

Political Polarisation, Colonial Inequalities and the Crisis of Modernity in Venezuela

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INTRODUCTION

The Bolivarian process in Venezuela opened up a political space for the contestation of historically informed socio-cultural hierarchies articulated through notions of class, ethnicity, gender and “race.” At the same time, socio-economic hierarchies were challenged through reduced levels of poverty¹ and increased access to social welfare. Concurrently, political polarisation in the course of the Bolivarian process accentuated the colonial legacy of class-based and racial hierarchies. This gained particular visibility through opposition supporters’ portrayal of Chávez’ predominantly poor and coloured followers in highly contentious and contemptuous terms. Reversely, Chávez’ followers frequently deployed an “upwards”

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class-contemptuous discourse, revering the country's whiter and wealthier for being stupid, superficial, unpatriotic and lacking of character and morals (Strønen 2017). However, whilst the tit-for-tat pejorative descriptions between different political camps were out there in the open for everyone to see, it is paramount to go beyond these surface expressions of conflict in order to understand their origins and deeper implications and meanings. In order to do so, we need to take into account the historical formation of Venezuelan society since its colonial inception as well as its subsequent development trajectories up to and into the Pink Tide.

This is precisely what this chapter aims to do, through a discussion that is structured around two main axes of analysis. The first axis of analysis is, in alignment with the overall focus in this edited volume, a contextual analysis of the historical formations of racial- and class-based inequalities in Venezuela, followed by a discussion of how these formations were remoulded and re-accentuated during the socio-economic crisis and neo-liberalisation of Venezuelan society in the 1980s and 1990s. The second axis of analysis is concerned with exploring how the historical formations of different life worlds in Venezuela—undercut by economic, spatial and socio-cultural inequalities—translated into the formation of radically opposite interpretations of the meaning of the Bolivarian process and an accentuated polarisation of Venezuelan society.

Seen from within—that is, the emic view, as it was conceptualised by its believers and followers—the Bolivarian process gained its strength from simultaneously addressing the politics of recognition as well as the politics of redistribution (de Sousa Santos 2001; Fraser and Honneth 2003). Through a political ideology affirming that socio-cultural discrimination and socio-economic exclusion constitute and re-enforce one another,

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supporters of the Bolivarian process positioned themselves as historical subjects that had been systematically marginalised within a local-global matrix shaped by colonial- and neocolonial structures of domination. The historical and global framing of the contemporary struggle that the Bolivarian process represented provided for an emerging structure of feeling (Williams 1989) that weaved individual suffering and hardships into a collective political story about the past, present and future.

However, whilst this paradigmatic change was experienced as emancipatory for the popular classes, the Bolivarian process was experienced as threatening by those sectors of the population whose socio-cultural and political dominance was challenged and undermined. Evidently, there is clearly a crude political-economy component to this, in the sense that the Chávez government challenged entrenched capitalist and class interests in the country. An understanding of political opposition to the Chávez government is inseparable from the struggle for control over the country's oil sector (see Tinker Salas 2009), and inseparable from the nexus between Venezuelan capitalist interests, their transnational networks and allies, and their ideological and interest-based adherence to free-market politics. It is also inseparable from middle-class resentments against weakened control over access to the state apparatus and public institutions (which, reflecting the accentuated levels of corruption in Venezuelan society since the 1970s, are widely seen as a honey jar²), and their resentment against state money being channeled in the direction of the "underserving poor" (Katz 1989).

However, interest-based opposition alone cannot count for explaining the aggravated hostility and fear-mongering that characterised opposition to the Chávez government and its supporters. Moreover, opposition to the government was evidently also informed by heterogeneous sets of reasons by different actors and groups, many of them expressing legitimate concerns about the problematic aspects of the Chávez era. However, in the context of the focus of this edited volume, the main argument that I want to develop is that racialised and class-contemptuous expressions of political opposition were constitutive of the hierarchical formation of the Venezuelan post-colonial state, whilst simultaneously shaped by the preceding political trajectories and the particular political ideology and aesthetics framing the Bolivarian process itself. Simultaneously, I contend that there is another dimension that needs to be addressed in order to understand the deeper meaning behind political divisions in Venezuela; namely the crisis of modernity as it is unfolding in Latin America at large.

