

## Collective Consumption and the Wealthy Nation-State

The state of Vargas, spring 2011: The area was unrecognizable from the last time I passed through here. The coastline west of the international airport of Maiquetía, in the state of Vargas, used to be a dusty shantytown area with a dimly lit road cutting through the lines of brick houses and shacks. Children used to play half-naked on the side of the road while their mothers were sitting on chairs outside their houses yelling to their kids as the cars and motorbikes rushed through. The men used to stand in clusters, talking and drinking beer and cheap liquor, or around a car or motorbike talking in men's manly and competitive manner. The hot, humid, salty air from the Atlantic Ocean, 300 meters away, was corrugating everything: the roofs, the bricks, facial skin, the energy to do anything. Behind the last line of houses, a half-built road was lying in the dark. Behind the road was a muddy, unlit beach.

Now, everything had changed. Two long rows of freshly painted yellow apartment buildings were facing the Atlantic Ocean. A sign announced to the visitors that the community's name was *Mares Abajo*. A newly constructed highway ran in front of the buildings. On the other side of the road was a recreational area, complete with a children's playground and wooden beach tents. A sign welcomed the visitors to *Playa Surfista* (surfer's beach) and another sign announced that this was a recreational area and that it was forbidden to sell or drink liquors. The shantytown area and the dusty road cutting through it had been demolished; only some smaller clusters of brick houses were left on the side of the apartment buildings.

We took off from the highway and drove into the plaza between one of the apartment buildings' clusters. It was clean and spacey and the cars were neatly lined up along the pavement. Children were running around with their bicycles. A group of adults had taken out chairs and a table, where a domino game was set up.

Together with a friend I had come to visit Abigayl and Ramón, friends from a long time back. They used to live with a family so large that I was never able to keep track of all its members, all cramped together in one of the makeshift brick shacks that had now been demolished. The "bathroom" was a wooden shack with a defective toilet and a bucket to wash it with.

Four months back, they had moved into the new apartment. It had two bedrooms, a bathroom with shower and a combined living room and kitchen. The apartment buildings were part of Gran Misión Vivienda Venezuela, a massive housing project launched by Chávez in 2010. They hadn't paid for the apartment. As they were very low on the income scale, it was handed to them for free. Abigayl and Ramón had two small sons together, nicknamed El Chino (the Chinese) and el Ruso (the Russian). Another son, the eldest, had died when a toddler as a result of brain damage caused by a hospital error during delivery. He suffered from convulsions until he eventually died. They never got a real explanation, proper treatment or an apology from the hospital. Abigayl always got a profoundly sad expression when this topic came up. Her lined face and skinny body were marked by a hard life, and shadows of grief often moved through her sparkly, friendly eyes.

Abigayl and Ramón were examples of people who had had their lives transformed in small, but significant steps during the past decade. Ramón was a short, skinny man in his 40s with a restless energy. He talked quickly, moved quickly and smoked quickly, and when he started to drink beer or *anis*, which he frequently used to do, he drank quickly too. He would probably have been diagnosed with ADHD if he had ever in his life been in contact with a school psychiatrist who cared. Of course, when he went to school, such a thing didn't exist. Ramón made a living as a construction worker, or as a truck driver or as a mechanic. He had no professional education, but in front of any engine with tools in hand, he was a wizard. Some years back, Ramón went to Cuba as a part of Frente Francisco de Miranda. He was inspired by his brother, who lived in Caracas and was deeply involved in the political movement that the Frente constituted at the time. Ramón enjoyed the stay in Cuba. Once back in Caracas, he collaborated with the Frente the best way he knew—driving and main-

taining their cars. He participated in perhaps the most intense part of the revolution, the years after the coup in 2002–2003, when thousands of young people roamed the country setting up health stations, identifying the needs of poor communities, visiting the most remote corners of the country to give identity papers to people who had lived their whole lives as undocumented citizens.

Ramón will never be an intellectual. He will never be an ideologue. He wasn't very fond of the classes in political economy and history that they had in Cuba, he confided. In fact, I suspected that his literacy skills were at minimum level. But through the Frente, he got a political identity, social and political companionship, a sense of belonging. From his guts, if not from a coherent ideological set of ideas, he contributed to the political processes Venezuela was experiencing. He had even participated in constructing the apartment buildings they were now living in as well as the highway that ran past them.

Even though Ramón and Abigayl had only moved some 100 meters away from where their old shack used to be, they had in reality taken a step into a completely different life. To live in an apartment and to live in a rancho was for them worlds apart. And it was as if both of them had changed. I couldn't point to exactly what, but they had a new air to them, a new way of talking, as if their new physical surroundings had become imprinted in their bodies, into their way of moving. The apartment was scarcely furnished, and the furniture that they had was old and shabby. The water supply in the apartments was unstable as the work on the underground tanks that would supply the apartments had not been finished. Yet, they both felt that they had started a new chapter in life. Abigayl told me that she was about to start night classes with *Misión Ribas* in order to complete high school. After that, she wanted to study social work. Ramón continued finding employment in the construction sectors, in the other apartment projects that were under way in the area. El Chino and el Ruso, who were racing around the apartment on two small bikes, nodded when I asked them if they liked their new home.

