries of large groups of citizens. This point is essential for understanding regime support in contexts where diversity exists and is understood through a lens of exclusion, such as is the case for political Islamists in states with Muslim majorities or members of different ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia.

This paper will first identify relevant points from academic literature on legitimacy and social imaginaries. It will then examine the basis of legitimacy for the Punto Fijo system and its successor. The paper will then conclude by discussing how the incompleteness of the hegemony of the Chavista imaginary, and the continued presence of the Punto Fijo imaginary creates the possibilities for consensus, though in limited spaces.

Social Imaginaries and Legitimacy

Regimes are understood "in terms of prevailing relations among political actors, including the government" (Tilly 2006, 19). These relations are dynamic, involving a changing cast of characters whose roles also change over time. Regimes are legitimate when their "right to govern" is recognized by the governed (Coicaud 2002, 10). This recognition is contextualized—the result of "interaction between ruler and ruled"—and is part of a continuously iterative process (Alagappa, 1995: 11). Alagappa writes that regimes generally receive legitimacy on the basis of either shared norms or on substantive performance (Alagappa 1995). Kjaer makes a similar division between input-oriented and output-oriented legitimacy where the former is a matter of compliance "with rules" and the latter "derives from the effectiveness of rules to produce tangible results" (2004, 12). The performative basis of legitimacy is straightforward. Regimes gain legitimacy because they meet stated goals or produce desirable results. Stokes, for example, found that politicians who choose neoliberal strategies after campaigning against such policies were reelected when they were presided over good macroeconomic performance (Stokes 2001). Similarly much of the legitimacy accorded the Brazilian military regime during the economic 'miracle' (1968-1973) or to the Deng and post-Deng Chinese Communist regime (1978-) has been the result of robust economic performance.

Legitimacy is normative when it is based on the recognition that the regime rules in accordance with a set of agreed to values, norms, culture, and/or ideology. The Chinese Cultural Revolution took place in a regime whose legitimacy was based on norms and ideology. Zizek argues that it attempted to establish an 'enacted utopia' (Zizek 2002, 559). Its performance could hardly be less utopic, but, alongside sheer terror, much of the legitimacy of that period was based upon appeals of true communism, halting bureaucratization of the revolution, rejecting management by a managerial class, and the destruction of all aspects of traditional Chinese culture and

[1] Note that legitimacy is a fluid concept which ebbs and flows. Nevertheless, regimes can attain such considerable levels that they are quite secure.

history which were backward and non-communist (see Chang 2003). The normative basis also includes the 'representativeness' of a regime. In a theocratic regime, such as a monastic republic, this might come from the ability of leaders to meet religious standards of ethics and behavior. In a regime with a 'charismatic leader,' legitimacy emerges from the way the leader is perceived to embody the needs, demands, and desires of the people through a quasi-religious relation with the 'people' (see Zuquete 2008). In a democratic regime, norms not only include basic freedoms and notions of equality, but also the idea that the government is representative of the people that it serves. This is understood in terms of accountability but also in a more basic sense that citizens feel that the regime understands them and recognizes their problems.

No regime exists without some legitimacy and all regimes contain some aspects of normative and performative elements. Additionally, over time, the basis of legitimacy may shift favoring one element or another (Alagappa 1995). Indeed, crises often emerge when a regime is unable to continue to meet expectations and/or citizens demand that the regime responds to them in some new manner. The former could be seen when a regime whose appeal is based in economic performance enters into a period of high inflation and low growth, such as was the case of the Punto Fijo system in Venezuela during the 1980s and 1990s. The latter may be seen when the citizens in a regime whose appeal had been based on economic performance and security demand a change in values, such as what happened when Brazilian voters chose to support the opposition to the military government in the 1974 elections in the midst of robust economic performance.

Crises create what Tannenwald calls 'switching points' during which identity and ideational formation is less stable (Tannenwald 2005, 24). Crises, thus, create moments in which the identity of citizens, regimes, and the relationship between the two can not only change, but so can the entire framework which citizens and regimes use to explain who has the right to exercise command and how that command can be exercised.

Crisis can lead to one of three results. Crises can weaken domestic opposition and allow the regime to retrench itself. Mezaros cites the Great Depression as being very severe but not producing a structural change (Meszaros 2006, 43). Rather, in this case, the capitalist regime emerged with greater legitimacy, though clearly with a new normative basis (a more social, redistributive state). Crisis can also be moments of opportunity where structural transformations take place (Hay 1999). In such transformations, not only might regime type change, but so might the basis for its legitimacy. An example might be the crisis which produced the fall of the Tsarist regime of the Russian empire and its replacement with the USSR. In both cases, the legitimacy was largely normative, but the norms were considerably different. Finally, crises can also be periods of extended decay where 'the old is dying and the new cannot be born' (Gramsci 1971, 276 in Hay 1999, 32). In such cases, the regime can not respond to new challenges and demands, but neither does a viable alternative appear. Venezuela of the 1980s (see next section) is a clear example of this. Here the party-dominated system where legitimacy was based on performance ceased to perform and parties had lost their representativeness, yet new forms of representativeness were stunted by the absence of representative mechanisms which could channel them into a meaningful political form of articulation. In such a situation, the prevailing social imaginary is challenged and alternatives appear, but none is dominant, giving way to a period of uncertainty (Contreras 2007). This uncertainty is profound and is not limited only to questions of what political party to support or whether to vote at all, but to more basic questions such as what is the relationship of the citizen to his or her government,

to fellow citizens, how does one live in an environment of increased violence, and so on.

Crises, thus, are meaningful moments for understanding legitimacy principally because they highlight the potential for changes in the way that a regime is perceived and under what conditions "the just exercise of political command" is possible (Coicaud 2002: 7). Clearly, all of these terms (just, exercise, political, command) are highly contested, not only during periods of crisis but even during moments of stability when regular patterns of interaction produce, reproduce, and challenge notions of legitimacy. What passes for the just exercise of political command is context dependent and cannot be assumed to be permanent. It is for this reason that Madison wrote that "'all governments rest on opinion,' a word no less true for the various forms of monarchy than for democracies ('To suppose that majority rule functions only in democracy is a fantastic illusion,' as Jouvenel points out: 'The king, who is but one solitary individual, stands far more in need of the general support of Society than any other form of government'" (Arendt 1972, 140).

As rule is so dependent on opinion, belief, values, and perceptions, it is necessary to consider the role played by the social imaginary of citizens. As Strauss writes in her review of the subject, "We need a way to talk about shared mental life" (Strauss 2006, 322), and it seems that the imaginary is a powerful way of capturing this without running the risk of stasis and essentialism that one encounters with the term 'culture.' In her attempt to set out a research program based on the role of ideas, Tannenwald writes:

> Ideas also shape outcomes indirectly by providing a framework for the social world. They provide the 'possibility conditions' for action. For example, ideas may link to new interpretations of self and reality. The questions that arise here are how new ideas change political discourse and the basic categories through which actors see reality, and how ideas reflect a changed conception of legitimacy, new historical interpretations, or critical attitudes. This perspective emphasizes the 'concept-dependent nature of social reality' and points toward more interpretive methodologies (Tannenwald 2005, 19-20)

Though she begins with ideas, she quickly moves into the larger category of the imaginary. It is here that ideas interact with other ideas, that perceptions are affected, and behavior is produced. This is consistent with Taylor's understanding that "social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather, it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society," and "the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (Taylor 2004, 2, 22).

