

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA-BERKELEY

SYMPOSIUM:

REINVENTING VENEZUELA: CULTURE, MEMORY AND POLITICS

(17-18 November, 2006)

**VENEZUELA IN THE MIRROR
(Heroes, Politics and Revolution)**

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What we are presently seeing – and living – in Venezuela is not simply another outlining of the political and social map; nor is it precisely the movement of certain political boundaries in connection with a dispute over new interests, or the drawing of a picturesque populist and revolutionary language, or new forms of social articulation accompanied by new political practices. **It deals with a profound change in the principles themselves for the outlining of this map.** It is not about adopting positions for or against the present regime, or supporting or rejecting the practices of the outlining, but about adopting new agreement interpretations formed in the heat of the great historical changes underway. What we are seeing – and living – at this time in Venezuela is a dynamic that is not very flowing, plural or decentralized. On the contrary, the process being lived is one in which excessive centralization in the leader, as an articulating factor, is the predominant feature.

The realities that are being debated are not very stable or consensual, and it does not appear that they are going to be anytime soon. **The most interesting problem is not how this complicated political-social situation can be**

solved but what all this ferment of relations, actions and passions means. Through which discursive mechanisms is the present state of affairs justified? And even more interesting, how is that excessive centralization in the leader to be turned into a process of radical transformation? Beginning with these words, which will serve as a guide for me, I would like to present certain considerations.

The process underway deals with building another place in politics by means of the ideologization of the State, without the technological mediation of communications – and their mass media – and the commonly called democratic freedom of expression. And this is not merely an instrumental problem of the State, of the mass media, of freedom of expression or of conflict between an official truth and another opposition truth. The process thickens, becomes dense and tends to become structural. Its practices and language refer today not only to the possibility or not of controlling the ideological apparatuses of the State (Althusser) but to building and controlling new manners of perception and language, new sensibilities that fertilize the social field and pretend to discard all that is known and practiced, including the abolition of history (Caballero, Carrera Damas et al.) and the construction of a single thought.

What the communicative scheme of the populist-militaristic rupture in process introduces in Venezuela is not so much an unusual amount of new practices, but a new way of relating the symbolic processes and the methods of production and distribution of goods, services, ideologies and concepts. We already know that all populist ruptures¹ do not anticipate anything concerning ideological content. Further on, we shall examine the ideology that accompanies the Venezuelan case.

I shall dedicate this paper to exploring and trying to explain some of these things. I shall discuss, through the study of discourse and political practices, the problem of language in historical rupture processes and trends such as the present one. It does not deal with finding a neutral simplicity of the political word, but of

¹ Laclau, E., *La razón populista*, Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005.

defining its meanings in the sometimes-meaningless game of social conflict. And to this end, it is imperative that I examine the power structure inherent in the process underway.

Let's put forward my argument: The source of the potential for political revolutionary creativity in Venezuela is intimately related to the duality of redeeming revolutionary heroism and the staging of a supposed drama of the catastrophe the permanence of capitalist practices, in their neo-liberal version, would imply. According to the discourse of power, the latter has generated a crisis of survival on the planet, a crisis that is said can be dismantled from the position of an oil producing and exporting country. **The heroic past and the oil present are, then, the basic support of the revolutionary power structure in Venezuela.**

I. THE STRUCTURE OF HEROIC POWER

Since 1999 and up until now, the name of Bolivar – a Bolivar who, we are told, rides every hundred years, and replicas of whose sword are distributed here and there (they were given even to an African dictator and to several others) - in the name of Bolivar, I repeat, what is desired is to submit the nation and establish a new authoritarianism, with a militaristic inclination, of course. The republic is destroyed; the institutions are uprooted so that all that remains is the power of the one exercising it. In spite of the very Kantian radical autonomy of reality, I am compelled, however, to see and to try to express clearly what I see.

We Venezuelans – with our political class at the head – for several decades now have persisted in destroying our democratic way of life, as though we were fatigued by the weight of a freedom we no longer wanted to be responsible for. We always expect, especially since the events in 1992, to be able to invoke magic formulas, we are inclined to create dreams about the virtues of militarism, even to conjure a power that will free us from the hard task of building a more just society

in freedom. This is a basic fact of reality, of our reality. And this can be said without great difficulty.

Now then, how is this basic fact to be linked with the permanence of the heroic-political question? What I wish to discuss in relation to this is that **after the dispute for independence, the social sectors involved in it, mainly the criollos, nourished more on monarchism as a social practice than on republicanism itself.** And this would remain as an atavism engraved on the political conscience and on the culture of the Venezuelans. When we became independent, in spite of the transfer of the liberal republican legal-political system, monarchic acceptance was also transferred to the civil society, reinforced by the militaristic habits of command-obedience and personified in the idea of the strong man. I shall present this argument based on the following points:

- HISTORICAL DISCOURSE AND POWER: Since its birth as a republic, Venezuela has always been an enormous hero factory. And this in the sense not of interpreting history as a chronological accumulation of narratives, but as a discourse that has the power to produce a significant transformation of the ideas and attitudes of the society as a fundamental foundation for the construction of a future that is always incomplete. Perhaps in a hasty and schematic manner it can be affirmed that historical discourse is something more than telling the past of societies – individuals, groups, institutions or social classes – anecdotally or interpretatively. Its plot has always been related to the rituals of power. Hence, discourse pertaining to historical matters is another of the mechanisms that in reality produces justification for and reinforcement of the existing powers. This relationship is very complicated and, consequently, fascinating. **Historical discourse needs power to increase its influence on society, but, at the same time, power requires the word of history to legitimate its actions and intensify its splendor.** This word is filled with heroic scenes, epic memory, cult to warrior heroes, that is, military heroes and not civilians.