Ramón in particular seemed calmer. He was standing outside on the narrow French balcony, pointing down to the plaza between the two apartment blocks that were facing each other. "We are all good neighbors," he said. "We meet down in the patio to play domino and talk, but there aren't any problems here, and besides, there are several policemen living here." He also confided that he drank less now. He just drank some beer when he played domino down in the plaza, but other than that he just worked as much as he could.

## REPAYING THE DEBT

The story about the transformation of Ramón's and Abigail's lives reminds us of a fundamental aspect of the Bolivarian process; namely, that throughout the years of the Chávez government, millions of poor people saw their lives improve. They were better fed; were better schooled; acquired better housing, received free healthcare, wheel chairs, vaccinations, university scholarships, single mother scholarships, and pensions; and participated in sports programs and cultural education. According to ECLAC, the United Nations Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean, income-based poverty rates fell from 48.6 percent of the population in 2002 to 27.8 percent of the population in 2010 (Tinker Salas 2015:192). Per the National Statistics Institute, overall poverty levels fell from 55.6 percent in 1998 to 21.2 percent in 2012. Extreme poverty dropped from 25.5 percent in 1998 to 6 percent in 2012.<sup>1</sup> In addition, there were significant welfare improvements not captured through income-based statistical methods (Weisbrot and Sandoval 2007). In a UN-Habitat report from 2012, Venezuela was ranked with a Gini index of 0.41, the best score in Latin America (the lowest level of economic inequalities). This is a significant improvement compared to the 1990s (UN-Habitat 2012).<sup>2</sup>

During my time in the barrios in the Chávez era, people responded rather univocally that they had never before had such access to social welfare (though it was by no means perfect). Indeed, people's subjective assessment of the situation for themselves as well as their peers was that not only was poverty reduced and social services more available, but also that they enjoyed increased access to different arenas and venues for self-development, being it through education, community media, sports, culture or work programs. I met numerous people who expressed that their lives significantly changed for the better through the government's policies. To present a few examples: one was my neighbor in 23 de Enero, a slim, nervous single mother of three, constantly biting her teeth. She was a beneficiary of *Misión Madres de Barrio* (Mothers from the Barrio), through which she had gotten a small scholarship while following courses and other requirements that the program demanded. She told me with pride about when she resigned her scholarship from the government and signed a contract with Metro de Caracas. For the first time in her life, she had a job with pension benefits and *cestatickets*.<sup>3</sup>

Another one was a young girl who was severely physically dysfunctional because of a rheumatic condition, presumably because of an untreated

virus infection when she was a child. Her condition was irreversible, and the doctors who originally treated her said that she was bound to end totally crippled in bed. It could perhaps be halted through operations, medication and physiotherapy, but it would require intense follow-up, which the family was not able to pay for through private medical insurance. At the time, public health was also in shambles, and it required a lot of payment on the side. In the early years of the Bolivarian process, her family sought out help through the Cuba-Venezuela health program. The girl was sent to Cuba several times together with her mother, all expenses paid for. The longest stay lasted for three months. Today, the accentuation of her condition has been halted. Two years ago, she graduated as a lawyer at the Bolivarian University (Universidad Bolivariana).

Another example is the numerous elderly people who underwent free surgeries for cataracts and similar conditions. This is a quick and relatively cheap procedure, but it had been out of reach for numerous people in the barrios. Through the so-called *Misión Milagro* set up by the Chávez government, 676,790 people had undergone eye surgery by 2012 (Correo del Orinoco 2012). One of them was Elizabeth, who lived together with her sons, their girlfriends and her grandchildren in a barrio in Catia. She had slowly lost her eyesight over several years, and when I first met, her vision was so bad that she did not dare to leave her house. After the operation, it was as if she could resume her life all over again.

Another example, again of which there are many, is the numerous people, above all women, who went back to school through the government's educational missions. One was my neighbor in Propatria, a dark-skinned, slim woman in her fifties. Her seven children, whom she had raised alone, were grown-ups (and one was dead). After having completed high school through *Misión Ribas* (*high school level educational program*), she was now studying *comunicación social* (journalism) through *Misión Sucre* (*university level educational program*). She, as many others middle-aged beneficiaries of the educational missions I spoke to, expressed that going back to school above all meant an increase in self-respect and a new sense of purpose. As many worded it, "it has opened our eyes."

Another example is the numerous people who were able to upgrade their homes. In the context of housing projects, the phrase recurrently used was to have a *vivienda digna* (a dignified home). Over the years, I have visited countless barrio homes. While some are quite comfortable, others live in substandard and even dangerous conditions. In one home I visited, one of the walls was completely covered with mold, producing

a nauseating smell and tickling sensation that made me instinctively want to run out. A whole family lived and slept in this room, including children. Their grandmother had recently died from a respiratory disease. Another home was flooded every time it rained, damaging their belongings and furniture. The children had become traumatized and started crying and screaming that they had to move their things out every time rain started. In innumerable homes, people shower and go to the toilet behind a curtain or an old sheet in the absence of a door. In most barrio homes, people share beds and bedrooms, and often they cook, sleep and spend their time in the same room. People may spend years and decade improving their homes, slowly saving up money to add an extra room or construct a proper bathroom. The housing rehabilitation (or relocation) projects therefore represented a giant leap for many people in terms of living conditions, but also for their sense of dignity.



