

Tercermundismo and Chavismo

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The following is an excerpt, somewhat revised and updated, from my paper, "Chávez, Globalization and Tercermundialismo" given at the Meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, Washington DC, September 2-8, 2001. The entire paper reviews the collapse of the puntofijo project, defined as one linking oil nationalism, modernization, and democracy to one another. It also reviews the attempts on the part of three sectors, defined as (1) social movements and the organized working class (2) the middle class, oil executives and business sectors, and (3) the military to construct a new project during the 1990s. None, including the military, fully succeeded, but the Chávez movement proved the most successful. The excerpt that follows deals with its political strengths and weaknesses and analyzes its ideological project. The full paper is available from the author at hellindc@webster.edu.

Although *chavismo* dominated the state apparatus, the opponents of President Hugo Chávez were well-organized in civil society, especially in the media after his election in December 1998. What sustained the president's popularity for three years after his election in December 1998 was his ability to tap into the deep reserve of popular resentment toward the old political class and his ability to pursue an independent foreign policy that reinforced his revolutionary credentials. After polls showed a steep decline in the president's popularity ratings, he seemed vulnerable to an overthrow. The massive protest march of April 10, 2002 seemed to confirm the change in fortunes. However, the coup attempt generated an unexpected backlash of protest that contributed to the restoration of the president to office.

What the public opinion polls may have failed to capture is the deep, cultural divide evoked by the *chavismo*. What has become evident in Venezuela is the failure of the project of modernization and national integration launched by the political generation of 1928. The political discourse of President Chávez, which has on the one hand thoroughly alienated the middle and elite sectors of society, draws upon a sense of Venezuelan national identity more closely tied to the "Third World" orientation that has warred with positivist notions of progress since independence. This national fissure is part of a larger gulf in the global world order articulated in the discourse of the President.

Chavismo as an Ideology

Various ideological influences shaped the worldview of *chavismo*. Because of the program of placing cadets in civilian universities, Chávez and his fellow conspirators came in contact with leftist intellectuals, some of whom would hold important posts in his administration. His outlook reflects not only Venezuelan nationalism but ideas drawn from an eclectic range of leaders and thinkers from Fidel Castro to Tony Blair ("third way") and Norberto Ceresole, a self-exiled Argentine sociologist who offered a neo-fascist critique of the post-Cold War dominance of the United States, tinged with anti-semitism. Chávez has eschewed the latter but found in the ideas of Ceresole (who has

since broken with Chávez) validation for his conception of a fusing of civilian and military components in defense of national values and interests.

Opponents have made much of the relationship between Chávez and leaders of countries that the United States labels “rogue states,” his refusal to cooperate with the U.S. drug war on Colombia, allegations that his administration tried to harbor Vladimir Montesinos (the renegade Peruvian strongman), and his friendly relations with Colombian guerrillas. After devastating floods destroyed the transportation infrastructure along the littoral, Chávez refused to allow American military engineer units to deploy and help in the rescue and rebuilding efforts. At the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City in 2001, Chávez refused to endorse the resolution that called for conditioning membership in a hemispheric free trade zone on electoral democracy.

What these actions all have in common is resistance to uni-polar domination of the world by the United States. Relations with countries like Iraq and Libya can be explained on a pragmatic basis – the need to coordinate oil policy. The *chavista* offensive to revitalize OPEC was undertaken with geo-strategic, now just economic goals. Chávez, much as Bolívar and Martí before him and Castro today, perceives the United States as a threat to a unified, free Latin America. Like Ceresole, he is particularly wary of Washington’s desire to refashion the Latin American military into an instrument of hemispheric defense of U.S. hegemony under the guise of defending democracy.

This independent foreign policy has, like everything else, deeply divided the country. The contrasting visions of the “modern” middle class and the “*negritas*” who support Chávez are reflected in the rhetoric surrounding OPEC. The most significant foreign policy accomplishment of the administration was the successful call for the Second Summit of Heads of States and Governments of the Member Countries of OPEC, which took place in Caracas in September 2000. Points 12, 13 and 14 of the “Declaration of Caracas” issued at the summit reaffirmed OPEC’s commitment to leadership of the entire underdeveloped world and called for substantial reduction of the developing countries’ debt, and called for the “just and equitable treatment of oil in the world energy market” in negotiations over environmental, fiscal, and energy problems. By contrast, the “modernized” oil executives pose the most articulate and powerful resistance with Venezuelan civil society to the Third World outlook championed by Chávez.