The precocious and decisive role of Venezuela in independence from Spain instilled in the Venezuelans a heroism of the type WE SHALL BE BECAUSE WE HAVE BEEN; BECAUSE WE ARE THE HEIRS OF BOLIVAR AND HIS HEROIC ACTS, OUR PLACE IN HISTORY IS ASSURED... The underlying ethic of this discourse has had consequences of very great importance.

- THE MONARCHIC NATURE OF THE VENEZUELAN SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS: The patriotic and national histories institutionalized by official historiography have persisted in obscuring the fact that, when the political crisis started that led to the struggle for independence, Venezuelan society was a **colonial monarchic society**: that is, a society that came into being and was shaped in the bosom of absolute monarchy.

This characteristic would mark, in a veiled manner, the coming about of this society in its republican stage. In a tenacious and fervently monarchic social structure, loyalty to a sole authority, to a strong man, has been very eloquent. The exclamation, the enunciation: *“Long live the king, down with bad government”* marked the scope of the protests and the acts of rebellion. In the Republic, the subject-citizens always exempted the caudillo-president from responsibility, assuming him to be misinformed or not informed of the effects of bad government.

Under the two systems of structure of heroic power: **the sociopolitical and the symbolic discursive**, a persistent monarchic conscience in its symbiotic association with a certain fanaticism toward the strong man can be traced. At the beginning of the 20th century, this would be called the **NECESSARY GENDARME, NOWADAYS PERSONIFIED IN THE FIGURE OF THE REDEEMER REVOLUTIONARY** and – up to a certain point – **REVENGER OF A LONG PROCESS OF SOCIAL INJUSTICES**. Such an attitude is conditioned by the necessary continuity with respect to the colonial order. It was not possible to demolish the foundations of this in order to sow – like magic – a republican liberal sociopolitical order. **Hence, the discursive logic of continuity and rupture is**

the basic bastion for making society believe that changes are occurring without their actually taking place. Consequently, a structure arose where there was more continuity than rupture. Pay attention to these words of Bolivar in the so-called Carupano Manifesto of September 7, 1814, in which he made the following responsible for the loss of the Republic: **"...the opinion of fanatic beings whose depravation of spirit makes them love chains as much as social bonds"**. Chains alluded to a certain tendency more toward monarchism than the establishment of a republican and liberal sociopolitical structure. But there is more. Bolivar was always concerned with condemning the permanence of the same individual in power, which is a fundamental trait of the monarchic system, of the kings enthroned by divine right. This continuation of authority in one person would plot with repeated elections; in his own words before the Angostura Congress on February 15, 1819: **"...nothing is so dangerous as to let the same citizen remain in power a long time. The people become accustomed to obeying him, whence usurpation and tyranny originate"**. So, the Monarchy's political defeat did not mean the eradication of its practices from society's social consciousness.

- REPUBLICAN MILITARY CAUDILLISMO: In general, caudillismo has been incorrectly interpreted as a sociopolitical phenomenon, because the monarchic germ from which it sprouts has not been seen or it has not been wanted that it be seen. When politico-military caudillismo arose as of 1830, it was justified by the restoration of a central power, such as in a monarchy, with more colonial than liberal aftertastes. Moreover, this politico-military caudillismo transferred to the republic a certain colonial political mentality: **the monarchic conception of the exercise of public power, reinforced by the habits created by the barracks relationship of command-obedience, was established, a legacy that still has not dissipated in spite of constant exaltation of republican equalitarianism.**

Thus, the institutional organization of the Executive Power in Venezuela, from its origins in the Grand Colombia, reflects the monarchic conception of government upon making the President, at the same time, the starting point and the confluence for all levels of power. In the midst of the liberal autocratic republic, the absolute exercise of power remained in the hands of the caudillo-presidents (or president-monarchs, if you will), who governed all the areas of the State. They were assumed to have the power to change things and protect the mistreated subjects. If we examine the language and the constitutional practices of Venezuelan liberalism, we find that, through the caudillo-presidents, it was closer to monarchy – whether absolute or constitutional – than to reformist and then democratic liberalism.

- BOLIVARIANISM AS LANGUAGE: To legitimate all the internal power structure, the manipulation of the maximum hero was resorted to through the establishment of a multiple identity of the type: **BOLIVAR, FATHER OF THE COUNTRY; BOLIVAR, LIBERATOR; BOLIVAR, FOUNDER OF THE NATION**. The use of the figure of Simon Bolivar has been commonplace in Venezuelan culture and politics at several times: **1** – It began in 1830 when it was necessary to look for someone guilty for the great deception brought about by independence; Jose Antonio Paez and his followers made Bolivar responsible through a tacit mechanism that consisted in saying “it wasn’t us”. **2** – Later, however, Antonio Guzman Blanco (between 1870 and 1888) took Bolivar to the status of a totem of liberalism. His autocracy was a continuation of Bolivarian autocracy. **3** – In the 20th century, under the government of Gomez (1908-1935), his followers made Bolivar the inspirer of dictatorial liberalism. It could even be said that, availing himself of certain chronological coincidences, Gomez passed himself off as the first incarnation of Bolivar. **4** – Lopez Contreras (1936-1945) attempted to make Venezuela a Bolivarian republic without changing its name and made the memory of Bolivar the inspiration and guide for neo-Gomezism. **5** – From 1945 on, and then as of 1958, the idea of Bolivar as a precursor of social justice, democracy and

agrarian reform was still used. To this circumstance is owed what the political parties of the democratic era in Venezuela did. Finally, **6** – In the present Republica Bolivariana de Venezuela, Bolivar has been converted into the inspirer of militarism-Bolivarianism. Likewise, all the effort necessary for the second incarnation of Bolivar in Hugo Chavez is also being fostered. In this respect, it is worthwhile quoting this phrase of Chavez himself:

“Then, a few years after Sucre fell in Berruecos. ‘Alas, bullet wound!’ and Bolivar in Santa Marta: ‘I have plowed in the sea’. But it does not matter because they did something great. They completed the first stage of the journey. Then the cold came, everything was frozen, and then the resurrection and here we are, but in the same long battle”.