**Photo 9.1** Ranchos in Casaalta 4, according to local residents built in unstable soil. Photo by the author



**Photo 9.2** New home built through a communal council housing project. This kind of project is referred to as *sustitución de ranchos por casas* (substitution of ranchos (shacks) for homes). Photo by the author

I am emphasizing these histories for two reasons: one is in order to highlight the subjective experiences of poverty reduction, welfare improvements and improved life opportunities that undercut people's embrace of the Chávez government's pro-poor policies. Another is to provide a preamble for the ensuing discussion about the contradictions and paradoxes surrounding the use of oil revenues for collective consumption. Because all these social policies cost money. State money. Oil money. The social justice ethos of the Bolivarian process hinged on the promise of repaying the state's social debt to the poor. In an attempt to reverse a process of decades of accumulated poverty, neglect and marginalization, enormous sums of money—no one really knows how much—were channeled into public programs of various kinds: some by the public ministries, some through the executive's discretionary budgets, some through the state oil company, PDVSA. This significantly reshaped how people thought of oil





**Photo 9.3** New roof acquired through a communal council project. Photo by the author

and national wealth, creating a sense of collective entitlement epitomized by the government slogans “Venezuela is now for everyone” and “PDVSA is now for everyone.” A narrative about how the country’s elites previously monopolized the nation’s wealth contrasted this transfiguration of the relationship between public wealth and the popular sectors. Manuel, a bearded man in his 60s from 23 de Enero put it this way:

Just have a look around to see how he has changed Venezuela. Everything he has done for the poor. Chávez has never given anything to me, but I look around, and I see how many people have benefited. Before, Venezuela was





**Photo 9.4** Barrio homes in el Nazareno. Photo by the author

run by three families. The Cicneros, the Zulvaga and the Phelps. It is in their nature to oppose Chávez because he runs against their interests. I accept that they oppose him. It is in their nature. But look how much this government is spending on the poor and still there is money left!!

At this point he was raising his voice before he finished: “And then imagine how much they took for themselves before, when they didn’t share with the poor!”

## THE PEOPLE'S OIL

Oil is at the center of popular imaginaries of the state in various Latin American countries, not only in Venezuela. Drawing the linkages between persistent accumulated marginalization—shaped by class and race—and elite rent capturing, claims for participating in the country's wealth, through state redistribution, loom large in struggles from below. As Gledhill has argued, these processes, and the imaginaries that they have fostered, are a reflection of how the neoliberal paradigm has been absorbed in Latin America:

In the case of the imaginary of “the people's oil,” loss of sovereignty over resources is symptomatic of the abandonment of any “national project” by neoliberal regimes seeking to deepen the “opening” of national economies at any cost. (Gledhill 2008:59)

This is why “resource nationalism” and popular claims for redistribution go hand in hand. As resources are privatized in the collusion between national elites and foreign interests, “the privatizers are seen as alienating what should be public goods in their personal interest as well as ‘selling the patrimony of the nation’ to foreign interest” (Gledhill 2008:59). As he notes, the resistance to these policies is immediately derived from the direct consequences that they have in people's lives as the everyday costs of household reproduction increase (Gledhill 2008:59).

The Bolivarian discourse clearly articulated the interconnectedness of these political processes. Social justice was framed as state-led redistribution of their common patrimony, that is, oil rents. In contrast, “capitalism” or alternatively “neoliberalism” implied the unequal distribution of wealth through elite capturing and lack of redistribute measures. As Miche, the government worker from Fundacomunal, worded it:

Well, the concept of oil has changed, because before the oil was for *los petroleros* (the oil people), or to put it this way, we knew that the country was a super power in oil, but the very same politics of bread and circus for el pueblo made it so that we were satisfied with the little that they supposedly gave us while they stole or the corrupt got away with most of the wealth.

Now, the concept of oil that we have is that it is for all Venezuelans ... that the state resources have been distributed through the social policies that the state has implemented, to the people.

However, as I will seek to illuminate in this chapter, the actual enactment of redistributive politics through collective consumption and the discourses underpinning it also came accompanied with a host of paradoxes. At the core of the matter were templates and practices intrinsic to the political culture in Venezuela during the Punto Fijo era. This legacy draws on the imaginary of the “Latin American populist-assistentialist state,” holding deep roots in political culture across the continent (Auyero 2001; Nuijten 2003). However, these attributes also intersected with cultural imageries of the “demanding rentist citizens,” mediated through national symbolisms and idioms. At the same time, the government and the state deployed a quite ambivalent discourse and performance of its rule. On the one hand, the spectacle of the Magical State (Coronil 1997) loomed large in the background, as a state possessing endless wealth and enormous capacities to transform realities. On the other hand, the government at times tried to deploy a quite sobering discourse, warning people against expecting that the state would fix everything and for thinking that oil revenues were endless.

Seen together, the blending of these imaginaries and practices created deep tensions and contradictions within the Bolivarian process. To many popular sector activists and state officials, it was paramount for the future of the Bolivarian process to defeat the historical legacy of individualistic rent-seeking and to foment a new revolutionary consciousness through popular organization and collective consumption. However, the ways in which “oil wealth,” “state welfare” and “resource redistribution” were framed through different lenses in different context evidenced once again how ingrained social practices and political culture were rubbing against the ideological goals of the Bolivarian process.