Within the social imaginary one encounters linkages between meaning and signs, statements, and actions. Denial of the ability to wear a head scarf could be read as an infringement on fundamental personal liberties (US), respect for the secular public order (France), or an effort to modernize a traditional culture (Turkey). Minorities may not agree with such interpretations, but they still will understand how the action 'should' be read by their society and they know what sort of responses (and reactions) are possible and likely should the woman chose to challenge such a denial. A social imaginary, Taylor explains, involves "the 'repertory' of collective actions at the disposal of a given group of society. These are the common actions that they know how to undertake, all the way from the general election, involving the whole society, to knowing how to strike up a polite but uninvolved conversation with a casual group in the reception ball" (Taylor 2004, 25). Someone raised in the US would find it difficult

to understand the government's proscription of her use of a head scarf and would respond with moral outrage and methods of protest and/or civil disobedience which are basic instruments of communication, persuasion, and protest in the US but would not necessarily be received in the same way in France or Turkey. Similarly, protests of Muslims within France which involved riots and setting fire to public buildings fall within the common repertoire of collective action in France but would be very provocative in the US. Clearly, social imaginaries give vocabularies and facilitate actions that will elicit predictable responses within that social imaginary but not in others. In one such social imaginary tanks entering the streets and violence being used against student protestors may lead to the fall of one regime (Greece 1973) or the consolidation of another (China 1989).

Social imaginaries clearly change over time. This often involves unraveling of the naturalness and the acceptance of an originary 'social compact,' critiquing it along lines that will facilitate the new order, and the creation of the present as a new and more moral foundation of the just society (Taylor 2004, 110). The reading of the Caracazo, the 1992 coup attempts, the election of President Chávez in 1998, the new Constitution in 1999, the response to the coup in April 2002, the revocatory referendum and many other incidents as well as the revisionist versions of the Punto Fijo pact, the role of leftist guerillas in the 1960s and 1970s, the relations between foreign oil companies and the state, have all been part of the Chavista effort to establish the role of the collective will, the people, in creating a new foundation in the here and now (Ellner 2008). What is relevant is here is not so much as how the Chávez regime has tried to reappropriate history (or the responses of its critics), but how social imaginaries shaped the gains and losses in legitimacy during the Punto Fijo and Chávez eras.

Legitimacy and the Social imaginary of Punto Fijo (1958-1998)

The story of Punto Fijo is well known (Ellner and Hellinger 2003, McCoy and Myers 2004). The 1958 regime was founded by political elites from the largest mainstream parties (AD, COPEI, URD) who agreed on the basic rules of the political system, its scope and its depth. Political elites committed themselves to recognition of elections as the only legitimate means to power (in contrast with previous support of military-civic coups). They also were willing to reduce policy space in order to form a consensual space so that new governments would not feel obliged to undermine policies of their predecessors. AD limited its social agenda and COPEI ceased to be a confessional party (Hellinger 2003, Ellner 2008). The pact provided considerable political stability and democratic elections in which multi-class parties competed for popular votes and where corporate sectors (particularly labor and business) associated with party elites. Excluded from the pact was the Communist Party and others who sought a more radical form of politics. Analysts have rightly given considerable attention to the importance of political party mediation in the Punto Fijo system but the basis of legitimation of the regime was primarily performative. It is true that elections and discourse were used to legitimate the regime in regular intervals of time, but the day to day legitimacy was based on economic growth. Once that performance deteriorated, electoral pressures and rhetoric led to the discussion of 'democratizing democracy' (Crisp and Levine 1998), which basically meant the 'unraveling of representative democracy' (McCoy and Myers 2004) and the end of Punto Fijo.

Surprisingly, although most analysis of the fall of Punto Fijo identifies the poor economic performance of Punto Fijo during the 1980s and 1990s, analysts tend to emphasize the party pact rather than the more fundamental performative basis of

legitimacy. Cannon provides a barrage of statistics to show the deterioration of indicators in Venezuela during the 1990s including that per capita income decreased from $5192 to $2858 between 1990 and 1997; the UN Human Development Index reading for the country dropped from 0.821 to 0.7046; the percent of the population that could be considered middle and upper classes declined from 40% of population in 1989 to 10% in 1999; and open unemployment increased from 6.6% in 1980 15.4% in 1999 (Cannon 2004, 291). It is hardly surprising that such economic performance destabilized the Punto Fijo regime. But Venezuelan analysts miss similar and worse data for the first four years of the Chávez era. The Venezuelan GDP per capita bottomed out in the first quarter of 2003, four years into the Chávez presidency. Real GDP had declined in local currency by some 30% and economic growth rates during the first five years of the Chávez era were -6, 3.7, 3.4, -8.9, and -7.8% (Weisbrot and Sandoval Feb 2008, 5, 7, 9). This helps explain the decline in support for president Chávez but not his ability to maintain legitimacy and to overcome a petroleum strike, a coup, and a recall referendum. What sustained Chávez was that his legitimacy had been largely normative and so he was not as effected by what would be otherwise dreadful performance (see next section). This was not the case for the Punto Fijo system.

While Punto Fijo had been drawn as a great compact of the principal representative bodies of the Venezuelan people, over time the Punto Fijo bargain increasingly involved a stable two-party electoral system and a redistributive state whose wealth was based on oil rents. Alfredo Keller notes "these practices functioned stupendously well between 1958 and 1979 when GDP per capita increased an average of 2.8% in a sustained manner…. [but] from 1980 until 2003 led to an average decrease in GDP per capita of 1.82%" (Keller Jan 2008, 2-3). Prior to the 1980s, the Punto Fijo system delivered growth and an environment for upward mobility for many who rewarded the system with loyalty. Political parties became increasingly instrumental mechanisms that distributed to corporate sectors and were less accountable for their actions. Additionally, the demographic shift in Venezuela away from the formal sector increased the number of people who were not formally linked to party and para-party institutions. The decline in representativeness of the Punto Fijo regime weakened it but it was not until the riots following the devaluation of the Bolivar on 'Black Friday' (18 Feb 1983) that the government's inability to meet the performative part of its social compact was made clear. Punto Fijo, as a system of liberal governors who expanded liberties while maintaining the privilege of government in the hands of political parties, was not so much brought down by the decreasing representativeness of that system but by its failure to meet its core promise, wealth. Devaluation of the Bolivar immediately meant a tremendous decline in purchasing power for Venezuelans given that very few goods are produced domestically. The sudden impoverishment and the protracted period of macroeconomic crisis that it brought weakened the legitimacy of the regime.

Venezuelans had been convinced that their country was a rich one (Romero 1997). The leaders of the country had played a fundamental role in developing the myth of Venezuela as rich as government and opposition emphasized the seemingly boundless wealth potential given 'vast' and 'unlimited' petroleum reserves. Moreover, electoral rhetoric, particularly of opposition candidates, in Venezuela during Punto Fijo always engaged in a rhetoric which recognized the wealth of Venezuela, the poverty of its citizens, and tied these together with the political failure of the government and its politicians. Ellner (2008) is correct in highlighting that this sort of rhetoric existed prior to the rise of Chávez. The disqualification of the Other, the recourse to a Third-Worldist (Terceromundista) positions, and economic populism were very real parts of the political language of Punto Fijo and they contributed to the signs, symbols, and values

of the Venezuelan people for forty years. But the frustration with ‘corrupt’ politicians who create the puzzling ‘rich country poor people’ condition was only part of the social imaginary of Venezuelans and it was a part that contributed to the fundamental legitimating myth of Venezuelan: redistribution.

Astorga writes, “the second half of the 20th century in Venezuela was characterized by the development of political forms whose stability was not to be found in the institutions of the state nor the development of civil society, but in the consolidation of a rentier economy and society, increasingly tied to the tides of political protagonism” (Astorga 2006, 207). The political in rentier states is generally reduced to administration of redistribution of resources. This tends to paradoxically devalue politics in moral terms while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of politics in terms for citizens in terms of their receipt of rents. Petroleum bonanzas and their aftermath make citizens especially aware of the importance of political maneuvering. Petroleum booms lead to a robust decline in inequality but, as Goderis and Malone find, the long term effect on inequality is quite limited (Goderis and Malone 2008). The decrease in inequality followed by a return to the traditional levels is likely to reinforce perceptions of mismanagement of resources by corrupt politicians.