(Nuevo Mapa Estratégico, verse 124, Caracas, November 2004).

With the rhetorical help of ex-communists and ex-military coup d'étatists, the autocratic exercise of power has been assigned the mission of carrying out a kind of Simon Bolivar socialist program. The effort to refine Bolivarian ideology includes the attempt to incorporate two ingredients into this matrix: socialism and populism. In the present electoral campaign, the followers of the president-candidate for reelection use slogans such as: **YESTERDAY INDEPENDENCE, TODAY SOCIALISM**, a phrase that is tinted with a certain apocalyptic tone: **WE CANNOT CHOOSE BETWEEN WINNING AND DYING, WE MUST WIN!** But, moreover, we should remember that to make clear the umbilical cord that joins the revolutionaries of today with the heroes of the past, the revolutionary commanders have made themselves called **HEIRS OF THE LIBERATOR ARMY**.

This leads me to believe unfailingly that Bolivar is no longer a historical figure, but a language for communicating what the historian German Carrera Damas has called the “second religion of the Venezuelans”. No ruler has resisted the temptation of using that language, for two reasons: 1 – It constitutes the

original source of legitimization of a power structure with monarchical aspects, and 2 - This language is the foundation of the hero factory that, looking back on the past, seeks to submit society by looking toward the future and following a Messianic and authoritarian logic.

Now in the 21st century, it appears to me that politics is a matter of citizens – with increased rights and duties – and not of heroes or heroism. Bolivar will never be more honored than in the Olympus where he rests. Another thing is the morbidity of having photographs taken with his figure, appearing before paintings of him and using historical memory as an object for ideological consumption. However, this is the principal mechanism for the constitution of the national-popular collective identity through heroic symbology in connection with Bolivarianism.

From this historical argument, proof can be inferred of the effectiveness of the mechanisms for manipulating public opinion found both in certain atavisms of the past and in more concrete circumstances at present. This present smells and tastes like oil. I shall now refer to this

II. IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS OIL

Reinforcing the symbolic and the material aspects of the heroic structure of power was made possible by oil. If the Independence from Spain had created the conditions that would make the creation of the Venezuelan nation possible, its consolidation would require that a long distance be traveled. This distance would be marked rather by an accident of Mother Nature: **the appearance, in a world thirsty for sources of energy, of sudden and great oil wealth.** However, the accident, the *"geological accident"* as it was called, would soon stop being such and turn into something substantial.

Something else would be derived from the black mineral: **putting the new wealth in harmony with national interests.** And this would be a high priority

of all the governments from Juan Vicente Gomez up until the present. This would generate optimum conditions for articulating the country with the world capitalist system and consequently, modernizing its economy and its production system. The collective signs would go from agriculture to oil. Upon these signs being moved, social representations would also be moved and, together with them, language. The adoption of new terms in a language, above all if they are official, and are gestated by and arise from power, foretells new forms of life.

The exploitation of oil, and the consequent wealth and culture, introduced the most significant changes seen in the history of Venezuela; fast institutional, social and mental processes were let loose in the country. **The concentration of the national wealth in the hands of the State generated its preeminence over political and social matters. Ownership of the resources generated by oil was transformed into a privileged force for advancing the life of the country. Rapid social mobility and urbanization took place, as well as certain ethical attitudes with respect to work, the labor market and the generation of wealth. Thus, this position of the State as a privileged force came to consolidate the heroic structure of power.**

- POLITICS THAT EXCEED THE ECONOMIC-SOCIAL ASPECT

Along with the exploitation of oil, something began to gestate, now not so much in the entrails of the Venezuelan soil as in its collective structures. Oil -- together with the situation it entails--would serve as the founder of a new social rationality, the first sparks of which barely began to appear. What idea of the imaginary, what idea of myths, of legends, of changes, of utopias did the transformation of Venezuela into an oil country bring with it? How would oil contribute to that unreachable national unity? **The imaginary aspect of oil would consequently act as an organizing plan whose content would change, but with some of its contours remaining. Modernity and democracy would be some of the most noticeable signs that would**

characterize the oil future of Venezuela. However, *“oil modernity became the great excuse for avoiding the examination of the defects of the past and, hence, becoming aware of the vices that, shielded by the national aspect, were thereby being strengthened”²*. Such a process was not, however, free from risks: **improvisation, demagogy, whims of the rulers, enjoying a feast that was not in accordance with the national productive capacity, centralization of the State.**

These considerations do not deal thoroughly with the problem of the incorporation of oil into national life. One must go to the bottom of the question, and that is in the nature of the State.

THE RENTIST AND MONARCHIC STATE

To begin with, it could be said that the State and society, according to the logic of modernity, determine each other precisely. And, moreover, they determine each other to a degree of reciprocal need never before seen. This is a beginning reality that neither political science nor any analysis of the State can ignore.