### THE PATERNALIST STATE

In order to understand these ambivalent imaginaries, we need to capture the historical dynamics and cultural templates that had shaped the relationship between the popular sectors and the Venezuelan state. A friend of mine once told me a popular joke about the *adecos* (politicians from Acción Democrática). It went something like this: an adeco running for the presidential elections is touring the country to gather votes. In every village he comes to, he promises the villagers everything they want: “We will build you new houses! We will build you a new electricity system! We will give you water! We will build you a new hospital!” Then he goes

to a village in the interior of the country. He is standing on the podium shouting enthusiastically: “We will give you new tractors! We will build a new road! We will build you a new bridge over the river!” A *campesino* (peasant) then raises his hand and says: “But *señor*, we don’t have a river here.” The *adeco* then lifts his hand in a sweeping gesture: “But then we will build you a river too!”

This joke starkly brings out the political imaginaries that the Punto Fijo parties engendered: those of seeking to entice followers through lofty promises of lavish spending. It was a pattern of state–society relations with its particular temporalities and political aesthetics, well known for students of Latin America. The “populist tradition” in Latin America has always hinged on “grandiose promises” to the masses that are later fulfilled, or not fulfilled, depending on the social inclination and political honesty of the incoming president. Both Auyero (2001) and Lazar (2008) discuss how “election time” in Argentina and Bolivia constitutes a particular period whereby the citizen tries to “seize upon the moment” and obtain the most benefit out of the “political opportunity window” before it closes again after the elections. Adrian, the government worker that we got to know in Chap. 6, described these dynamics during the Punto Fijo period like this:

For the Venezuelans it was above all about *obras* (public work) the streets, street lights ... when the electoral processes starts, then they come doing their campaigns, they start to offer, they do and do and do when once they are in power the period of forgetting starts.

So I take care of the population for months, some months, for the electoral campaign, I become president or governor and then come four years of forgetting, that is how the population was educated, saying “let’s wait for the new elections and they will fix the street.” Do you understand? So the next year they fix the street and then comes four new years of forgetting. That was the dynamic and that is why we are talking about a paternalistic culture.

Rosa, who had lived in the barrio of Casalta 3, high above Propatria, since she was a little girl, recalls that prior to the elections in 1978,

Luis Herrera came to do campaigning in the community. He came here and started talking to my mother, because, you know, the typical photo of politicians with the old lady, the photo drinking coffee with the old lady, and well, in reality we were *ignorantes* (ignorant people), or not ignorant,

but we had other concerns than politics, we had to get food, we had to look for work, we had children that we needed to get into school, these things ... so we were apathetic what politics was concerned, the majority of people in the barrios were concerned with finding food and try to fix their *rancho* (barrio shack).

Luis Herrera (COPEI) won the elections and assumed office in early 1979. Shortly thereafter, the sewage system and other basic infrastructure were built in the community, Rosa recalled. She thought that this was because he himself came from a more modest background than other presidents in the Puntofijo era. “And well ... in spite of all the corruption in Luis Herrera’s government—even though it was Carlos Andrés [Pérez] who took home all the medals in what corruption is concerned—one can say that there was a little bit more done for the barrios,” she concluded.

Many people also brought up the common practice whereby local party brokers (Auyero 2001) went from barrio house to barrio house before the elections and distributed bricks or bags of food in exchange for promises to vote for the party. Moreover, people commonly sought out the brokers for petty assistentialism such as bricks and zinc sheets for their ranchos. Acción Democrática’s political profile and voter base implied that they cultivated tighter clientelistic relationships with popular sector communities than COPEI. Rosa recalled that her now-deceased father conceptualized the difference between the two parties like this: “the *adecos* are like hens; they eat and leave their mess so that those around them also can pick up some. But the *copeyanos* are like vultures, they eat off everyone else whilst no one eats off them.”

The administrative architecture of the Venezuelans state as outlined in the 1961 Constitution accentuated assistentialist and clientelistic dynamics between the political parties and informal neighborhoods. As the Constitution did not recognize municipal power as a separate political branch, “the municipal councils became mere extensions of the central government and the dominant political parties” (Rivero Santos 1995:5). Consequently, popular sector struggles for public services such as roads, light posts, sewage system and water “directly addressed issues totally under the control of the centralized and populist state apparatus controlled by the parties” (Rivero Santos 1995:6). Moreover, making use of public services, or obtaining jobs, also frequently required partisanship.

### THE LEGACY OF ASSISTENTIALISM

A clearer picture now emerges of the habituated political culture and dynamics fostered during the Punto Fijo era. For decades, the popular sectors were accustomed to using political opportunity windows to “receive” whatever was on offer; otherwise one had to draw on direct mediation between the political parties and its client network. (Here it is worthwhile to recall our discussion about *la palanca*—the door opener—in Chap. 6.)