The availability of rents during the 1970s bonanza contributed to new expectations placed upon the state in terms of distribution and increased the amount of responsibility given to politicians for the economic and personal fortunes of citizens. These expectations were validated in the regular language of populist democratic politics, particularly during electoral campaigns. While the awareness of petroleum prices lead to increased expectations and demands from citizens in the 1970s, the decline in petroleum prices increased the urgency of such demands and expectations, expectations that Punto Fijo style populism (the return of Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1989) or Punto Fijo era da Gaullism (the election of COPEI founder Rafael Caldera as an independent in 1994) could not meet.

This is because the rise of the poor classes led to a new majority and contributed to challenges in the prevailing social imaginary. In 1978, 10 per cent of the population lived in poverty while in 1994 as much as 79 percent of the families did (Buxton 2003, 115, 121). The conflict-free, classless society (Buxton 2003, Cannon 2004) which had not only been the propaganda of the Punto Fijo system but was deeply embedded within the social imaginary of most Venezuelans had always co-existed with inconvenient truths. But the latter became increasingly difficult to explain away as an imaginary based on a middle-class nation with multi-class parties based on liberal democracy and economic distribution was confronted with a very different image. Although the challenge to the legitimacy of Punto Fijo was primarily in its performative capacity and can be traced to popular responses to the devaluation of Black Friday, the Punto Fijo system collapsed because of its normative illegitimacy which became obvious with the rise of Hugo Chávez. The delegitimization of the normative element of Punto Fijo is most clearly found in the Caracazo.

The Caracazo was a series of popular protests, rioting, and looting that that exploded in Caracas and other cities beginning 27 February 1989 in response to a 100% increase in domestic gas prices (a reduction in subsidies) and a doubling in public transportation fees. It was especially a response to the austerity package that newly reelected Carlos Andrés Pérez signed with the IMF and the effort to transform the Punto Fijo social contract. Contreras notes the contrast between the pharoanic inauguration of Carlos Ándres Pérez, the president most associated with Punto Fijo style populism, on 2 of February, the announcement of the IMF agreement on 16 February, and the popular riots on 17 February 1989. The ‘coronation’ of CAP was the culmination of a campaign

which promised a return to prosperity. The situation was worsened given CAP's populist campaign in which he referred to the IMF as "*la bomba sola-mata-gente*. At his inauguration he issued a call to debtor nations to lobby against the oppressive policies of international banks." (Coronil 1997, 375) Two weeks later, he announced an agreement with the IMF which signaled not simply austerity but a 'political and social transformation' and a 'profound cultural change' (in Contreras 2006, 43). The package itself was a heterodox mix of price controls, reductions of subsidies, and fiscal austerity, but the language used was not simply one of temporary measures but a 'Great Turnaround' (gran viraje). The neoliberal language suggested that the state would become a regulator not a distributor and it would no longer foster a culture of consumption. Moreover citizens were responsible for generating their own wealth. In short, the state would not use the mechanisms which had been used for decades to provide the basis for the legitimacy of the regime.

Not surprisingly, abstention rates increased dramatically from 18.1% in the presidential elections of 1988 to 39.8% and 36.5 and 43.5% in the presidential elections of 1993, 1998, and 2000 (Hellinger 2003, 45). The increase in abstention demonstrates an alienation from the electoral process. But the Caracazo and the rise of a politics of protest, sympathy for anti-system events (such as support of the two 1992 coup attempts) and candidates, demonstrate a delegitimization of the normative elements of the Punto Fijo system: who was a citizen, what were the political options and channels available to citizens, who could articulate demands and how. In this way, Romero is correct when he argues that what had been a government problem in the 1980s became a regime problem after 1989 (1997).

What is particularly noteworthy of the Caracazo is not only the violence in the lootings and the disproportionate use of violence by the state in return, but the space in which it took place. López Maya notes "[t]he most surprising absence and the most significant in determining the size and scale of the revolt was that of the government itself. It did not make a public appearance until after midday on 28 of February" (López Maya 2003, 133-134). The state, like the rest of Venezuela, watched incapable or unwilling to respond to the lootings. The looters "found themselves in a public space where there was no restraint or control by the authorities" (López Maya 2003, 136). That space was filled with urgency when orders were given to violently suppress the popular uprising. The number of citizens murdered while those orders were being carried out is imprecise though probably around 1,000 persons (Coronil and Kurski 1991, 291).

Venezuelans remember the Caracazo as the day when the people in the shanty-towns on the hills (cerros) came down to the city and when the reclaiming of state involved the use of *mano duro* policies in repressing popular uprisings in the shanty-towns (*ranchos*). The fact that by 1989, the vast majority of Caraqueños were poor, politicians were widely seen as a discredited class—particularly Carlos Ándres Pérez, the widespread participation of many groups in the looting, and the especially disproportionate use of violence by security forces led to a sense of solidarity with the rioters. At the same time, the Caracazo confirmed the danger and uncertainty of living in a city with an increasing crime, poverty, and declining prestige for public institutions of control. The middle and upper classes could clearly see the threat posed to them, a threat that had been latent for some time but was no unavoidable. At the same time, the poor both claimed spaces that had been denied them and found a state that was willing to use considerable violence to reclaim those spaces and remarginalize them.

As Cedeño writes "[t]he masses of the so-called 'Caracazo' displayed a *thirst for social justice* whose spontaneous expression could not but *violently disturb* an

established body of naturalized social representations, in which the poor (and poverty) were at the margin of any social and political agency"(Cedeño 2006, 94). What the protesters accomplished was not simply enable their own political agency but they were able to radically shift their own social imaginary as well as that of the dominant interpretations of Punto Fijo. The result was a challenge to the meaning of everything. Contreras identifies the Caracazo as stripping away the myth of the naturalness of the dominant imaginary in Venezuela and replacing it with a profound sense of uncertainty (Contreras 2006). The broad social imaginary of Punto Fijo—of a liberal democracy, with parties that mediated concerns, class and racial harmony, a culture of protest and demand for equality through the use of state resources—had become naturalized over the decades but, since the early 1980s and especially since the Caracazo, it had also been increasingly alien to the experienced reality of a growing majority of Venezuelans. Or, at least, maintaining the social imaginary of Punto Fijo required more qualifications and asterisks to explain away real world experiences.

The main response of the party system was to call for concertación or coalition governments of the major political parties and to begin a process of decentralization (Gil Yepes 2004). Decentralization was and remains popular because the failure of the substantive performance of the Punto Fijo regime shifted attention towards representativeness and local governance was seen as ways to innovate and reverse the stranglehold on entry into the political arena held by traditional political parties. Increasingly political parties and the whole class of political elites were seen as the problem. So much so that Irene Sáez, the independent candidate for the presidency in 1998, who had been leading the presidential polls saw her fortunes rapidly reversed when she received support from the traditional political parties. But the problem was not the parties *per se* but the representativeness of the regime.