Consequently, the problem is related to the type of preeminence existing between the State and society, or between the State and politics, or, in more flexible terms, the preeminence that the State has over the different areas of social life. Tracing this problem implies following the footprints of practical history, which should not be understood as a hierarchy of another type being postulated. My arguments go rather in other directions. One of them can be expressed as follows: given the similarity of the positions of politics and economy, their reciprocal need, their co-dependence, a certain bidirectionality between the State and politics can be determined, between the State and social matters that depend on specific historical situations, but with the State always appearing as a determining force.

² This acute observation comes from a lucid essay on the topic of the advent of oil, its role in the modernization of the society, and the consequent “silence of the Venezuelan narrative” in the face of the phenomenon. Campos, Miguel Angel, *Las novedades del petróleo*, Caracas: Fundarte, 1994, p. 18.

PAST OF THE VENEZUELAN STATE

1. The emergence of the rentist and autonomous State, 20th century

In comparison with the material poverty lived by the Venezuelan State during the 19th century, the 20th century would be different. By 1920, this situation would take a dramatic turn. With the advent of the oil industry, where the ownership of the material resource belonged to the State, the economic autonomy of the State began to be woven. By 1938, less than two decades later, it could be said that, as Arturo Uslar Pietri stated energetically in 1938, *"Today, the Venezuelan State ... is the center of all our national economy... The fact is that the State intervenes in and is intervening in our economic life, because our economic life is nothing other than the reflection of the State"*. And he added something that would turn out to be the center of our national drama in coming years: *"The wealth of the State and all our economy depend at present, to a formidable degree, on oil"*³.

As could be expected, this economic autonomy of the State would soon have its political difficulties: it would make populist ruptures possible. In 1939, Betancourt, perhaps being the first and at the time of outlining his inventory of the

³ Uslar Pietri, A., "Palabras pronunciadas en la instalación de la Escuela Libre de Ciencias Económicas y Sociales", Universidad Central de Venezuela, October 1938, in *Sumario de Economía Venezolana para alivio de estudiantes*, Caracas: Fundación Eugenio Mendoza, 1958, p. 268.

Venezuelan political process and giving a handhold to his political organization at the time: *The National Democratic Party* ("illegal"), presented an extensive analysis of the Venezuelan economic-social reality. In it thought concerning the State and, in particular, the role that it would fulfill within the process led by the so-called

"national democratic forces", could not be left out. Betancourt said very clearly, *"This analysis of the role played by the State in our national life is not merely of academic interest. From it, the idea can be necessarily deduced that the State is more qualified in Venezuela than in other countries on the American continent to exercise a determining influence on the life of the Nation, even before a profound transformation of a democratic nature takes place in its structure"*⁴.

However, as the result of a singular historical process, of a somewhat fortuitous nature, the stimulus for the productive forces of the State is not found in the origin of this power represented as financial autonomy of the State, but the capacity as owner of the subsoil where the natural resources are found. That wretched State of the 19th century was being changed, to the sound of oil drills, into an opulent economic agent. *"Oil is not – Uslar would say with a tragic tone – a crop or a rent, but the continuous consumption of capital deposited by nature in the subsoil ... That term oil wealth, off of which we are living, is the most tragic question arising on the panorama of our economic and social future"* (ibid., p. 268).

The political consequences were more interesting than the ethical influences to which such an economic and social situation could lead, that is, the rentist situation. Betancourt emphasized this: *"The Venezuelan State, because of its special economic potential, has the capacity, like few in Latin America to adopt polemic positions in dealing with social sectors of which it is the political expression, if the popular forces act resolutely and cautiously at the same time"* (ibid., p. 259).

⁴ Betancourt, R., "Tesis política y programa del Partido Democrático Nacional ("PDN ilegal, 1939)" in Suárez, N., (compilation, introduction and indexes), *Programas políticos venezolanos de la primera mitad del siglo XX*, Caracas: Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, 1977, book I, p. 258.

In our revolutionary times, apart from the previous oil connotations still in effect, oil is being used in two ways: internally, as a factor for the articulation of the popular sectors with the oil wealth and as support by these sectors of the political process; externally, it is being used as a weapon of coercion and

blackmail. Listen to these words pronounced recently by a General who is a member of one Office of the Presidency of the Republic:

“Oil is a weapon and it must be used both for cooperation and for resistance. It is a matter of blackmailing with oil in order to attain the internal objectives of this process. Our strategy is not military confrontation. Blackmail will be used against those who oppose us or attack us.”³

2. The nature of the rentist State

The nature of the rentist State is double. In the origin of oil rent: All is defined as the correlation of forces with international capital. There has always been a rentist aspiration on the part of the owner State to receive a greater part of the wealth generated by the oil industry. In the destiny of oil rent: The correlation is between the distributing State and the capacity of the different social sectors to demand a larger participation in the consumption of oil rent.

3. The paradoxes of the oil situation

However, this process is not as speedy as it might seem. Its path is filled with paradoxes that nurture the Venezuelan national drama. We can synthesize the greatest of these as follows: **RICH STATE, POOR SOCIETY.**

In relation to this, there are many conclusions that have sought to neutralize this drama since 1936 through a proposal concerning the need to **SOW THE OIL**, thereby giving a productive sense to an economic activity that is basically rentist.

The position of Betancourt, in the first three-year period of democracy and then in 1958, was more realistic: **IMPOVERISH THE STATE TO ENRICH SOCIETY.**

In 1956, Caldera would propose: **DOMINATE OIL.**

³ Words of General Alberto Muller Rojas at a symposium on national security on October 26, 2006, *El Nacional*, Caracas, October 27, 2006, p. A-4.