In its place, the ideological focus of the Bolivarian process was twofold. One, to provide universal access to public welfare such as health, education and pensions. And two, to establish broad-based popular organizations that could serve as the foci for fomenting collective local development and welfare improvements. In order to achieve the latter, it was crucial to develop critical consciousness among people about their collective rights and duties as citizens, and, as part of this process, to reverse the historical legacy of individualized strategies for rent-seeking. However, many popular sector activists were deeply concerned with how the habituated assistentialist and clientelist political imaginaries hampered popular organization. Adrian, the government worker we got to know in Chap. 6, commented:

I think that organization here is not very easy, because unfortunately they taught us this individualistic culture, the paternalistic culture, that is, that the state has to give, that the state has to give, that we don't have to do anything, that the state will give things to us, and of course, many years will have to pass before this reality is reversed, and this is what is expressed here in this moment, that the population doesn't understand that organization is what is needed.

What Adrian referred to here was on the one hand, the habituated expectation that the state would come and “give,” however little, in the critical “hand-out” conjunctures of the electoral cycle. On the other hand, he referred to the difficulties in incorporating “ordinary” people, who were not accustomed to participating in collective struggles, into community organizations. As we have previously discussed, a broad and heterogeneous popular movement had indeed emerged following Chávez's election, drawing on popular organization and critical consciousness that was born through social struggles in the decades prior to Chávez. However, this ideological orientation and prior organizational experience was not equally distributed in the population.



Many in the older generations were also cynical of new community initiatives and political initiatives emerging from the government, brushing them off with *es la misma vaina que los adecos* (it is the same thing as the adecos), meaning that they considered it as promises that would not materialize. In a similar manner, many people considered the communal councils to be replicas of the former neighborhood organizations that served as client organizations to Acción Democrática. These former neighborhood organizations had different formal names (see Rivero Santos 1995), but people habitually referred to them as *juntas de vecinos*. The association between these organizations and the communal councils made people prone to think that either those who were active in the communal councils had joined solely to attend to their individual interests, or that it was communal councils' spokespersons' responsibility to "fix" things for the rest of the community. In any case, these habituated perceptions of neighborhood councils as self-serving client organizations impeded many people from joining the communal councils, constituting a great deal of frustration for grassroots activists trying to mobilize their neighbors.

### MY DROP OF OIL

For others, the government's pledge to distribute oil revenues magnified people's expectations of receiving "their drop of oil." To paraphrase Nuijten (2003), the Venezuelan state became converted into an expectation-generating machine, fueled by not only the tangible results of redistribute measures and social spending, but also by the seeming abundance of wealth at the time. Many community activists were highly critical of their fellow neighbors whom they perceived as demanding not only toward the state, but also toward the voceros and other people in the community that were actively participating in various projects. Often, these community activists experienced that they got little gratitude in return, and instead received scolding, accusations and criticism. Many of the internal conflicts of the communal councils were related to the different and contradictory understanding of what these organs were supposed to provide, who was responsible for providing it and how. I once asked Candy, a community activist in 23 de Enero, why she thought that it was so difficult to organize people. They were dealing with the problem of mobilizing enough people to stand for the elections they were organizing. She answered dryly: "I have been everywhere in these streets. There is nothing new you can tell me. I know Venezuelans. They want you to bring them a bag of food, then

they want you to cook the food for them, and then they want you to stick it into their mouth.” She added, “Oh, *mami*, what they really want is an oil well in their backyard.” Somewhat less pungent, a public functionary in the Libertador municipal administration who had worked closely with the communal councils eloquently summed it up this way:

People have different criteria, because there are those who think that Venezuela is a super rich country and that the state has to give them everything, there are those who think that there is a struggle for power over using the oil in an arbitrary manner and keep on handing out and keep on destroying the country, while only a small group is making itself rich, and there are those who think that if we distribute it well we can resolve all these problematics that we have...

### PAPA GOVERNMENT

Chávez expressed keen awareness of the cultural and political tradition that the Venezuelan electorate was used to, and frequently spoke of popular mobilization as the prime criteria for social development. He repeatedly reiterated that people could not hope for the state to fix all their problems. As he said in one televised speech: “I am telling you with all my love, but also crudely: Don’t get used to coming to *papa* government for everything ‘to give me the little machine that I need’” (Chávez 2005, addressing Núcleo Endógeno Fabricio Ojeda; cited in Aponte Moreno 2008:175, author’s translation from Spanish). As we recall from Chap. 7, community workers in Fundacomunal were instructed by their superiors to emphasize this message, warning people against thinking that “their drop of oil” would come in the form of a gift. Rather, collective organization was a prerequisite for receiving funds. Indeed, except from student scholarships (through Misión Ríbas) and single mother’s scholarships (through Misión Madres de Barrio), none of the social programs contained direct cash transfers. In the case of the communal councils, the legal framework for transference of fund was in theory designed to avoid that individual beneficiaries got cash in their hands (though there was many irregularities concerning how this was carried out in practice).

When oil prices started to drop in the spring of 2011, voceros working with the communal councils were instructed to raise the issue in community meetings. Hedging against future discontent and underlining that oil money was not endless, they tried to inspire discussions about the impli-

cations the drop in prices would have for future state spending. Thus, at a discursive level, the government was frequently trying to foment a new notion of rent distribution, coupling social welfare with collective organization and a broader ideological horizon of social transformation.