Indeed, as I will argue towards the end of the chapter, the formation of radically different political realities in Venezuela reflects a growing global schism between those who “live inside” the imagery of a globalised, cosmopolitan capitalist modernity, and those who feel excluded by it. In Venezuela, and elsewhere at the continent before and during the Pink Tide, accumulated local/global differentiation translated into attempts to carve out new political and social models and imaginaries that also managed to incorporate subaltern life worlds, histories and aspirations. As the Pink Tide now by most accounts is ebbing, and Venezuela is finding itself in the largest crisis amongst all the former Pink Tide countries, it is necessary to take a broader and historically informed look on the underlying structures and processes that undergirded the divisive nature of the Bolivarian process. However, before I reach that point in the discussion, I will lay out the broader contextual framework for understanding Venezuela’s particular socio-political formations during the Pink Tide, starting with a broad overview over key political trajectories in the latter part of the twentieth century.

THE NEOLIBERAL ERA AND ITS CONTEXT

In some significant respects, Venezuela followed a different political and economic development trajectory during the latter part of the twentieth century than other South-American nations. For one, the country did not have any authoritarian regimes coming to power by violent means as most of its neighbours. For long, the country appeared, at least on the surface, as a relatively socially stable and harmonious society, leading scholars to coin the expression the “Venezuelan exceptionalism” (Ellner 2010:2). Following the authoritarian Marcos Pérez Jiménez’s fall in 1958, political stability was maintained by a political pact between the two dominant parties, Acción Democrática (AD) and COPEI. This pact, entered in 1958, was created to exclude political competition from the right and the left. Notably, this involved excluding the communist party and leftist currents who had participated in bringing down Pérez Jiménez. For the next 40 years, AD and COPEI alternated in government offices until Chávez’ arrival to power in 1998. During the 1960s and 1970s, the country was characterised by a strong state-interventionist approach and a populist-nationalist ideological vein, in particular articulated and channeled by Acción Democrática. The country’s growing abundance of oil wealth

provided post-1958 governments with significant economic leeway, at the same time as a growing petroleum economy led to the abandonment of the countryside and booming urban informal growth. To a certain extent, social conflict was smoothed out through extensive clientelism and patronage systems and the co-optation or oppression of oppositional or radical currents. A brief period of guerilla warfare was crushed by the state by the end of the 1960s (Ciccariello-Maher 2013), and social struggle did not really gain public momentum again until the 1980s.

Venezuela implemented structural adjustment reforms dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) later than its neighbouring countries. The first round came in 1989 during the second Carlos Andrés Pérez administration (AD) (1989–1992) in the form of a “shock treatment”, whilst additional reforms came during the Caldera government (COPEI) (1994–1998) in the 1990s (Ellner 2010:90). Carlos Andrés Pérez had presided over the golden years in Venezuelan history as president in the period 1974–1979. The price hikes on oil due to the Arab oil embargo filled the state’s coffers, at the same time as Pérez mortgaged the country’s future oil rents in exchange for foreign loans in order to develop his ambitious development plans.

Thus, ironically, the debt burden that would later propel Carlos Andrés Pérez into an uneasy (and to him personally, disastrous³) marriage with the IMF was originally principally accumulated by himself. When global oil prices slumped in the early 1980s, the country found itself in an economic quagmire. A run on the country’s currency, the *bolívar*, and massive capital flight eventually forced the subsequent Herrera government (1979–1984) to devalue on February 18, 1983, known as the Black Friday. In the immediate following years, the Herrera and later the Lusinchi government (1984–1989) resisted the adaption of IMF prescriptions. However, the economy continued to deteriorate. Both governments prioritised paying off foreign debt (some of it considered illegal) bleeding dry public coffers, and the exchange system set up to protect the bolívar was subject to rampant corruption and mismanagement. Public firms were run into the ground to the extent that some argued that it was done deliberately in order to pave the way for subsequent privatisation (Ellner 2010:79–81). At the same time, corruption and mismanagement escalated (Ellner 2010:82). During these years, poverty and inequality rates escalated quickly, and even parts of the middle classes found themselves slumping into poverty.

In the 1989 presidential elections, Carlos Andrés Pérez was elected to a second term, echoing popular sentiments opposing further austerity policies and promising that he would restore the prosperity of his first presidential époque. However, in the backroom, he had brokered a secret structural adjustment deal with the IMF. Key aspects of the plan included the lifting of price controls on basic goods, “flexibilisation” of the labour system, the elimination of subsidies on gasoline, the privatisation of state enterprises and the social security system and the removal of restrictions on foreign investments (Ellner 2010: 91–94).