In order to demonstrate that there has always been continuity concerning this subject between democratic and dictatorial governments, between civilians and the military, we can point out the position of Perez Jimenez in the same year of 1956, which was: **HARVEST THE OIL.**

In 1958, Uslar Pietri would add a metaphor of great significance in light of what is being lived nowadays in Venezuela: **FREE OURSELVES FROM THE TYRANNY OF OIL.** But he went even further. He predicted the great danger that the economic power of the State represented for society, alerting in these terms: **“IF IT CONTINUES TO GROW UNLIMITEDLY, VENEZUELA WILL BECOME A COUNTRY NO LONGER OF DEPENDENTS ON OIL, BUT OF DEPENDENTS ON THE STATE, AND THAT MONSTROUS CAPITALISM OF THE STATE WILL BECOME FATALLY CONVERTED INTO (...) A TERRIBLE MACHINE FOR TYRANNIZING”⁴.**

In our euphoric and revolutionary present, the paradox RICH STATE, POOR SOCIETY seems not to matter much to the government since the situation is over-determined with the rhetoric that **now the oil belongs to everybody, and consequently, the State and its wealth belong to everybody.** Naturally, in a government that defines itself as a government of the poor, a government of everybody, this is not worthwhile paying attention to. The truth is that Venezuelan oil wealth is in the hands of the State and not of the nation, with the former distributing it according to the dominant ideology and development model. This is always unequal and can be seen if we evaluate the contents of the distribution of the oil rent and not simply the manner of discourse. One could even ask oneself if what happened in 1976 was the nationalization or the ‘statization’ of the oil industry. In any event, the Bolivarian discourse revolves around an action very much in the present: THE SOWING OF THE OIL that seeks to go far beyond the standard 1936 slogan of SOW THE OIL. Something that does appear to be unprecedented in the present populist rupture is what could be called **THE**

⁴ Uslar Pietri, A., “Venezuela, un país en transformación”, February 25, 1958. See *Materiales para la transformación de Venezuela*, Caracas Ediciones Orinoco, 1959, p. 84.

INTERNATIONAL SOWING OF VENEZUELAN OIL RENT. It is estimated that up until now, the Bolivarian government has disbursed some 23 billion dollars through donations, investments, loans or social programs to a list of countries headed by Argentina and Cuba, and where even the United States of America also appears as a recipient of some of the cheap oil social programs for certain low-income areas.

4. The statist-militaristic road to totalitarianism

This oil situation of the society consequently brought about a new logic for action and new processes, as well as new political and social actors. The abundant income that enters the coffers of the State, as already said – and it should be repeated — has the nature of a rent that it takes in from the world market in its condition as an owner. Hence, its material mainstay has no relationship to national economic performance, which allows it a degree of independence with respect to society that has no significant comparison.

Nevertheless, something more should be added to the particular economic circumstances of Venezuela: **When oil came on the scene, the social development of the State was very weak.** This fertilized the ground for a popular national discourse. Under such conditions, the emergence of oil was going to allow those controlling the State to have a very privileged position, just as Betancourt had foreseen before he came to power. Hence, the political power that is consubstantial with the state, plus the novelty of an autonomous economic power will be the main sign of this privileged structure: **it is not only concerns the autonomy of the State with respect to society, but also the subordination of society.** The State can assume the role of the great dispenser of material resources, and in effect, it has done so, is doing so and will continue to do so. In this respect, it distributes rather than redistributes, it grants and allots without any counterpart other than political clientelism criteria. This assures it a preeminence that rests not solely on political power or on brute force, or, much less, on the hegemony of open violence.

This preeminence given by the economic autonomy of the State moreover impedes, in a decisive manner, the existence of citizens because of the fact that the material life of the State does not rest on their shoulders. This logic requires the existence of mere clients who receive to the same extent that they support power. What a condition of servitude and domination that has come about in our times in this revolutionary paroxysm, the patent anachronism of which it is difficult to hide!

One could add a new paradox to the Venezuelan historical process: **in a context of crisis of the modernity project and its main actors, the State among them, first, would the present regime be able to attain, from the State, the totalitarian control of society and then the identity State and society? The moment of rupture, of putting identity-difference on the scene, which it will be attempted to do if the Bolivarian government wins the coming elections in December.** To attain such an end, no other way can be surmised, at the time being, that is not coercion and repressive violence, exclusion, and the route of total confrontation, both institutional and political, as a policy of those who control the State and seek to control the rest of the society in order to consolidate an autocratic and totalitarian regime. **This would be the moment of popular and militaristic rupture toward totalitarianism.** It is from this perspective that I have considered it necessary to think about the present situation in Venezuela.

The purely state channeling of social demands is being exalted by: **1** – the militarization of the State apparatus; **2** – Constant mobilization of the sectors that support the government; **3** – The incentive of a policy of permanent antagonism between the popular sectors and the rest of the social sectors, including the middle sectors, and the construction of a so-called civil-military power block, with the clear hegemony of the military over the civilian population; **4** – The ideologization of the political debate, which has passed from the discussion of a **participatory and protagonist democracy**, as the Bolivarian project was called between 1999 and 2004, to **socialism of the 21st century**.

5. Ideological over-determination

Hence, a specter is haunting the country: the specter of socialism of the 21st century. Its figure remains conveniently diffuse. No matter how hard we try today to identify that spectral silhouette, it is difficult because there is something in it that the public conscience demands: **the country wants to recognize itself again, that is, it wants to unite what it is with what it wants to be**. All this is related to the massive ideologization of the political process, in dimensions unheard of in our recent collective experience⁵.