At the same time, the state's lavish spending, which gave the impression of endless wealth, as well as its personalistic style of government, also contributed to reinforcing these notions, striking deep chords of the collective psyche. The habituated practice of soliciting help for solving individual problems was reproduced on a number of arenas. Ever since Chávez was elected, people had the custom of trying to hand him personal notes with requests for help during public meetings. Indeed, when he traveled across the country, he was followed by personnel whose responsibility it was to collect these notes and catalogue them in a special office. Moreover, the vice-presidency—vis-à-vis the presidential palace—had an office dedicated to processing citizens' emergencies and difficulties with other institutions. The task of this office however, rather than providing assistance directly, was to turn to other state entities (i.e., a hospital, a municipal government, a social security entity) and try to find solutions. As a last resort, people came to this office from all over the country. Individual attempts for problem-solving was also on display every day in the top national newspaper, *Ultimas Noticias*. It has a section whereby people can call or send short messages by SMS. It contained a string of requests directed to the government or President Chávez, or sometimes to a particular institution or just anybody, to, for instance, supply credit for a car so that someone can make a living as a taxi driver, or to provide material for constructing a house, or a lap-top for the children's education.

I want to reiterate that it is not my intention to be patronizing or condescending toward people's efforts to solve their problems as best they can. Rather, the persistence of these practices—reflecting a political imagery as much as historically habituated mechanism of problem-solving—must intrinsically be understood through a structural perspective. As long as needs are still widespread, and universal access to welfare is hampered by continuous poverty and patchy state policies, these practices necessarily reflect people's attempts to find “a way in” and a last resort when other options are exhausted. Fundamentally, these practices are intimately interwoven into political culture across Latin America, reflecting particular patterns of post-colonial state formation in societies characterized by hierarchical social formations and the monopolization of access to power and economic resources.

## NEW VALUES

Thus, rather than dwelling on these practices per se, my interest here is to shed light on how these tensions between the historical templates of “state handouts” and the ethos of social justice through collective organization and broad social transformation were articulated. A case in point is the social discourses emerging after the launch of the public housing program *Gran Misión Vivienda Venezuela* (grand Venezuelan housing mission), of which Abigail and Ramón were beneficiaries. This mission was launched by Chávez in April 2011, spurred by the heavy torrential rains that fell in November 2010, leaving 130,000 homeless and killing 34 people. With the tragic landslide in the state of Vargas, which claimed perhaps as many as 30,000 lives in 1999, fresh in mind, the government pledged that everyone who was left homeless would be relocated to new and safe housing. When the mission was launched, everyone living in inadequate housing conditions was encouraged to apply for a new home. The government vowed to build 2 million new homes between 2011 and 2017, which was the estimated housing deficit across Venezuela. This would be done through a concerted effort of the state, the private sectors and the communal councils, as well as the communes. More than 10 million people registered, supplying data on social and economic conditions, which would be the basis for an analysis on who was in fact eligible. By the end of November 2012, 293,799 homes, apartments or houses, depending on location, had been constructed. The overall goal was set to 3 million homes by the end of 2019.

However, the housing mission generated two different discourses among social activists. On the one hand, it was conceptualized as a question of social justice, and as the state’s fulfillment of its constitutional duties to ensure that all citizens had dignified and adequate living standards. On the other hand, it was framed as a state handout to passive, undeserving and demanding citizens that expected the state to resolve their problems. It was public belief that many people resorted to dirty tricks and maneuvers to get an apartment, and that once built, they complained about deficiencies and shortcomings. At the same time, stories were circulating about how the apartment buildings soon became worn-down as a result of the inhabitant’s “barrio habits” of throwing litter everywhere, letting the children do whatever they wanted without supervision and a general

lack of maintenance. As Oscar, the ideological activist from 23 de Enero, said on one occasion:

They give them a fully equipped apartment, and if there is a fork missing they complain. They give them an apartment and six months afterwards everything is in decay, they don't appreciate it. Easy come, easy go.<sup>4</sup> What is missing here is education, the values.

Adrian, Ramón's brother, shared a similar view. He had just moved into his girlfriend's apartment, in Fuerte Tiuna, which she had also gotten through Misión Vivienda. Adrian's girlfriend had a child from a former relationship and they were expecting a child together within the next couple of months. He was happy about his new living conditions, but complained about the neighbors' behavior—all of whom had been assigned apartments through Misión Vivienda. "There are 8 apartments on each floor, and 6–7 loudspeakers blasting. You don't hear anything. The kids paint graffiti on the wall. The education starts at home, and that is the problem, the lack of education at home. I keep saying: '*Coño*, you left the *rancho*, left the *mal vivir* (bad living) for a *buen vivir* (good living). You have to change as well. People have moved to better homes, now you have to change values.'" On one occasion I was visiting one of the shelters that the government had set up for the *dignificados*<sup>5</sup>—those who had been evacuated from their homes during the 2010 rains. On the wall, there was a poster saying:

"GIVE ME A HOUSE" should be accompanied by "give me a life," "give me a path," "liberate me from the capitalist logic, let's start to be human beings," "let's stop being wrecked merchandise desperately hanging on to the margins of consumer society." Give me a house should mean "LET'S CONSTRUCT A NEW WORLD!"