Well before nationalization the foreign oil companies “Venezuelanized” their management. Perhaps it is more accurate to say the companies had “westernized” the outlook of the native managerial strata. The generation of managers that embarked on the oil *apertura* pressed for Venezuela’s departure from OPEC and privatization of PDVSA not only in economic but cultural terms. Arturo Sosa Pietri, former president of PDVSA, described membership in OPEC as nothing less than the rejection of Western modernity. “Our country was never a colony, not of Spain nor of any other power,” he argued on the eve of Chavez’s 1998 victory. For Sosa terms “discovery” or “encounter” pertain more to Venezuela than “conquest” because the country’s territory was, he claims, thinly populated by tribes living close to a state of nature. The wars of liberation

in Africa and Asia were to preserve cultures often thousands of years old, whereas the Independence War of Venezuela was more a civil conflict among a population with European ethical and religious values. Had it not been for OPEC, argued Sosa Pietri, “we could have aspired, because of our origins, cultural roots, and territorial wealth, to convert ourselves quickly into full associates of the so-called ‘first world’” (1998).

Oil policy was not settled by the Constitution, which prohibits (Article 302) privatization of PDV but leaves open the possibility of privatizing subsidiaries. Chávez decreed (under authority granted by the National Assembly) a new organic law for mining and hydrocarbons in November 1991. The draft required the state to maintain at least 51 percent of the shares of the company’s subsidiaries, which generated criticism from former company executives waging a public relations campaign in favor of liberal terms for investment and joint ventures. Chávez had treated the oil issue mainly in terms of alleged corruption in the company, especially in implementation of its internationalization policies, and as a matter of relations with OPEC. The important debate over regulating private investment was almost *sub rosa*, much of it on the Internet (e.g., www.petroleoyv.com and www.analica.com) where the weight of middle class and professional opinion clearly leans toward some form of privatization.

If the foreign policy of President Chávez has significantly broken from the pro-Washington outlook of *puntofijismo*, his exercise of power at home represents less clear a break. For all of his revolutionary rhetoric, candidate Chávez attracted support from sectors of the business community, which provided indispensable financial help for the campaign. The degree and nature of the *quid pro quo* was unclear, but by some reports he owed much to insurance interests, public relations firms, developers and even fugitive bankers eager to return to Venezuela once Caldera departed (Ojeda 2001; Santodomingo 2000). Discontent with the way the loosely organized but tightly controlled MVR designated candidates for legislative and local elections in the megaelection produced further defections, particularly among professionals who had hoped for a clearer break with traditional practices (e.g., Ojeda, 2001).

The MVR, under adroit direction of Luis Miquilena, began to practice tactical politics associated with *puntofijismo*. After the July 2000 elections it offered the *Proyecto Venezuela* of Salas Romer a vice presidency in the new Assembly in exchange for legislative support. In early 2001 the MVR reached out to a majority faction of AD headed by Deputy Henry Ramos Allup for support on some legislation, while Miquilena threatened MAS with expulsion from the PP if it continued to withhold support from some initiatives (e.g., in education) opposed by the middle class. On the one hand, this kind of alliance behavior belied the notion that Chávez, like Fujimori, intended to close Congress and execute an “*auto-golpe*.” On the other hand, Chávez several times threatened to ask for emergency powers, which his majority in the Assembly could provide, to issue decrees without legislative approval. Such powers were often granted presidents during the Fourth Republic, but critics saw in it a grab for dictatorial power.

Thirty months into his presidency, Chávez could point to some evidence of progress in arresting the secular decline in wages and unemployment visible in various

social and economic measures covering 1990 to 1998. A survey carried out in March 2001 showed that over nine hundred thousand Venezuelans had escaped extreme poverty during the previous year, equivalent to a drop of four percentage points. (*Venezuela al Día*, Miami, July 2001, www.venezuelaaldia.com) However, this hardly represents the kind of rapid progress many of his supporters hoped to see. One opposition think-tank, the Workers' Center for Documentation and Analysis (CENDA) claimed 90 percent of Venezuelan households had insufficient income to meet basic necessities, with 55 percent of the population in extreme poverty (*El Universal*, Caracas, January 30, 2001). These are the people who most fervently place their hopes in Chávez, but they are also posing difficult dilemmas as he tries to balance their interests against his desire to avoid a fundamental break with the rest of society.