The holding of the presidential elections in December 2006, on the one hand; international circumstances, on the other; and finally, the dynamic characteristic of the exercise of government and the aggrandizement that it has brought along with it, configure the conditions for this discursive explosion, which makes obvious what we could call **the *encyclopedia* of militaristic populism**: the set of doctrinal coordinates, their ideological use (and abuse), and the engraving of all this on the political project of Chavez.

The seven years of the Bolivarian government have witnessed different political and discursive configurations. Several separate stages or moments would appear as the result of a refined analysis. The first positions of the government branch off into economic heterodoxy seeking to modernize public administration and the characteristics of a certain authoritarian populism with a hegemonic inclination, in an atmosphere in which the constitutional changes basically left the liberal structure of the State intact. However, they function symbolically and politically to demarcate a moment of rupture, a foundational moment that will distinguish radically the past from the present, thereby fulfilling the precondition of all revolutions. Such would be the bridge with what began to happen as of the year 2003, when a fundamental ideological threshold was crossed and the

⁵ Capriles, Colette, *Teología del populismo*, unpublished; submitted to the *Revista Venezolana de Ciencia Política*, No 29, Mérida, 2006, Universidad de Los Andes.

conceptual ambiguity of the discourse was reduced, resorting increasingly to the revolutionary language of the traditional left. Only at the beginning of 2005 was the expression “**socialism of the 21st century**” officialized, with which it was sought to resume this change of direction. What should be pointed out is that as of a certain time that coincided with the political crises of 2002, the government understands the exercise of power as a struggle taking place fundamentally on the ideological level. Thus, we came under the dominion of pure ideology, which is perhaps the realm of the definitive death of politics.

The present moment in the Venezuelan political process can be characterized as that of ideological consolidation and this means, effectively, the start of a struggle for the meaning of certain terms, of fighting for the “**right to define**”. It also implies the construction of an ideological geography with a series of coordinates and specific references with the capacity to organize the heterogeneous popular militaristic universe in Venezuela, which has been dispersed up until now. A common language must be fabricated precisely to establish a unitary spirit, the unity of thought and the unity of action.

I have said “must be fabricated” because it is precisely a task that is barely beginning. There is no pre-design in this area, a deliberate plan that is just now being revealed. I believe that here what the historian Quentin Skinner calls the “**mythology of coherence**” holds true: in spite of the ambiguity of President Chavez himself in this respect. However, this ideological over-determination is recent and it is linked with the vicissitudes of the experience of the government, with the circumstances of the maturing of this experience. Perhaps its birth certificate is the famous *Nuevo mapa estratégico (New Strategic Map)* of November 2004, that could also be called (*The Gospel according to Marta Harnecker*) (Capriles, 2006)⁶ and which, without doubt, is the public document that has, up until now, best summarized the political program of the regime.

² Marta Harnecker, a well-known Chilean-Cuban writer, served as the reporter for the public version of the document *Nuevo Mapa Estratégico*, that gathers the participations of President Chavez in the deliberations of the most prominent members of the government and the Movimiento Quinta

One of the most notable features, if not the most obvious, of the government of Chavez has been **the progressive dissolution of the distinction between the different spheres in public life and, together with it, also the dissolution between public and private, or between institutional and personal, by means of the creation of an almost infinite series of enunciation spaces.** The revolution is essentially “mediatic” and showy⁴. Anyone wishing to reconstruct the purposes, the plans or the intentions of the government must resort to multiple sources: **from the messages to the nation, the innumerable and ill-timed presidential speeches, his appearances before the National Assembly, or the Official Gazette, and including informal statements to the press, and passing through the great weekly tribunal that the television program *Hello, President* is.** Thereby, one could expect to find diversity of rhetorical strategies and a corresponding hierarchy of discursive content. However, on the contrary, it will be found that in spite of the fact that there is only one voice occupying all those spaces, and that this sole presence is the guarantee of the communicative validity of those spaces, independent from the diversity of contexts or the importance or political relevance of what is being communicated. **Hence, the excessive centralization in the leader that we referred to previously.**

As we have already demonstrated, Bolivarianism is evidently the ideological nucleus of Venezuelan militaristic populism. Its central notion is the idea of a

República MVR (Fifth Republic Movement) that took place in Caracas on November 12 and 13, 2004.

⁴ According to Antonio Pasquali, by August 2005, the government of Chavez had constructed a communications emporium at his exclusive service: << at present, the regime controls: 1) four national and international television stations that are ideologically synchronized: VTV, ViveTV, ANTV and Telesur (with its 45 repeaters, VTV presently has the greatest coverage), backed since 2002 by 25 para-public community TV stations); 2) a constantly growing number of radio stations (RNV alone now has 11 AM repeaters and 32 FM) that are about to completely occupy half the national radio dial, backed since 2001 by 146 para-public community/alternative radio stations; 3) a multitude of printed media, the most important of which are *Vea* and *A Plena Voz*, plus 72 para-public community newspapers; 4) a great number of official and para-public web sites, of which 24 are government and 66 “Bolivarian alternative”, the latter occasionally repeated by 62 Latin American and at least 20 international sites >> (Antonio Pasquali : « Las comunicaciones del régimen », *El Nacional*, in the center of the events 08- 28-2005, p. A/9.

revolution that restores the hero and projects him toward the future; it is the basic fabric on which other ideological influences have been and are being embroidered and that now it is sought to combine in the expression "Socialism of the 21st Century".