As Coicaud writes "a shortage of legitimacy exists when the values implemented in the decisions and actions of the rulers do not receive the assent of the group's members. Such a shortage exists when these decisions and actions make people strangers to themselves, to others, and, ultimately, to their history in general" (Coicaud 2002, 231). Over time, the governance of Punto Fijo—not simply the politicians, or the political parties—became estranged from the people whose obedience had waned towards assent. But assent is a weak basis for legitimacy, certainly not one that will encourage citizens to continually invest moral capital in a regime during a protracted period of crisis. Weyland is correct in saying that the Venezuelan people were "charisma hungry," especially when charisma is given its proper secular-version-of-the-spiritual gloss (in Zúquete 2008, 92). A large majority of Venezuelans were looking for a government that could restore a sense of community, but a sense of community that would include them. Inclusion would necessitate material advantages, but it was not the priority that it had been under Punto Fijo. Rather, the focus was on finding someone or something that could 'embody' the suffering, dreams, critiques, and desires of a *demos* that perceived it had suffered so much under the present *kratos*.

Legitimacy and the Social imaginary of the Chavez era (1998-)

In his masterful *The Magical State*, Fernando Coronil concludes by showing how the pursuit of progress no longer as a collective goal (using a state-centered model) but as individual goals (a neoliberal paradigm) led to the bifurcation of Venezuelan society (Coronil 1997, see also Cannon 2004). "While the internationalized elite moves easily between ever more insecure domestic enclaves of privilege and the metropolitan centers, the majority is restricted to an increasingly impoverished social environment

palpably marked by abandonment and neglect" (Coronil 1997, 385). The bleakness of the perspective speaks volumes of the context in which it was written. The existence of two Venezuelas became an undeniable social fact by the mid to late 1990s. In truth, one of the most powerful elements of the actual Venezuelan social imaginary is that the 'fact' that there are two groups. Each is seen to have particular values, beliefs, and ideas which lead to inevitable conflict in a zero-sum world which leaves no ground for negotiation between claims that compete on the most fundamental levels.

Exemplary of this tendency is an effort by enCaracas to promote dialogue between government supporters and opponents. During one calendar year, two reporters, one 'Chavista' and one 'opposition,' alternated weeks writing about Caracas and the problems it faced (Moleiro and Duque 2006). What is remarkable is that despite the efforts of the organizers, the authors seem to not talk to each other, except when they are disqualifying the other's position or lamenting the effort they put into a project where the Other is deaf to reason. In his introduction, opposition journalist Alonso Moleiro writes "I have been, am, and will be against the political process under way, for its sectarianism, its inefficiency… I am bothered that Chavismo gives little importance to differing opinions, how they are irritated by dissent. [They want] to construct a society for them alone, in which the newspapers and independent thought are wild versions of *Vea* and *El Correo del Presidente*" (Moleiro and Duque 2006, 9-10). This was written by a journalist who wanted to be part of this specific project, and these articles were written in 2005, when polarization had declined considerably from its height in 2001-2004. For his part, José Roberto Duque, a supporter of Chavismo, explains that Caracas is a city divide into East and West, demarcations that are more 'political and cultural' than geographic. The 'East' is the wealthy municipalities of Chacao, Baruto, el Hatillo, while the 'West' are the poorer and barrio-strewn municipalities of Sucre and Libertador. Early on in his essays, Duque writes "it is not possible to reconcile East and West in only one community and in the same dynamic of justice; the existence of the former is a perennial spit in the face of the latter" (Moleiro and Duque 2006, 14).

The reality of these visions is not quite as important as the perception that Venezuela allows for two social imaginaries and that these are inherently and totally in conflict with one another. This problem emerges from the problem of community, the result of the breakdown of the Punto Fijo order, and the ability of Hugo Chávez and his supporters to appropriate and further the delegitimation of the Punto Fijo system on the basis of incompatibility with the true 'community.' It is not accidental that Chávez has emphasized the role of the people ('pueblo') or the 'sovereign' (el soberano), nor that his discourse has spoken of inclusion of the many peoples who had previously been disenfranchised and, in typical style, he lists the poor, workers, blacks, Indians, women, students, among other groups. The incessant listing of groups is a constant signal of recognition to groups that had never felt they were part of the community. Furthermore, the revolutionary propaganda of the state has decidedly 'reclaimed' history. The government newspaper *Vea* produces regular information about 'on this day in history' which list events in global and Venezuelan history in which some group resisted the oppression of some imperialist or capitalist or elite group. It also prints government advertising which link some date in history to the current 'revolutionary process.'

Most obvious in this area is the renaming of the 4th of February, the day of the failed coup attempt of then-lieutenant colonel Chávez (1992), the 'day of national dignity.' On the 4th of February 2008, President Chávez delivered an address which all television agencies were obliged to carry. His speech was given from a military barracks in the state of Carabobo and he explained "I have no doubts that there was a force which

produced the 4th of February. Where did this force come from? It came from the people. It is from the people… It comes from Zamora, it comes from him… When the IMF package from Washington crushed us… For the first time Venezuela has a president who is independent, who does not depend on anyone, who is only committed to Venezuela, only to the people of Venezuela. A president who is not controlled by transnational organizations… What has been happening the last 9 years in this country, this is the 4th of Fenruary. I have always said that the 4th of February never ended! It is alive. It is today. It is still today. It is with us every second, every minute, every day, every week, every moment. It is here to make us more revolutionary. Every day, it is a symbol…"[2]

Chavista rhetoric links the struggles of the Venezuelan people during the lean Punto Fijo years (1983-1998) to the struggles of Bolívar, Zamora, Castro and other characters of the Venezuelan pantheon and to the contemporary struggles of the Chavez government (Cannon 2004). At all times, the 'people' suffered as a result of the 'nefarious' behavior of a small group of countryless oligarchs. It has taken little effort for Chavismo to appropriate ownership of the experience of socio-economic martyrdom of the Caracazo. In government advertisements published on 27 February 2008, *Vea's* coverpage read "Neoliberal Model: Rebellion and Massacre". On page 25 of the 28 February 2008 edition of *Vea*, a caption next to a photo of a soldier stepping on a body lying prone in the street reads "19 years continuing to awaken the conscience of a people."

The struggles of all the oppressed are those of the Chavistas, because the 'people' means the broad masses who are aligned with Chavez. The Chavista social imaginary defines identity according to numbers, never ceding it majoritarian status. For example, a story that shows a popular Chavista group 'taking' the archiepiscopal palace of the Roman Catholic Church in Caracas. The photo is a close up, intended to mask the very few people present at the event (Araujo 28 Feb 69). This stands in stark contrast to its reporting of an opposition protest in which a panoramic shot is used to show "police doubled the number of opposition students" (Araujo 28 Feb 2008, 5). The headline read "Not even able to mobilize 100 students. Failed mobilization of the opposition." The point is not whether or not Chavismo is always in the majority, clearly it was not at points during 2002-2003, but its claims to speak for the 'pueblo' and the pueblo's identity as the dialectic agonistic partner of the few/oligarchs means by definition Chavismo is the movement of the majority. If it is not embraced by the majority, it is explained away by the President and his supporters as a matter of building a 'revolutionary conscience.'

The issue of numbers is crucial as Chavista informants in in-depth interviews regularly identified the opposition as minorities, privileged few, among other terms (they are called the 'esqualidos,' the few). When addressing a question comparing the coup attempt of 4 Feb 1992 and that of 11 April 2002, Chávez supporters gave consistent answers[3]. In 1992, there was a military rebellion which was part of a process of popular rebellion. It grew out of the Caracazo and it was against a 'nefarious' system. It was a matter of the 'people' expressing their demands or the military defending the people[4]. One said it was a civic-military uprising. That of April 2002 was the effort of a small group of elites fighting to protect their interests. The first case was a legitimate

---

[2] This quotation is based on the author's transcription of the presidential address and therefore is not an exact quotation.

[3] Interviews conducted between January and April 2008 in Caracas and the state of Lara.