Chávez combined his remarkable charisma and skill in the mass media with a highly personal distribution of rents. Many of the callers to his weekly radio program, *¡Alo, Presidente!*, seek to resolve problems in finding employment or obtaining a benefit from a particular social service agency. On the occasion of a presidential caravan to commemorate the ninth anniversary of the February 4 revolt, televised interviews with bystanders featured people pleading for redress of specific problems. The grievances were often attributed to the neglect or callousness of individuals associated (so said the speakers) with the old regime. The presidential office even created a special bureau to attend to thousands of similar petitions arriving daily in the mail, by way of telephone calls to *¡Alo, Presidente!*, and from people waiting on line outside of Miraflores Palace or La Casona, the president's official residence (*El Nacional*, Caracas, January 26, 2001).

Chávez powerfully articulates the resistance of the poor to marginalization, but this complicates governance. For example, in a his speech commemorating the ninth anniversary (Feb. 4, 2001) of his coup attempt, Chávez referred to a highly visible and volatile conflict between *buhoneros* (ambulant street vendors) and municipal authorities. He repeated his promise never to send the security forces to assault them, "*el soberano*", evoking a contrast with bitter memories of the repression of the *caracazo*. Yet he also praised the mayor of Caracas (Freddy Bernal) and asked the *buhoneros* to be patient as he tried to resolve the differences between the vendors and residents of a neighborhood in which a market for the vendors was to be located. He told the vendors, who had been evicted peacefully from the popular Sabana Grande pedestrian avenue with the promise of relocation to the market, to have patience. Their problems, said the president, rooted in the failures *puntofijismo* and cannot be rectified overnight.

The *buhoneros* heard the promise not to deploy security forces, but their patience had worn thin. For days they had been occupying a weed-strewn, vacant plot where the promised market was to be located. Municipal police had surrounded them. Perched on a cement wall around the plot were young men in red berets. Banners proclaimed the vendors "right to work," while angry neighbors milled around the vicinity. An agreement with municipal authorities had been reached, but the day after the Chávez speech, a group of vendors, frustrated with lack progress in resolving their grievances and without other sources of income, seized the Sabana Grande mall and had to be dislodged by mounted police, resulting in some injuries. The incident is just one of many that pose difficult

decisions for Chávez and the MVR as it seeks to negotiate an accommodation between those who have been marginalized and those struggling to avoid the same fate.

Chávez seeks to represent the marginalized, excluded, and impoverished sectors, which form the majority, but he cannot simply ignore the power of the privileged, globalized few, both nationally and internationally. This dilemma underlay his handling of the conflict between *buhoneros* and neighborhood associations, and it has been visible in myriad other conflicts as well. Opponents are eager to seize on *tomas*, demonstrations, and strikes as evidence of lawlessness, but at the same time they are eager to portray enforcement as repression. In addition, the situation lends itself to opportunistic actions by (predominantly) young *chavistas* who are only loosely organized into the MVR and certainly not subject to organizational discipline. This places the MVR in a difficult position politically. It also makes the Chávez vulnerable to destabilization by the United States and creates difficulties for its image abroad. When he articulates suspicions of outside interference, these are taken as signs of its paranoia, yet there are ample precedents in Latin America to justify his concerns.

It is tempting to attribute the mass appeal of Chávez to skillful manipulation of public opinion and his talents as a social communicator, but this is to devalue the importance of the message itself. In his discourse Chávez consistently privileges lower class interests over those of other social classes and sectors. This was not something artificially created by public relations specialists. As Alberto Muller Rojas, who served as chief of staff for the 1998 campaign, put it, the Chávez image was “self-constructed.” A significant amount of the MVR’s limited publicity budget was devoted to mass distribution of posters immediately *after* the pronouncement of Chávez as winner. The text was carefully chosen: “Chávez, President, everyone for Venezuela now (*ahora*).” “*Ahora*” was an attempt to capitalize on the phrase “*por ahora*,” which Chávez pronounced in his short surrender speech in 1992, admitting that “for now” his plans had been frustrated (*Boína imagen* 1999).

The discourse of Chávez is disconcerting and infuriating to elites. The explanation, says Alejandro Moreno, a Salesian priest and social psychologist who has lived for more than a decade in a Caracas *barrio*, is that the president addresses himself to “the people”, not to them. For Moreno, the enthusiastic response of the people to his message cannot be put down to charisma, manipulation, or demagoguery. “What is important is not what he speaks but what speaks inside him. In him speaks the convivial relations of popular Venezuela, of convivial man. ...An elderly woman expressed it very well: ‘For me, it’s like my own son is president’” (Moreno, 1998: 5).