III. THE WORLD THAT IS BEING IMPOSED UPON US

Let us ask ourselves, then, about the dynamic for the incorporation of socialism into the militaristic-Bolivarian body. The first thing to be observed is that THE PROPOSAL OF SOCIALISM OF THE 21ST CENTURY has not resulted from a collective debate, but from an individual decision based on the duet Hugo Chavez-Fidel Castro. There were probably some basic decisions, but these were minor. The evidence of the purely individual channeling of this decision is the lack of a deep analysis of the practices of popular participation, the dispersion of the discussion about ideology and the party and, fundamentally, the excessive personalization of the political process. **Perhaps this excessive centralization in the leader is the result of the monarchic atavism of Venezuelan society that we referred to before.**

This personalistic feature has its correlation in the proposal of the SOLE PARTY, perhaps one of the few electoral offerings that the president-candidate for reelection has made during his electoral campaign and which was rejected by members of his own political party in a recent text of an ex-high official of the government:

"To begin with, we consider that it is an error to speak of a "sole party"; that is a conception that is typical of the totalitarian notion of society and organization. In the best of cases, it is the beginning of a dictatorship of the party as absolute guarantor of the socialist political order. "Supporter unification" of the parties and movements that support the Bolivarian revolution and that are in agreement with this line could be authentically spoken of"⁷.

⁷ Denis, R., *Consideraciones sobre el partido único*, Caracas, October 3, 2006; in aporrea.org

In view of these circumstances, I cannot but doubt seriously about the democratic intentions of the Bolivarian government and the ambiguity surrounding its conception of socialism. While it is being said, with rhetorical turns of phrase, that Venezuela now belongs to everybody, what is actually being seen is a policy of exclusion, not only of certain sectors of the oligarchy (without counting the banking system, for example) but also of intermediate and popular sectors. And this exclusion is of a double nature: for ideological and political reasons.

From the militaristic position, history is obligated to say that the Bolivarian revolution is of socialist origin, and Bolívar himself acquires that adjective. The same official mentioned before reminds his companions in the struggle of what he calls the "original sin of Chavezism":

"Neither Chavezism nor the 'Bolivarian revolution' are political phenomena born in a place on the left. They were born in street rebellion, in the insurrections of the barracks and not as the result of a rational decision of a vanguard or a political block of the left that pushes a revolutionary process toward victory"⁸.

In this situation, the reasons for the irruption of socialism are more of a pragmatic order. **In the first place**, it allows the establishment of a crucial connection with the political, economic and strategic alliance with the Cuban regime and it feeds on it. **Second**, it operates as an international platform that connects the events in Venezuela with a supranational logic and results in a window of opportunity for the consolidation of the political process internally and abroad. **Third**, it responds to dynamics that are typical of the movements that form the varied Bolivarian activist base, among which the orthodoxy of the left, having come out of its lethargy as of 1992, has conserved certain preeminence in spite of the tensions that it caused during the first years of the government.

However, besides these tensions that, in practice, press Chavez to incorporate the language of socialism into his political project, it is evident, from

⁸ Denis, R., *Movimientos sociales, gobierno y burocracia en el proceso bolivariano. La revolución desde la izquierda*, Caracas, May 29, 2006; in aporrea.org

the need itself to unify the power in which Chavez places all the political effectiveness of the State, that the conceptual framework of socialism comes to support very well the weight of the moment of consolidation that the government considers is occurring. The point on which the problem of the incorporation of socialism into the Bolivarian ideology has been centered is, evidently, that of the structure of property. It is maintained that private property will be respected, but coexisting with a still unspecified model of collective property in which the owners and the government are fused, of course, under the control of the State.

At the time being, the model seems to contemplate three types of property: purely state (State companies), collective property and private property. The first is the only type that is known with certainty, because the idea of collective property up until now does not have a defined legal correlation and furthermore, private ownership of the means of production continues to be under suspicion.

In reality, there is no abundance of positive definitions of what Bolivarian socialism of the 21st century would be. Its language always contains negative definitions, leaving a wide margin for maneuvering for what, in psychological terms, we would call projection. It is always about being anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-neoliberal, which is not the same, evidently, as is revealed within the internal factions of the international radical left, where discussions are taking place about the priorities of the struggle in the international political context that determine clear distinctions between these concepts (Harnecker, 2005). Domestically, Bolivarian militarism is content with a very heavy polarization that draws the line between good and evil, the first being called socialism and the second capitalism. The frontier between both is extremely rigid.

IV. THE IMAGINARY OF BOLIVARIAN PETRO-POPULISM

I end by leaving the problem set forth in the following manner: In the present political process that could be **CHARACTERIZED AS BOLIVARIAN**

PETRO-POPULISM, there is a lack of synchronization between the symbolic record and the record of facts. **In the first**, the present regime handles itself with adequate efficiency. This symbolic record is successful in the area of happy expressions, of accurate attacks, opportune slogans, references to heroes, heroic attitudes, nationalistic expressions, mistrust concerning international and globalized attitudes, efficiency in the handling and use of language. **This regime has tested a new language and political style in Venezuela.** Society is already beginning to build its pattern of opinion, its common places: **Chavez the redeemer, he knows it all, he is a great communicator and teacher, irreverent and astute in the art of insulting, radical and Jacobin.** Besides, he governs using the word and has turned his language into a great builder of realities. The State, apart from being the distributor of oil wealth, has become a great factory of words, distributor of expressions and ideologies.