This discourse about a lack of appreciation of what they had received and the need to change values was tied to a broader moral discourse about how people failed to respond to the call to becoming different kinds of citizens: collectively orientated, socially aware citizens, the New Men and Women we have previously referred to. Eduardo Piñate, a director in the administration of the Libertador Municipality, commented to me that:

What we generally are concerned with is a kind of popular participation that is more based in the political, that goes beyond the revindicative perspective,

right? Because the revindicative perspective is closely tied to an individualistic thinking, and this is an ideological and cultural issue, right? So, our parish governments, all the assemblies and reunions with the parish government where I assist, and I can tell you that I go to at least ten a week ... they are very permeated by this revindicative thinking, but in order to nuance this, I should also say that we have encountered an emerging growth of collective consciousness, solidarity, that is, every time we go the parish governments are discussing less individual problems and more collective problems.

### MI NEGRA

The opposition frequently criticized the government for reckless spending of oil money on the social programs. However, in the electoral campaign for the 2006 presidential elections, the opposition candidate Manuel Rosales introduced a new twist to the notion of “my drop of oil” when he introduced a credit card called *Mi Negra* (my black woman) as his main electoral bait. Rosales promised that if he was elected, the credit card would be distributed to middle- and low-income households, with a monthly sum of 600,000 bolivares (approximately USD 280) for free spending, and with an additional 400,000 bolivares which could only be used to purchase food. The resources to fund this credit card would be drawn directly from the oil revenues, consuming approximately 20 percent of gross national revenues. In 2007, the minimum wage in Venezuela was approximately USD 250 per month. If *Mi Negra* had actually been implemented, many people would have seen their income doubled over night.

The exact eligibility criteria for receiving the credit card were never clarified. During the electoral campaign, Rosales’s people set up tents across the city where people could fill out the forms and obtain their cards, which Rosales promised would be activated once he was installed in the presidential office. The name of the card caused harsh reactions among many (see Duno-Gottberg 2011). Literally, the term *Mi Negra* means “my black woman,” but the Rosales campaign insisted that it alluded to the black color of oil. However, many people insisted on the inherent racism in the word, as *Mi Negra* is also a folk expression that refers to a “black slave” or “black maid.”

As previously noted, Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuściński once wrote that:

oil creates the illusion of a completely free life, life without work, life for free ... the concept of oil expresses perfectly the enternal human dream of wealth achieved through lucky accident .... In this sense oil is a fairy tale and like every fairy tale a bit of a lie. (Watts 2004:213)



The credit card was evidently an attempt to tap into such a vein in the Venezuelan population, sublimating the relationship between the populace and the nation's natural resources into hard cash and a care-free life. I was in Venezuela during the electoral race and the 2006 elections, and my impression was that the popular sector segments didn't really take this electoral promise seriously. In the end, Rosales only received approximately 36 percent of the votes, evidencing that he was not able to tap into the popular sectors that were the main target for the *Mi Negra* campaign. There is a lot to say about why that was the case, but I wish to highlight three things. First, that the popular sector electorate recognized a promise of a "new river" when they saw it (referencing the adeco joke above), and were well aware of the fact that they were being tempted with "election candy." Second, that they had been sufficiently politically formed throughout the last ten years or so to prefer the government's model of collective rent distribution, and that, third, even the humblest shantytown dweller knew that such a measure would have catastrophic economic consequences.

Many community activists at the time commented that Rosales's proposal stood in stark contrast to the political ethos of the Bolivarian revolution revolving around state-sponsored welfare. Indeed, it represented essentially, as one man said, a "capitalist proposal" (Strønen and Waerness 2007) whereby each person could buy what he or she wanted on the market place. However, he said, this was exactly the kind of (neoliberal) social model that had such detrimental effects on Venezuelan society in the past, and from which the Bolivarian process emerged as a counter-proposal espousing collective solutions to collective problems.

### THE QUESTION OF OIL PATHOLOGIES

In 2011, I did an interview with Santiago Arconada, a renowned popular intellectual from the community of Antimano, who has been involved in community organization and popular activism for decades. He drew a linkage between rentenist mentality and consumption, arguing that this was a way of thinking that was imprinted in the collective Venezuelan imaginary, and which would be very uneasily rooted out:

[Consumerism] is one of the largest deformations, distortions of the petroleum rent, I was enraged with my brother when I asked him *epa*, what's up, what have you been doing, and he would answer "I, nothing, I buy everything ready-made."

There was a time when this answer became a sort of fashion, people perceived it as ... they said it with the greatest pride ... like being proud of being a person that produces nothing and as by magic receives a resource to buy everything in life ready-done, not to produce, to buy. This way of thinking, like a chip in our hard drive, continues to do us great harm....

I believe that we cannot ... I have heard in the fields of health studies that a tumor that was developed over 20 years cannot be cured in three days, you can start the process of reversing the tumor but it is going to take the same time as it took to develop it ... what I want to say is that we cannot retreat from 100 years of a culture of petroleum rents from one day to the other ... what is also certain is that if we don't start, we will never change ... if the vision of that petroleum pays everything remains, that we will not be able to question the essential elements of our daily lives.

Arconada represents the ambivalence found among many popular ideologues and organic intellectuals: wholeheartedly supporting social and political change away from elite rule and neoliberalism per se, but critically and cautiously observing how the Bolivarian process was unfolding.