The nationalism incubating in the MBR-2000 drew upon a deep tradition of populist caudillism in Venezuelan history. The least known, but possibly most emblematic, of the trinity (including Bolívar and the philosopher/teacher, Simón Rodríguez) of heroes in MBR-2000 rhetoric is Ezequiel Zamora, a Liberal general assassinated in 1860, allegedly from within his own ranks during the Federalist War (See Banko 1996: 169-183). During the 1960s leftists (e.g., folk singer Ali Primera) revived the mythic reputation around Zamora, even if most Venezuelans otherwise knew little of

his history. Chávez, from the *llanero* region of Barinas, where Zamora achieved his greatest following, exalted the Federalist martyr and appropriated his anti-oligarchic rhetoric, which resonates in his mass rallies, televised speeches and weekly radio broadcasts. Like Zamora, Chávez employs an egalitarian discourse that is often vague on specifics, laced with racial overtones, evocative of the resentment of the masses, and threatening to elites. “*Horror al oligarquía*,” was a popular Federalist cry. Humberto Celli, a prominent leader of AD, lamented how far his party had drifted from the affection of the masses since the days of Betancourt when he took note of the tumultuous scene that greeted Chávez in December 1998 when he gave his victory speech, delivered from a window of the presidential palace, newly dedicated to his followers. “When I saw Chávez triumphant on the ‘People’s Balcony,’ greeting the multitude, and the TV cameras focused on those delirious faces, I said to myself, ‘My God, those are the *negritas* of *Acción Democrática*’” (Colomina 2001).

Celli’s rueful comment on “*negritas*” evokes the manner in which the discourse of Chávez appropriates intertwined class and racial identities in Venezuelan political culture. Less appreciated in the manipulation of gender politics by both Chávez and the opposition. On the one hand, women have occupied several high positions in the cabinet and for the first time, the Vice Presidency). The president’s spouse, Marísabel, is a prominent advisor and public relations asset to the MVR. On the other hand, public opinion surveys show that across all social classes men are more likely than women to support Chávez, which may become a significant political factor if gap between the opposition and president narrows. Women head many of the social movements frustrated by the administration’s failure to implement fully consultation with civil society. As with earlier efforts to incorporate women into party organization (see Friedman 2000), the MVR seems intent on subordinating Bolivarian women’s groups to other goals. Much presidential rhetoric is paternalistic, if not macho. However, the opposition also has not hesitated to appeal to baser prejudices in the culture, as it did when it sent women’s panties to military officers, clearly implying that failure to rise up against the president brought into question their masculinity.

Chávez mobilizes subaltern sentiments against the privileged by themes that are deeply ingrained in Venezuelan history and national identity. A good example is his national radio and television broadcast of June 15, 2001. For several hours the president held a “conversation” with his audience, scorning his critics as “*los escualidos*”. In a conversational style, punctuated by friendly asides to studio workers, he discussed several foreign policy initiatives, including his plans to attend several international conferences and visit several foreign capitals.

It would be naïve to think that ordinary Venezuelan citizens are any more captivated by discussions of presidential itineraries or details of domestic policy than most other people. The middle class finds the programs especially tedious, but they are not the target audience. Chávez uses the media to portray Venezuela as once again a player in world events, a country shaping them, not merely at their mercy. In both style and substance his addresses and conversational programs communicate to the economically marginalized that this president takes them into his confidence. The very

vocal annoyance expressed by opponents ratifies the perception that he is their voice in a world that otherwise seeks to discard them or sees their welfare as at best a residual product of economic policies that would immediately worsen their conditions.

Another use of the media is to convey of the *chavista* hermeneutics about history. In his June 15 broadcast, the president followed news of his foreign policy initiatives with an exhortation to his audience to read Ramón Velásquez's book on the fall of the "yellow liberal" regime in 1899. Displaying several photos of the troops of General Cipriano Castro, leader of the insurgents, he proclaimed,

These are the troops of the Liberal Restoration Army of General Cipriano Castro. ...They came from the Andes. ...Here is the camp. Venezuela is at war, ending the century at war because independence, as Bolívar recognized, managed to break the chains of Spain but not to complete the social revolution. [To someone in the studio.] Put the photo up again so that you can see ...here it is...this is a poor people. See them, with their banners, shoeless, with their old drums, their coronets, and their leader, Cipriano Castro, in front, a people seeking justice because after Independence they were betrayed, and today they continue seeking justice. We thank God that one hundred years later we are embarked on this course without a war; we are embarked on a peaceful battle, in a democratic battle. A God, the Virgin, and everybody is saying calling to the country to struggle to make this road victorious. It will be so in order to avoid that things turn out to repeat themselves as they have throughout Venezuelan history. (www.analitica.com)

Here Chávez takes as his model a controversial, often reviled figure evoking obvious comparisons to his own situation. Castro, like Chávez, presented himself as a charismatic, nationalist leader, often scorned as a tyrant with an unstable personality, leading a movement of the poor against perfidious elites associated with a discredited form of liberalism. Displaying a photo of prominent bankers who financed a revolt against Castro, Chávez drove home a comparison to his own political enemies, but he was quick to claim that his enemies, "*los escualidos*," were much less potent.