He talks, he lies and he runs circles around people with golden words. He says he is prepared to sacrifice everything for the unredeemed people; *"only God is above the people"*, he says; *"I am a piece of straw in the strong winds of the revolution"*, he insists. These are the terms that have become familiar, but at the same time, they reveal a Messianic tendency, a depository of the popular will that has been constructing its own totalitarian logic, at times ill fated and destructive. **Features that are similar more to the first totalitarian regime of the modern type, that of Napoleon III, established in France in 1851 and described by Karl Marx himself "as a regime elevated above the classes"⁹, than 20th century totalitarianism.** To understand a regime as verbal as this one implies seeing what it does (or rather, what it does not do) and forgetting what it says. Chavez is trapped in his own words and promises; he is imprisoned by a discourse about his legitimacy that, in the final analysis, "absolutizes" his power as a modern monarch: socialist and Bolivarian, populist and military, capitalist and oil dealer.

⁹ Marx, K., "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" (1852), in *The Portable Karl Marx* (edited by Eugene Kamenka), Penguin Books, New York-London, 1983, pp. 287-323.

However, **in the record of facts** things are different for the Bolivarian revolution. In spite of the imminent announcements, the building of a bridge between the grandiose-symbolic and the concrete-real has not been attained. Here, several things could be pointed out: **1** – Perhaps the project that it sought to impose is not accepted by the majorities, which poses the paradox: **POPULAR LEADER, UNPOPULAR MODEL** and to which is added the lack of an economic policy beyond oil rentism. **2-** The U.S. capitalist system is criticized and satanized, but the U.S. is its main business partner. **3-** The language of power projects only fragments that it institutionalizes through ideal structures in order to weave a supposed socialist ideology of the 21st century. According to the facts, the Bolivarian social and economic policy has been orientated toward a greater dependence on world oil conditions. What is behind each economic or social movement is that legitimizing phrase since 1945: **“the government has money”**.

The feeling of national identity having deteriorated before 1998, the discourse and the symbols of the Bolivarian regime – besides the manner in which the leader sees and does things – have been able to appeal to the marginal and excluded majorities. With the symbols, the words and the official acts, they feel represented, recognize their identity and thus, rebuild a feeling of **us**. But this is not enough; the attitudes assumed in the last two years were not able to reach **the deepest structures of the popular**.

The battle is symbolic. There is use and abuse of history in the current political confrontation. Beyond the rhetorical effect, the great Bolivarian accomplishment has been to once again place the people and problems that the old political leadership had been forgetting in the center of the events. In this, the Bolivarian and militaristic populist rupture is more similar to that carried out by the civilian populist revolutionaries of October 1945 than to the one occurring in 1958, which was inspired by its same offshoots: AD and COPEI parties.

Likewise, promoting a logic of confrontation with those who do not support the process, avoiding the recognition of the “other” also as an active force,

Bolivarian petro-populism has turned social hatred and political violence into its greatest political capital. From power, terrorism is practiced in the exercise itself of not only political confrontation, but also what is unprecedented: **in the exercise of the public word that is single, necessary and incontestable.**

By only dramatizing the impersonal and abstract forces that govern the collective imagination, history cannot be controlled, and much less society. A histrionic love of the people does not authorize the thinking that an entire country can be redeemed by submitting it to the tyranny of the power of the State. This has been the great lesson, not very well assimilated and even less well digested by the populist ruptures. But it has especially been the weak point of what we are seeing today: loud, angry and violent populism, where an excess of “heroization” would seem to wish to correct the intrinsic weaknesses of an administration that has been incapable of shaping and developing the hidden abilities of a majority submerged in poverty within the context of a country that can still be considered wealthy.

Bolivarian petro-populism is characterized by the setting in motion of a series of political-discursive practices, where the ideological-symbolic component is over-determined and seeks to create a popular individual (*“the people”*) who are obedient and controlled. However, the pre-condition for the emergence of this individual – as has been seen – is accomplished efficiently by constructing antagonistic frontiers that divide society’s space into two fields: the patriots (who support the process) and the anti-patriots (who oppose it). Moreover, the logic of this division is dictated, as is seen in the language of power, by the creation of a chain of equivalencies: **being a revolutionary and a patriot, being Bolivarian and an anti-imperialist, being a nationalist and anti-neoliberal, being popular and anti-oligarchic.** In this respect, the moment of the equivalencies prevails over all the content of the social demands themselves (employment, social justice, education, credits, health, housing). Consequently, Bolivarian petro-populism is characterized by a specific method of popular-national articulation, where certain ideological equivalencies are above the

real needs of society. In terms of intellectual frontiers, in Bolivarian practices there is a shifting of the content of discourse to merely political-ideological forms.

It can be understood, then, that the discourses that lay the foundations for the articulative logic of Bolivarian petro-populism can emerge from anywhere in the socio-institutional structure: from the clientelist political organization (the social missions), from established or emerging political movements, from the labor unions that support the regime, from the army, from the squadrons supporting the revolution ("Bolivarian circles"), from the anti-globalizing international movements. The content of all this is the radicalization of the protest movements whatever their political inclination: official or opposition. During these years, Bolivarian petro-populism has displayed a formal principle of political articulation based on confrontation and exclusion. The sovereign people, exactly as appears in the discourse of power, will never be a foundation but a discursive construction. In this respect, Bolivarian populism does not express a popular identity, but constitutes the popular in itself and in relation to power. **It remains to be seen when the Venezuelans will realize that the process underway is nothing but retrogression, because a true revolution does not limit, dispense with freedoms, is not tutelary, does not oversee and tyrannize through economic means, but creates the conditions for making individuals more masters of themselves, of knowledge, of their potential. The true revolution is one that teaches how to govern oneself.**