On the morning of February 28, the price of bus tickets rose steeply due to the sudden increase in the price of gasoline. This was a few days before the end-of-month paycheck, and most people were both broke and exhausted by years of escalating struggles and hardships. A riot started on the bus station of the satellite town of Guarenas outside of Caracas and quickly spread to Caracas and other urban centres across Venezuela. People were used to government clamp-down on popular protests, but this time, they were met with unprecedented state violence. *El Caracazo*, as the riot came to be known, claimed between 1000 and 3000 lives by unofficial accounts (the official accounts were highly unreliable). Subjecting parts of shantytowns (*barrios*) to a military siege for several days, *el Caracazo* has been called “the largest and most violently repressed revolt against austerity measures in Latin American history” (Coronil 1997: 376). In following years, social protest and disenchantment with the political system at large translated into increasing repudiation of the Puntofijo model, at the same time as the effects of the neoliberal policies set in, resulting in accentuated levels of inequality and social insecurity (Lander 2005).

After the Caracazo, many soldiers, who themselves came from lower socio-economic strata, became disgruntled with the government for having been sent out “to kill their own.” In 1992, Hugo Chávez, then a military officer who had led a secret dissident group within the military for ten years, led an aborted civil-military revolt against the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez (see Strønen 2016). The rebels were citing the massive onslaught on the civilian population during the Caracazo as part of the reason for why, in their view, the government had lost its constitutional legitimacy. Chávez was imprisoned, and immediately converted into a popular hero. Upon being released from prison in 1994, he formed a political party, Movimiento Quinta República (MVR), and won the presidential elections in 1998 with 56 per cent of the vote.

THE CHÁVEZ GOVERNMENT

Chávez did not run for president on an explicitly anti-neoliberal programme. Rather, he initially signalled interest in Tony Blair's "Third Way" and was in the beginning also supported by parts of the country's middle classes and business community (Tinker Salas 2015:172). However, this quickly changed as he made it clear that he was not interested in making a pact with the "old establishment." The decisive split eventually came with the passing of 49 laws by decrees in the fall of 2001. Significantly, the decrees extended the state's regulatory control over the agricultural and fishery sector, as well as Venezuela's principal economic asset: the hydrocarbon sector. In effect, this meant the reversal of a gradual privatisation process that had been taking place throughout the 1990s, putting the government at a definitive collisions course with some of the most powerful sectors in the country, as well as foreign interests and capital tied to the oil sector.

The aborted coup in 2002 and the oil strike/sabotage in 2002–2003 (Tinker Salas 2015:158–162) prompted a radicalisation both in the government and amongst Chávez' supporters. In 2005, Chávez declared himself a socialist at a mass meeting at Mar de Plata, Argentina. During Chávez' tenure, several reforms from the neoliberal era were reversed, including the renationalisation of the pension system, the ports and key companies in telecommunications, electricity and heavy industry. Several banks were taken over by the state, and land reforms distributing land and credits to peasants were enacted on the countryside. Renegotiated deals and agreements with foreign oil companies provided the Venezuelan state with majority stakes in all joint ventures, and taxes and royalties were raised. New policies within health and education, the so-called social missions (D'Elia and Cabezas 2008; Muntaner et al. 2011), were pursued through building up new programmes and policies outside established institutional frameworks. The argument for doing so—and not without merit—was that existing state institutions were too rigid, inefficient and governed by staff from the Puntofijo era who in effect were in opposition to the government. However, the lack of institutionalisation of social programmes and policies would also later emerge as one of the Achilles heels of the Bolivarian process. Nevertheless, at the time, the extensive state-community cooperation in the course of the development of the social programmes was vital for forging a new sense of socio-political inclusion in the popular sectors. Concurrently, the social missions also represented unprecedented access to social welfare and services in the popular sectors, having real and substantive impact on many people's lives (Strønen 2017).

CRAFTING A BOLIVARIAN SPACE

Chávez' arrival to power generated a new era of popular mobilisation and organisation in Venezuela. Social movements had relatively limited manoeuvring space during the Puntofijo era and were frequently subjected to political repression and censorship (Lopez-Maya et al. 2002; Ciccariello-Maher 2013). After 1999, a broad and diverse grassroots movement, comprising urban dwellers, peasants, indigenous groups, and diverse cultural and political movement with roots in the popular sectors became vested with a new form of legitimacy and public visibility in the country. Indeed, "Bolivarianism" offered previously marginalised sectors a new historical narrative and new moral grounding for asserting themselves as a historical subject, *el pueblo*, whose time had come to claim rectification for accumulated injustice.