[4] There was little novel about Chávez and supporters claiming their coup in the name of democracy. This was true of the very founders of Venezuelan democracy as well (Coronil 1997, 379).

rebellion against an illegitimate regime, the latter was an illegitimate coup against a legitimate regime. Both governments had been elected, but elections conferred no legitimacy for the supporters of the president. Or rather, elections in themselves were insufficient indicators of legitimacy.

What is interesting is Chavista informants insisted on the very small number of people who protested against the government in 2002 when the numbers of protesters in April of 2002 might have been as high as one-tenth of the population of the city and they tended to exaggerate the 'popular nature' (though not the popularity) of the 1992 coup attempt. Even if opposition claims are self-serving, there is no question that the numbers involved in the protests leading up to the April 2002, or, for that matter, supporting the petroleum strike in PDVSA or signing the petition to convoke a revocatory referendum, were indeed considerable. But the social imaginary employed by Chavistas processes challenges to Chavismo, as challenges to the people, a broad majoritarian group whose opponent can only have minority status.

The question about the coup attempt of 1992 and the coup in 2002 confirms the findings of Cannon in that Chavistas and opponents understood the April 2002 coup in fundamentally different ways (2004). Responses from opponents of the government were far more diverse. While some said a 'coup as a coup' and by definition it is something anti-democratic, others identified the events of April 2002 as an 'unstructured mess,' the full facts of which are still not known. These informants broke the events of April 2002 into two phases, that of popular rebellion where the streets were littered with unsatisfied citizens 'of all races, economic classes, political ideology' demanding that Chávez renounce, and a coup which took place after Chávez 'renounced' authority when President Carmona suspended the 1999 Constitution and created a civic-military regime which immediately lost support of most of the opposition.[5]

The distinction is important for an opposition which claims to reject Chavismo not because it speaks for the poor, oppressed, racial others, but because it is undemocratic. Opposition social imaginaries, thus, must understand the petroleum strike, the events of April 2002, and myriad other events in ways that show the righteous rebellion of an autonomous 'civil society' to the concentration of power in the hands of a dictator with communist aspirations. In doing so, they ex post facto legitimize the 1999 Constitution which most rejected in 1999 because it was 'Chávez's'. But that Constitution gave them the opportunity to promote a recall referendum and government obstruction and retaliation to citizens 'exercising of their constitutional rights' during the recall campaign is one of the strongest claims to the Chávez government's non-democratic credentials.

The government opponents are quick to mention the violence inherent in the rhetoric of Chavismo and the extremism that it promotes, but they often ignore similar content in their own groups (García-Guadilla 2003, Cannon 2004[6]). The opposition is highly critical of the influence of Fidel Castro on president Chávez, but is silent on the aid received by many civil society groups from US government sources. This does not necessarily disqualify their critiques, but it validates the claims of the Chavista who sees the opposition as being 'country-sellers' like the people of the previous regime who gave away the national patrimony (oil) for nothing to foreign oil concerns. On the other

[5] Chávez claims to have never renounced. The depiction of events here is through the lens of opposition informants. There are no 'truth claims' being made by the author about the particular events of April 2002.

[6] This does not mean that threats of violence from government and non-government sources have equal value or potential for terror.

hand, counsel from Fidel Castro, a leader who has heroically resisted US imperialism for five decades, is not imperialism but solidarity.

The social imaginary of the Chavistas distinguishes the 'people' against the 'opposition,' calling the struggles of the one virtuous, heroic and solidary and those of the other as being coup-making, country-less, and terrorist. That of the opposition identifies Chavistas as unthinking hordes who follow their leader with religious devotion, incite violence during peaceful acts of opposition civil disobedience, and regularly use universal language (the people) to press agendas that are particular and that target specific groups. It is hardly surprising given these imaginaries that there is polarization in Venezuela.

But polarization is more apparent than real. Part of this is due to the tendency of a macro social imaginary which understands Venezuela as divided, conflictual, and polarized. As such, when President Chávez says that he wants the new PSUV to be divided into squadrons, battalions and other divisions bearing the names of military formations, the opposition is likely to perceive this use of warlike imagery as a way of consolidating support by emphasizing an enemy. Were such language to be used in the context of the Punto Fijo social imaginary of Venezuelan exceptionalism and a conflict-free society, the names would hardly be controversial. But given the hegemony of the current imaginary, even less provocative political language elicits rejection from Others.

The role of the social imaginary, particularly the bifurcation into two distinct groups, helps explain why the Chávez government was able to survive the terrible economic performance of its first four to five years. To begin with, the majority wanted growth but more specifically wanted to feel as though they were represented, that the government recognized them, understood them, and would attend to them. As campy as *Alo Presidente* can be, the travels of President Chávez to the various parts of the country, his everyday language, his conversations with 'the people', even his dress and the apparently low-budget production of the show demonstrate an identity with the people. Particularly noteworthy is that despite the vast revenues the state has received due to the high price of oil, President Chávez never uses power point, preferring instead to have printed graphs on which he can draw with markers (which often do not have ink or are a color which does not show up well on camera), forcing the cameraman to hover over his shoulder, leading to the President directing the cameraman so he can get a better image. The spectacle, a regular event on *Alo Presidente*, belies the fundamental message of the television show, a message that the president implicitly and explicitly reminds his supporters "I am one of you," "I am the people," and "they are not like you and will take away all you have gained if they get their chance." The image is not without resonance especially given the highly conservative and repressive government mounted by President Carmona following coup of 2002. The elimination of the Constitution of 1999, reverting the name of the country back to "Venezuela," hunting down prominent Chavistas, jailing the president and not ceding power to the vice president, confirmed the worst fears of Chavistas—that the 'right' is waiting for its chance to remove the president, sell national enterprises to the United States, and to force the 'people' back into the 'hills', reversing any gains in political and economic empowerment since 1989.

Not surprisingly, in this context, the construction of political community presents a situation which is perpetually precarious. Though legitimacy is not constantly under threat, the potential for threat does not disappear because the citizen's existence *qua* citizen is seen, within his or her social imaginary, as being threatened by another group of citizens. Whereas the social imaginary of Punto Fijo promoted a conflict-free environment which denied claims based on class and race, weakening the articulation of

groups who could not exploit the advantages of legal universalism, the social imaginary in the Chávez era is agonistic, driven by a dialectical conflict between communities which disqualify each other on moral, intellectual, and/or economic grounds. Since the legitimacy of any regime requires community, it is highly unlikely that legitimacy in Chavista Venezuela will become a settled issue.

The inability to stabilize a sense of legitimacy despite the very impressive growth realized by the Venezuelan government since 2003 is important. Performance is used by Chavistas as a justification for support for government, but clearly their support pre-existed the government's performance (Weisbrot and Sandoval Feb 2008). Moreover, support has actually declined since the 2006 reelection of the president in the face of rapid growth. Meanwhile, government critics write off the economic growth of the last few years as being the result of the petroleum boom, and thus unrelated to the Chávez government, or being despite the Chávez government (Rodríguez 2008). Without question, economic growth has lessened the sense of immediacy of violence and polarization. But they remain both latent and accessible given the right circumstances.

Since 1989, if not 1983 or earlier, Venezuelan public space has been a site for cathartic explosions of frustration which have targeted government policies, particular governments, or entire regimes. Moreover, the plebiscitary tendency of the Chavista government to turn every year into an electoral year, as well as the provocative style of introduction of policies and the often equally provocative responses these receive from sectors of the opposition, mean that there is a regular intensification of political identities and community (de)formation. Electoral politics, in such a scenario, provide ample spaces in which eruptions of protest against internal and external Others can emerge (Connolly 1995). These are generally peaceful, in that no one is physically harmed, but they are invariably conflictual in language, and they demand recognition of their status as victim of the Other and/or they promote utopias in which the Other is simply not present. Thus, so long as the legitimacy of Chavez era governance is based on norms related to representativeness of an essentially and practically contested concept of 'community,' the regime will maintain a permanently unstable character to it.