The politicization of history finds expression in debates over public holidays. For example, in an attempt to preserve the memory of January 23, 1958, the date of a popular uprising against General Pérez Jiménez, the opposition introduced a resolution into the Assembly calling for a public commemoration of the date. For his part, Chávez characterized the anniversary as a sad reminder of the failures of the regime it inaugurated. In response to strong media support for commemorating January 23 date, the president promoted a major mobilization and alternative celebration of the anniversary of the February 4, 1992 coup attempt.

Three days before the February 4 events, the government staged an elaborate ceremony at the Pantheon, where the remains of Bolívar and many other national heroes are buried, to commemorate the birthday of Zamora, the nineteenth century *caudillo* regarded as the supreme example of popular rebellion against an oligarchy. Chávez shares the same hometown in the Venezuelan *llanos*, and frequently invoked by the

president as an inspiration for his Bolivarian revolution. However, illness prevented the president from appearing, and the turnout was meager. In contrast, the event in Caracas was high theater and massive. Yellow with red splashed across it, the colors of the MVR, were prominent throughout the event. In his speech Chávez referred to the turnout as a rebuke to the major media organizations and polls suggesting some slippage in his popularity. “These are polls that count,” said the president.

Chávez told his followers that that the intellectuals don’t know history the way the people do. Although he acknowledged that January 23 uprising contributed to the flight of Pérez Jiménez, he went on challenge history as it has been written under *adeco* hegemony. He praised Medina as the greatest president of the century, decried the Oct. 18, 1945 coup that toppled the general. He characterized the *trienio* as a sectarian government that, along with the coup, paved the way for the return of dictatorship. He claimed the Bolivarian Constituent Assembly consulted the population in a way that the *trienio* one did not. He argued that the coup attempts of 1992 were justified and put down with considerable loss of life. By contrast, he said, Medina was introducing democracy but had surrendered rather than open fire on civilians and on young cadets supporting the coup. By contrast, the armed forces had been ordered by the leaders of the Punto Fijo regime to fire on the people to put down the *caracazo*.

Such competing claims and interpretations hardly generate consensus among Venezuelan historians, much less politicians. More significantly, the debate indicates how deeply divided Venezuelans are about the meaning of their own history, and how divided on what they want democracy to mean. Chávez draws upon Simón Rodríguez for a vision of democracy in more radical, Roussian terms, one that envisions a strong democratic state working actively to transform society to lay the basis for republican rule. The opposition offers a more Lockean vision of polyarchy, characterized by checks and balances and consistent with the liberal, Washington consensus (See Robinson, 1996).

There is little reason to believe that capitalist globalization holds much promise of being inclusive for most Venezuelans because social conditions offer minimal promise for investments that will generate employment. Wages are too high for labor intensive industries, but levels of education and skills are not adequate for capital intensive, high-tech industries. On a world scale capitalist globalization remains uneven, perhaps more so than ever before. Mounting rates of world poverty suggest globalized capitalism is marginalizing greater numbers than it is incorporating into its circuits. It is customary for opponents to blame Chávez for the exodus of 150,000 Venezuelans, but the underlying cause of this reversal is runs deeper in the international economy.

The power and appeal of the Chávez message resides in his ability to articulate the deep resentment felt by the people. Few Venezuelans are versed in the history of yellow liberalism, the Federalist Wars, or the writings of Zamora, Simón Rodríguez, and Bolívar, but much of state culture (monuments and the national anthem, for example) celebrates the historical myth associating Venezuelan national identity with a popular, egalitarian struggle for freedom against a perfidious oligarchy. In this conception of the nation, its “people” refers not to the bourgeois meaning of “people” as a civil society

composed of legal equals, sharing a common national identity, integrated into market society and modern culture. “People” refers to a majority of Venezuelans who live in that “other” society at the margins of civil society as it is known to the wealthy, the middle class, and parts of the working class. The project of Betancourt was to integrate poor Venezuelans into modern national culture, predominantly a Western, cosmopolitan, urban culture.