As he pointed out, there are certain historical processes leading up to Chávez's time in government that continued to hold great sway over social imaginaries and political life. Throughout the past two chapters, I have tried to tease out some of the frictions arising in the faultlines between Venezuela's historical trajectory as an oil state and the ideological goals of the Bolivarian process. Notions of oil wealth and consumption loom large in these narratives, emphasizing how Venezuela's turbulent and ambivalent relationship to its national patrimony is seen as having engendered both the potential for great personal and collective prosperity, as well as great harm.

Discourses of oil wealth and consumption, in Venezuela and elsewhere, draw on a host of contested notions over how oil wealth should be spent, how and by whom it should be distributed, and who is deserving of receiving a piece of the pie. Each of these questions are wrapped in complex economic, political, cultural and ideological schemes with global reach. However, as anthropological scholars of oil have emphasized, oil is in itself imbued with an imaginary power engendering valued-laden and morally ambivalent notions about "oil citizens" and "oil as a way of life" (Appel et al. 2015:27–28). Within these schemes, the trope "oil pathologies," whether it is used to characterize a country, a particular political regime or individuals benefiting from oil rents is frequently looming implicitly in the background.

However, as a final comment I want to suggest that there is reason to be cautious when notions of “rentist citizens” and “oil pathologies” are brought up, both in scholarly analysis and as articulated in “folk wisdom.” These are seductive templates that may be used and manipulated in ideological and class-biased discourses without making explicit underlying political assumptions or agendas. As the Venezuelan economist and oil analyst Carlos Mendoza Potellá maintains in the case of Venezuela:

The abusive use of the label “rentist” has served the supporters of oil expansion [privatization] in a subordinated association with foreign oil capital in discrediting the Venezuelan struggle for ensuring a just distribution of wealth of national patrimony. (Flama 2011:39, interview)

Chávez’s critics repeatedly framed social spending for the poor as populist oil-demagoguery. This position is also reflected in the scholarly literature (e.g., see Corrales and Penfold 2007; Penfold-Becerra 2007; Rodríguez 2007). However, these arguments often serve as barely concealed resistance against the very idea that the Venezuelan state should control and prioritize redistributing oil revenues toward its poor citizens. Concurrently, a narrow and one-sided focus on “rentist citizens” or “assistentialist state policies” have the potential to deaden the broader problematic of historical and accumulated unequal distributions of wealth, and the question of how oil wealth actually can be redistributed. This has to be seen in relation to how accusations of the poor’s pathological welfare dependencies have deep roots in history (O’Connor 2001), wielding strong justificative power for not redistributing wealth or providing poverty relief. However, as the author Norman Mailer has formulated it:

To blame the poor for subsisting on welfare has no justice unless we are also willing to judge every rich member of society by how productive he or she is. Taken individual by individual, it is likely that there’s more idleness and abuse of government favors among the economically privileged than among the ranks of the disadvantaged.<sup>6</sup>

As we have previously discussed, Venezuela’s well-off citizens commonly argue that they have become rich because of hard work, while the poor are poor because of laziness and sloth. However, in Venezuela and other countries with low social mobility, high socio-economic status is more

often than not a result of hereditary luck. And, we may add, an abundance of personal wealth is not infrequently a result of murky or exploitative business, or simply because of in-built structural and political mechanisms that distributes wealth upward rather than downward. It is therefore the poor, who necessarily are the ones in need of assistance from the state, who are often accused of displaying oil pathologies and state dependency. Thus, feeding into a broader discourse of dependencies, amoralities and cultures of poverty (Lewis 1966), the poor are in effect crucified twice: First for being poor, and, second, for being lifted out of poverty through state redistribution of wealth.

That is not to say that we should not critically examine how oil resources are spent and policies developed, or that we should abstain from critical analysis of how particular redistributive regimes are mediating and mediated by cultural and social relations. However, as I have sought to tease out through these chapters, we need to develop our analysis with a keen understanding of the complex interaction between historical and contemporary socio-cultural processes and political formations. In Chap. 10, we will continue this explorative endeavor into yet another contested terrain, namely corruption. As I will show, corruption constituted yet another template that emerged in the context of moral discourses about how Venezuela had become destroyed from within during the Fourth Republic. At the same time, corruption gained salience in the context of community politics, engendering local struggles as well as making visible the plasticity of what constitutes “corruption” on different social and political arenas.

## NOTES

1. These statistics are also derived from income-based measurements (INE n.d.).
2. Some scholars have however questioned the impact of the Chávez government’s social policy. For example, Ponce and González (2015), from the neoliberal Venezuelan think tank CEDICE, argue that social spending had limited effect on structural poverty and that the poverty reduction that did take place was primarily an effect of the oil boom.
3. Cestatickets are checks that can be used as payment in certain shops and restaurants. It is widely used in Venezuela as part of the salary in addition to the monetary payment.
4. In Spanish: “Lo que nada cuesta, hagamos fiesta” [we make a party of what comes for free].

5. As a symbolic and political re-definition of the victims of the 1999 landslide, Chavez started to call those that had become homeless for *dignificados* (the dignified) instead of *damnificados* (the victims) (see Fassin and Vasquez 2005). This term continues to be used.
6. Thanks to my CMI colleague Elin Skaar for making me aware of this quotation in just the right moment.

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