And Yet It Still Stands

Yet it would be incorrect to see the Venezuelan regime as ready to topple, facing immediate challenges to its legitimacy, or on the verge of replacement. With the exception of notable but extreme cases, all Venezuelans recognize the Chávez government as having "right rule" though they may challenge whether that rule is exercised appropriately and what sort of obedience is due. The relatively scarcity of an active form of obedience with the governors of the regime is not new to the Chávez government nor is large-scale withdrawal or periodic protests. What might be more new is that the government constantly insists that the people are sovereign and that it is constructing a participatory and protagonist democracy, which requires not only an engaged community, but one that has the capacity to overcome its internal divisions. For the most part, there is one community and Venezuelans seem aware that the imaginary which depicts Venezuelan as polarized between two groups exists in a space where public and private space is shared, generally with no serious conflict of divisions. Moreover, they often tend to know that there are limitations on rhetorical and political actions which may seem extreme.

This latter point is instructive. On 2 March 2008, Colombian armed forces entered Ecuadorian territory and bombed a camp holding members of the FARC, including the second in command, Raul Reyes. Hours later on *Alo Presidente*, President Chávez unloaded his usual arsenal against the president of Colombia (he is a genocidist, mafia, narco-militar, stooge of the empire) and its government (terrorist, parapolitical), ordered 10 battalions of soldiers to the border with Colombia, and offered support to the Ecuadorian president at any level the latter deemed necessary. For one week, public space in Venezuela was rife with the usual separation of the groups called "opposition" attacking the President's decision, language, and so on, and the supporters of the President calling them country-less, unpatriotic, traitors, and slaves of the empire. The affair ended abruptly the same week at the Cumbre de Rio summit in Santo Domingo and the very next day no one was discussing the war with Colombia. Chavista informants who had made a point of including the importance of sovereignty in interviews prior to the end of the conflict did not mention the issue. The newspapers were virtually silent and the following *Alo Presidente* featured very little of president Chávez. The talking heads and the politicized people understood that a space had opened in which they could elevate rhetoric to relatively extreme proportions but they also understood, remarkably at the same time, that the window had closed. What was remarkable about the shift from indignant, saber-rattling partisanship to withdrawn silence was that all parties understood when to express voice and when to be silent.

This may be because there is an understanding about facticity and the seriousness of discourse in public space that most Venezuelans are capable of recognizing, but that many outside analysts do not understand. This explains why 'ugly rhetoric' turns into 'polarization' which becomes the 'brink of civil war.' When asked about why he writes for La Hojilla, a revolutionary newspaper whose motto is "guillotining the lies" (purportedly of the 'opposition controlled, terrorist media'), an informant said: 1) "it is the only newspaper that would give me a chance" and 2) people know what it is. It is an expression of opinions, like the other newspapers but it is understood for what it is. The extreme violence and vulgarity of its text and images are taken for being the expressions of people on one extreme. Similarly, he watches Globovision, a 24 hour news channel which features only criticism of the Chávez government, and enjoys it for what it is. The son of another informant watches the television version of La Hojilla reguarly not because he is a supporter of president Chávez nor even a revolutionary, but because he hates the presenter. The more extreme voices present truths that are articulated in more or less professionalized language, but they are interpreted in a space of urgency and threat but also in campiness.

It is akin to someone reading a news story in the *New York Post*. They will wait to see if it appears in the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal* before they take it seriously. Because mediatic space is politicized (by both the actions of journalists, the government, and oppositions) there is no *New York Times* or standard-bearer for relatively reliable information. The result is that newspapers have credibility for their constituents, but the constituents tend to know that they are reading partial truths, they tend to read outside of their own circles to "see what the other side is saying," and because both sides reject the characterization that they are brainwashed or uncritical supporters/opponents. This tendency was found more common among supporters of the government who are more likely to see media as being unreliable. The question, then, is why would they read or watch media if it is unreliable and if it contains what they themselves identify as distortions and lies about their side. Certainly there is an entertainment level, but there is also an awareness of the limitations of the extreme side of one's partisans and that no space contains a truly accurately articulated truth.

If there is a common awareness of the limits to extreme discourse and political actions, there is a greater awareness of other social phenomena. For example, although the opposition defends a liberal democracy which protects minority rights and Chavista versions of democracy are more majoritarian ('you need freedoms, but you cannot have the freedom of the few over the majority"), both groups disqualify political acts by the other on the basis of numbers. One march of a small group of women protesting the treatment of political protestors (23 March 2008) was subject to derision by passersby who laughed at how few people were involved. At two events celebrating the "Day of National Dignity," events which had been advertised for weeks in pro-government and sympathetic newspapers, had only one person in attendance: the author of this piece. Opponents of the government said "of course, because the buses did not show up." The buses bring supporters to political events and are reported to have beer, food, and other substantive rewards for participating in mass actions. The aim here is to deny the real numbers of supporters of the government by linking their participation to material rewards. Whether or not this is true is immaterial here. What does matter is that both groups undermine the legitimacy of the other on the basis of their failure to mobilize large amounts. This is of course more fundamental to Chavistas because their claim to legitimacy is that they are (not represent) 'el pueblo.'

Yet both sides mobilize, recognize the legitimacy of popular rebellion (27 Feb 1989 or 11 April 2002), emphasize the importance of democracy, criticize the other for its support of non-democratic behavior, and insist that the other has worsened the conditions for the majority of poor Venezuelans. The discourse about goals of government (with the exception of committed socialists) and way problems of society are envisioned, tend to be shared. Most Venezuelans accept a basic model of social-democracy as the ideal. Where they differ is often on ontology and its implications for methodology. Overwhelmingly, supporters of the government see political problems (security, scarcity of food, infrastructure, education, health) as structural problems. In interviews they repeatedly spoke of the need not to solve problems but to go to the "roots" of the problem. They insist that these problems have existed for 40 years, 100 years, or even since the arrival of Columbus. For example, when asked about "what are the responsibilities to which all governments must attend," one Chavista gave a lengthy history beginning with Bolivar, the plight of the Indigenous peoples and the Africans, the various dictatorships and so on. Naturally, Chavistas were supportive of the government and explained that what might otherwise be considered 'shortcomings' were inability to solve structural problems already. But, they pointed out, the Chávez government "has only had 10 years." Opponents of the regime have an ontology which is oriented around problem-solving. They believe that problems have identifiable short-term causes (price controls lead to scarcity) and that proper policy or administration can eliminate the problems. But the goals, public goods that are serviceable and inclusive, are not as distinct from the supporters of the regime as either group would think.

If the Chavistas borrowed much from the populist, statist, and Third-Worldist rhetoric of the Punto Fijo regimes (Ellner 2008), so the opponents of Chávez have incorporated Chavista language and codes into their own social imaginary. For example, though opponents of the regime opposed the Constitution and constitutional process of 1999, they referred to the 1999 Constitution to justify their 'civic action' to recall the president through a referendum and they believed governmental obstruction in this area was a violation of their constitutional rights. Further, they defended the constitution during the campaign to reform the Constitution in 2007. The loyalty to the Constitution of 1999 is not nearly as great, nor as relevant here, as the common belief that legitimation can be had by appealing to a purportedly pre- and extra-political document

like a Constitution. The fact that the constitutional process was written in an environment which threatened its claim to legitimacy (Astorga 2006) may divide opponents and supporters, but a common social imaginary lauds the idea of social compact.