Modern and Subaltern Conceptions of Democracy

The model of political modernization bequeathed to political science by the French Revolution and Enlightenment, suggests that Latin America will only progress once its traditional, personalist culture is replaced by a civic culture populated with rational, educated citizens capable of competing in both the economic and political marketplace. Consistent with the principles of democracy as polyarchy, citizens are to articulate their interests through freely formed organizations in civic society. Secular modernists like Betancourt, Rómulo Gallegos, Luis Beltrán Figueroa, and others sought to tame *la barbarie* and, aided by oil rents, build a modern, Western democratic society, but the system they created never fully transcended the cultural and class divide between this liberal ideal and a population oriented not so much to traditional so much as “solidaristic” relations.

The tendency toward caudillism is not restricted to *el soberano*. In a context of institutional void and instability, middle class and business communities were in search of a candidate with a strong personality, one who could fill the void left by the collapse of the parties. In mid 1997, *Consultores 21* asked a cross section of the population what model of president they preferred – Fidel Castro, Alberto Fujimori, another figure, or nobody (See Table 1). Although Castro was most popular among the most marginalized sectors of the population, his 25 percent paled compared to the enthusiasm of the lower middle to upper class for Alberto Fujimori. More than accomplishments, it was Fujimori’s “strong personality” that most attracted the middle class.

Table 1 Type of President Favored by Different Social Strata

Modelo de Presidente que queremos						
	Total	Marginal	Pop. Baja	Pop. Media	Media	Media-Alta
Alberto Fujimori	43	10	32	53	49	50
Ninguno	18	27	23	14	15	27
Fidel Castro	16	25	17	13	16	4
Otros	18	19	19	16	18	15

Fuente: Percepción 21 Volumen 2, No. 2 Junio 1997, Pag.6

The issue in Venezuela today may not be caudillism versus democracy, but what kind of caudillism, representing whose interests, will prevail.

The Punto Fijo regime integrated Venezuelan across class and racial lines (less so across gender; see Friedman 2000) into populist system of reconciliation, but the result was not the modern, Western civil society envisioned by its founders. Moreno captured the nature of the system as follows:

The leadership is oriented to a modern model, but the popular base has its own manner of relating to one another. The two worlds co-exist in one party. The leadership has been sufficiently astute, perhaps because it is not as modern as it seems, in not forcing the people to enter into a rational model. Thus, severe conflicts are restricted to leadership circles but kept from dividing the party from its base. (1997: 25-26)

Moreno says that the national network of *adeco* party organizations consisted of local base committees connect by “family ties or by ties of godparentage, friendship, regional origins. They form a family tapestry.” Kinship relations were “human bridges” within the party network (1997: 25). More of AD’s “human bridges” were being marginalized from processes of social integration as the rents were siphoned from the economy overseas.

Chávez seems both to embrace and reject a portrait of him as a rogue statesman. Erudite and pragmatic, he eschews labels and repeatedly defines himself in terms of what he is *not*. This, of course, leaves open the question of what he really is. There is no *Plan of Barranquilla* (Betancourt’s political manifesto of 1931) nor *De Una a Otra Venezuela* (the best known of Arturo Uslar Pietri’s political writings) outlining a vision of the future. Chávez has yet to propose a coherent, alternative economic policy framework to neoliberalism, but if he did so he would undoubtedly be accused of being doctrinaire. One political solution is to portray himself as the opposite of his enemies. But how can he portray his opponents as powerless (“*los escualidos*”) yet hope to use them as a point of reference for organizing a movement? One solution would be to raise the level of nationalist rhetoric against the United States, but this has other costs that the president, as a political realist, seems to understand.

Those who think the supporters of Hugo Chávez will abandon him entirely may be overlooking the deep veins of popular resentment of oligarchy, but those who think the Venezuelan masses have issued the president a blank check are also mistaken. “If he doesn’t do well, we’ll replace him, the same as we put him in there,” says one of Father Moreno’s neighbors in the *barrio* (1998b: 5). For all of his popularity, Chávez found himself facing significant public resistance to two of his high-priority programs, education reform and creation of a new Bolivarian union federation. Demonstrations in favor of his proposals in these areas failed to approach the magnitude of those by groups opposed. The legacy of 40 years of *puntofijismo*, the first extended democratic experience in country’s history, is that today the Venezuelan people are less likely to accept any leadership, whether originating from government or opposition, blindly.

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