Moreover, commonalities in the area of social space are also interesting. All informants knew of cases where people could not maintain personal and/or professional relationships with someone "from the other side," but few had personally experienced this and, when they did, it was the other person who was to blame. All informants claim to have friends with different perspectives and that it is good to have dialogue with different groups. Though the stories about families broken over politics do exist, they are largely sensational and do not represent the personal experience of most Venezuelans. They do form part of the justification for the social imaginary they adopt but they are very distant from everyday life. As one informant said, "in discos you see Chavistas, opposition, everything, it does not matter." It is as though, like in the case with the histrionics during the week of the potential war with Colombia, what Orwell might call a "hate week," that people know their places and spaces. Similarly, all informants with whom barrios were discussed said that they are "dangerous places" and that the interviewer "should not go there." These statements were striking in how ubiquitous and uniform they were among people of such different ideological stripes and levels of politicization. Even members of a socialist revolutionary process warned against the very spaces that they claimed to be representing, the victims of the "nefarious Fourth Republic." The sense of "community" was clearly not nearly as divided as often appears. Some continued to be excluded.

Furthermore, an additional overlap in social imaginaries is the idea of the very personalization of power. Like French peasants in the 18th century, Chavista arguments about scarcity and inflation are linked to an internal and external enemy who is imposing sanctions upon the people. There is no space for impersonal forces except among the most committed Marxists who see structural forces at work. But even these forces are the work of a 'them.' Taylor explains that social imaginaries which understand politics as personalized "leave little room for impersonal mechanisms" and "if things go wrong, it is always someone's fault" (Taylor 2004, 130).

Opponents of the regime are more likely to accept the possibility of objective realities and rational agents responding to incentives (not class interests). If Chavista policies intervene in markets produce 'distortions,' then markets can be run objectively without distortions (or, at least with minimal distortions). Similarly, civil society is an 'autonomous' space and Chavista groups are denied 'civil society' status in the social imaginaries of regime opponents because they are paid/controlled by the government (Garcia-Gaudilla 2003). Despite the ability of opponents to see impersonal institutions and to reject personalization of power, their analysis of the Chávez regime revolves around the personalization of power. Rhetoric denies the existence of a state apparatus outside of the presidents whims and the control he supposedly employs over all facets of life is considered total. In other words, when things fail, Chávez is at fault. Hence, when news of a colleague's kidnapping and murder appeared, the blame immediately was given to 'Chávez.' This is remarkably similar to the Chavistas that opponents critique for their 'messianic' interpretation of president Chávez. Though Chavistas resist this critique, they regularly reproduce narratives which express how Chávez 'saved' them or how president Chávez alone was capable of bringing about the changes that Venezuela had witness.

In the end, both have recourse to an imaginary which understands power as being highly personalized. This is not new and comparisons to earlier populist

governments, particularly the first CAP presidency, display similar tendencies (Ellner 2008, Coronil 1997). This is not surprising since "the new imaginary doesn't just displace the old one. It reinterprets the key values of the older tradition, and that precisely because the new was seen not as a break, but as reinterpretation" (Taylor 2004, 153). Indeed, the new social imaginary contained many of these elements, including resentment of a 'corrupt elite,' but previously this resentment was expressed within an imaginary that prioritized peace, consensus (particularly of class and organized sectors).

The context has shifted but the repertory available and employed by actors has not changed as much as either 'Chavista' or 'opposition' may imply. This is because these two groups, not in reality but in their representations within the social imaginary of the Other, are cartoonized. Zubillaga correctly identifies essentialization of identities a fundamental problem in the Venezuelan political ambit (2002). Opposition and Chavista take on their ultimate meanings and bear the characteristics of their most extreme proponents. Essentialization allows identification of self and other to translate into rhetorical stances unmediated (by reality) into the imaginary. As such, polarizing language begets a polarizing social imaginary, regardless of the 'accuracy' of the ontological portrait. But the contradictions with reality problematize the total essentialization of the Other, particularly because people deal with kinder, gentler versions of the Other on a regular basis. The Other is not nearly distant enough to be fully essentialized. Moreover, the social imaginary of Punto Fijo has not been erased.

Just as the social imaginary promoted by Chávez, of victimization, class conflict, oppression of racial minorities, existed prior to Chávez, and indeed since at least colonization (Cannon 2004), that of Punto Fijo continues to exist an inform the beliefs and practices of many citizens, including Chavistas. It is true that the social imaginary of Chavez has achieved hegemony, but this is an hegemony consistent with Laclau's understanding of perpetual agonistic encounters producing temporary periods of dominance of one idea claiming universalism over another (Laclau 1979). The hegemony is neither total nor permanent. The hegemony has undermined the regime's legitimacy in its problematic understanding of community, but it also has created new spaces for resistance by the displaced social imaginary and for new alternatives.

Conclusion

Taylor's *Modern Social Imaginaries* contrasts the American Revolution, where a new social imaginary and a new regime was created, with that of the French Revolution, where neither was possible. What distinguished the American from the French Revolution is that it could drawn on consensual understandings of institutional representation which could produce a concept of 'We the people.' This was not possible in revolutionary France, Taylor argues where "any particular expression of popular sovereignty could be challenged by some other, with substantial support. Part of the terrifying instability of the first years of the Revolution stemmed from this negative fact, that the shift from the legitimacy of dynastic rule to that of the nation had no agreed meaning in a broadly based social imaginary" (Taylor 2004, 113). He goes on to write "the fact that substantial parts of the king's entourage, the army and the nobility, did not accept the new principles created a tremendous obstacle to stabilization. Even those who were for the new legitimacy were divided among themselves. But what made these latter divisions so deadly was the absence of any agree understanding on the institutional meaning of the sovereignty of the nation" (Taylor 2004, 113).

The parallels with the 'Bolivarian revolution' are striking. There are clear limitations in terms of achieving a "broadly based social imaginary" and considerable

divisions exist both between and among opponents and supporters of the regime. Opponents of the regime may favor the current Constitution versus the reforms proposed in 2007, but were the 'opposition' to power it is not clear how it would interpret the Constitution. The 'opposition' which ruled for a couple of days in April of 2002—which is not representative of regime opponents more broadly—eliminated the Constitution of 1999 in one of its first acts. At the same time, it is clear from turn out and off the record comments, that many supporters of the regime did not support and/or understand the need for and implications of the reforms proposed in 2007. There is clearly a division over not only how to represent the 'people' but also who that people really is. This has very serious implications for regime legitimacy, implications that go beyond the Venezuelan case.

Understanding the social imaginary in Venezuela, a "deeply divided society" offers possibilities for deeper understanding of other such societies. In such governments, particularly undergoing regime breakdown and crisis, actual and future regimes cannot rely on a clear and uncontested idea of the political community. Dankwart Rustow (1970) argued that 'national unity'—the idea that there be no doubt about the political community—was the the most fundamental element necessary in democratization. This was written long before the rise of identity politics and new social movements, the Third Wave of democratization, and the breakdown of many multi-ethnic governments. What democratization in the Third Wave has shown is that many governments underwent a transition to democratic government without either a settled understanding of "community" or a means by which to come to such an understanding that would be recognized by all relevant groups.

Had analysts understood the sort of dueling social imaginaries one finds in Venezuela and which may very well have existed among different groups in the former Yugoslavia, many 'failed/collapsed' states in Sub-Saharan Africa, or the support coalitions for authoritarian rule in the Middle East, internal and external acts of violence may very well have produced less extreme results. Regimes that fail to establish a sense of 'political community' build legitimacy over tectonic plates. Economic growth and other measures of performance may shift weight temporarily but they do not change the underlying topography. Moreover, during crisis, the basis of legitimacy is more likely to shift and a shift towards more normative factors could be all the more devastating. But conflictual social imaginaries do not necessarily lead to violence and here the Venezuelan case is again important. If the sort of rhetoric one finds in Venezuela were to exist within another social imaginary, the result could be bloody and brutal.

There is a permanent threat to legitimacy, but the threat is not that great. A local joke helps explain this. A man appears before the gates of Hell and is given the choice of American Hell and Venezuelan Hell. He is told that in both the temperature is oppressive, the people work constantly, and that the demons regularly beat and torture the souls. He chooses the American Hell. Soon after, he decides to visit the Venezuelan Hell. He walks in and sees people sleeping in hammocks, playing cards, listening to music. "What kind of Hell is this?" he asks. "Oh, the demons have not shown up" he is told[7]. The language, laws, and actions generally sound terrible and divisive but in real life they are not always so.

Real life involves continuous moments of coexistence which is often unaffected by the dueling social imaginaries. But electoral politics and rallies and the responses these provoke encourage the 'demons' to show up. A women exiting a train full of Chavez supporters on their way to manifest support for the regime on 13 April 2008

[7] The author is grateful to Tom O'Donnell for this anecdote.

said “you are pathetic.” “You are pathetic,” “what did she say?” “Why did she not say that when she was on the train?” “They have no courage.” ‘She’ became ‘they’ very easily and as the Chavistas exited the train one of them began a chant “uh, ah, Chávez no se va” (ooh, ah, Chávez is not going anywhere). A red-shirted multitude went up the stairs chanting loudly and passionately this hymn of resistance which serve to reinforce a profound sense of community of people who were retracing the steps of the ‘pueblo’ which 6 years ago marched to Miraflores and restored president Chávez to power. It was something of a socialist pilgrimage. But that sense of community required the exteriority of the disdaining women who perceived them to be uneducated, deluded hordes, and it must have been very intimidating for any non-Chavista who was using the public space of the metro or the plazas that had been ‘taken’ by Chavista supporters as they found themselves surrounded by a sea of red, a sea in which they were immiscible.

Sources

Alagappa, Muthiah. “The Anatomy of Legitimacy.” Muthiah Alagappa Ed. *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The Quest for Moral Authority.* Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1995a.
Arendt, Hannah. *Crises of the Republic*. New York: Harvest Books. 1972.
Astorga, Omar. *Ensayo sobre filosofía política y cultura*. Caracas: Ediciones de la Biblioteca. 2006.
Buxton, Julia. “Economic Policy and the Rise of Hugo Chávez.” Steve Ellner and Daniel Hellinger Ed. *Venezuelan Politics in the Chávez Era: Class, Polarization & Conflict.* Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publications 2003.
Cannon, Barry. “Venezuela, April 2002: Coup or Popular Rebellion? The Myth of a United Venezuela.” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 23 (3). 2004. pp. 285-302.
Cedeño, Jeffrey. "Venezuela in the Twenty-First Century: 'New Men, New Ideals, New Procedures'" *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 15 (1). March 2006. pp. 93-109.
Chang, Jung. *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*. New York: Touchstone Books. 2003.
Coicaud, Jean-Marc. *Legitimacy and Politics: A Contribution to the Study of Political Right and Political Responsibility*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2002. Translated and edited by David Ames Curtis.
Contreras Natera, Miguel Ángel. “Cultura Política y Política Cultural en Venezuela. Un debate sobre las reconfiguraciones de la ciudadanía y la democracia en un espacio tiempo transformativo.” Cadenas, José María Ed. *Debate sobre la democracia en América.* Caracas: Centro de Estudios de América. 2006.
Connolly, William E. *The Ethos of Pluralization.* Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press. 1995.
Crisp, *Brian F* and *Daniel H Levine*. Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs. Beverly Hills: Summer 1998. 40 (2). pp. 27-61.
Ellner, Steve. *Rethinking Venezuelan Politics: Class, Conflict, and the Chávez Phenomenon.* Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publications. 2008.
and Daniel Hellinger Ed. *Venezuelan Politics in the Chávez Era: Class, Polarization & Conflict.* Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publications 2003.
Garcia-Guadilla, Maria Pilar. “Civil Society: Institutionalization, Fragmentation, Autonomy.”Steve Ellner and Daniel Hellinger Ed. *Venezuelan Politics in the Chávez Era: Class, Polarization & Conflict.* Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publications 2003.
Gil Yepes, José Antonio Gil Yepes. “Public Opinion, Political Socialization, and Regime Stabilization.” Jennifer L. McCoy and David J. Myers Ed. *The Unraveling of Representative Democracy in Venezuela.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 2004.
Goderis, Benedikt and Samuel Malone "Natural Resource Booms and Inequality: Theory and Evidence". Unpublished Manuscript. (2008),
Hay, Colin. “Crisis and the structural transformation of the state: interrogating the process of change.” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*. 1 (3). 1999. pp. 317-344.
Hellinger, Daniel. “Political Overview: The Breakdown of *Puntofijismo* and the Rise of *Chavismo.* Steve Ellner and Daniel Hellinger Ed. *Venezuelan Politics in the Chávez Era: Class, Polarization & Conflict.* Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publications 2003.

Kjaer, Anne Mette. *Governance*. Meldin: Polity Press. 2004.
Mészáros, *István*. "The Structural Crisis of Politics." *Monthly Review*. 58 (4). Sep 2006. Pp. 34-53.
Keller, Alfredo. "Cultura y Juegos de Poder." Paper prepared for *Venezuela Heute* (Venezuela Hoy) Ed Nikolaus Wertz, Andreas Boeckh, and Frederich Welsch, Publisher by Editorial Vervurt (draft Jan 2008)
Lopez Maya, Margarita. "The Venezuelan Caracazo of 1989: Popular protest and institutional weakness." *Journal of Latin American Studies*. Feb 2003. 35. pp. 117-136.
McCoy, Jennifer L. and David J. Myers Ed. *The Unraveling of Representative Democracy in Venezuela.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 2004.
Moleiro, Alonso y José Roberto Duque. *De Un Lado y Del, Caracas: ciudad en conflicto*. Caracas: enCaracas Sello Editorial. 2006.
Rodríguez, Francisco. "Venezuela's Empty Revolution." *Foreign Affairs* March/April 2008. pp. 49-62.
Romero, Anibal. "Rearranging the Deck Chairs on the Titanic: The Agony of Democracy in Venezuela." *Latin American Research Review*. 32 (1). 1997. pp. 7-36.
Rustow, Dankwart. "Transitions to democracy: Toward a dynamic model." *Comparative Politics.*2 (3) April 1970. pp. 337-363.
Stokes, Susan C. *Mandates and Democracy: Neoliberalism by Surprise in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2001.
Strauss, Claudia. "The Imaginary." *Anthropological Inquiry.* 6 (3). 2006. pp. 322-343.
Tannenwald, Nina. "Ideas and Explanation: Advancing the Theoretical Agenda." Journal of Cold War Studies 7:2 Journal of Cold War Studies 7 (2).2005. pp13-42
Taylor, Charles. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Dirham: Duke University Press. 2004.
Tilly, Charles. *Regimes and Repertoires*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2006.
Weisbrot, Mark and Luis Sandoval. "Update: The Venezuelan Economy in the Chávez Years." Feb 2008.
http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/venezuela_update_2008_02.pdf
Zizek, *Slavoj* . "A Plea for Leninist Intolerance."Critical Inquiry. Chicago: Winter 2002. Vol. 28, Iss. 2; pg. 542-546.
Zubillaga, Veronica. "Venezulea: contra el esencialismo politico.' *Nueva Sociedad* 179. May 2002. pp. 25-31.
http://www.nuso.org/upload/articulos/3050_1.pdf
Zúquete, José Pedro. "The Missionary Politics of Hugo Chávez." *Latin American Politics & Society.* 50 (1). 2008. 91-121.