In the same period, successive left-leaning governments were brought to power on the backbone of popular mobilisation in neighbouring countries, creating the sensation that a continental shift was taking place. The Bolivarian process was at its height in the years following the defeat of the 2002 coup, the 2002/2003 oil strike/sabotage and the 2004 recall referendum against Chávez. In the fall and winter of 2005/2006, I did fieldwork amongst popular movements in western Caracas on a day-to-day basis (Strønen 2006). Caracas' barrios and the city's political centre west of Sabana Grande were teeming with revolutionary fervour, and marches, popular assemblies, mobilisations and events were taking place at a grand scale. The social missions were in the process of being developed, both in health, education, sports, culture and alimentation, and many people were deeply involved in housing and infrastructural projects through the so-called Urban Housing Committees (Comités de Tierra Urbana, CTU) and Participative Committees for the Transformation of Habitat (Comité de Participación de Transformación de Habitat, CPTH). As one woman worded it:

The most special thing with this process is that people, like my mother aged 70, who never before in her life and gone out [to do work in the community]...with this process she got motivated, and in some form or another, in her own manner, is doing social work...people participate from their homes, people participate in the assemblies, and people participate both in their homes and in their assemblies (Strønen 2006:67).

Innumerable times I was told by enthusiastic activists that Venezuela was the epicentre for a global historical shift, proving wrong Francis Fukuyama's famous postulate about "the end of history." The political aesthetics of the revolution was crafted through revolutionary music and jingles, political wall paintings, public concerts draped in revolutionary symbolism, the revival of popular revolutionary singers (Alí Primera, Silvio Rodríguez), political programming on state TV, political discourse from above and political discourse from below. In barrio streets and barrio houses, and at street corners, bars and restaurants in the western city centre, political discussions were the order of the day. Intense political manoeuvring and strategising was taking place amongst popular sector activists as they were discussing how to further their causes within the political space that had been opened up by the Chávez government. In no way was this a harmonious and straightforward process; rather, conflicts and intense negotiations were the order of the day both horizontally and vertically. However, what characterised these processes was the sensation of living in a critical moment in history, whereby historical power structures had been seriously destabilised. What was at stake was to steer the process in such a way that it would lead to long-lasting socio-political change, and to seize the moment to rectify historical injustices.

I have previously coined the concept "a Bolivarian space" in order to capture the symbolic, political, cultural and social space of interaction that was carved out in the interface between the Chávez government and its principally popular constituency. More precisely, I have described the Bolivarian space as:

the complex conundrum of political discourses, practices, policies, historical narratives and ideological templates shaping the interaction between the state and the popular grassroots in Venezuela under the Chávez government. This is not a top-down process whereby Chávez imposed a political idea from above. Rather, it is a flow of multi-directional processes that are shaped by popular efforts to appropriate the political space opened up by the Chávez government's pro-poor political alignment (Strønen 2017:5).

Within that space, the templates of neoliberalism and global capitalism were framed in explicitly negative terms, both as political systems of domination and subordination in an orthodox left-wing, anti-imperialism

sense, but also through articulating the lived experiences of its localised outcomes. The popular sectors in Venezuela were deeply traumatised by the social havoc they experienced during the 1980s and 1990s (Lander 2005). Personal stories of hardships, hunger, violence, death, vulnerability and desperation were interwoven with a collective historical narrative about having been under siege by hostile and callous politicians and a brutal economic system. To them, “neoliberalism” and “capitalism” were not descriptive terms for particular economic and political regimes of governance. Rather, these concepts epitomised a lived experience within a particular social order that was experienced as detrimental to their life projects and dignity. Significantly, the years leading up to el Caracazo in 1989, and the experience of living through el Caracazo, were conceptualised not only as a brutal state clampdown on a spontaneous reaction to extended suffering. It was also conceptualised as a demonstration of the brutal callousness of the system itself, which by default designated poor people to suffer whilst protecting the interests of the rich. As Rosa, a Chávez supporter from one of Caracas’ western barrios worded it:

So the second government of Carlos Andrés Pérez was the final thrust...the poor got even poorer, because they didn’t raise the wages, the businesses did whatever they wanted with their workers, they came and told you a story that “look, there isn’t any money to pay you with, we cannot pay you the Christmas bonus”...The poor have always waited for Christmas bonus so that you can buy the things that you are going to need for the rest of the year...the poor went without buying a new pair of shoes the whole year, not a shirt, do you understand? Because you couldn’t, we were like the Indians, we worked in order to be able to eat, and that was it. But in December the workplace paid out our four bucks [of Christmas bonus] and you went out and bought two shirts, two jeans, stacked the cupboards with food so that it would last longer, things like that. Do you understand?

And then, well...the final thrust came when Carlos Andrés Pérez appeared on national television and delivered that bomb about the measures that had to be taken, what we had to do with the loan that the International Monetary Fund had given us.... The loans that they had asked the International Monetary Fund for...so we had to obey the normative [structural adjustment plans] that they implemented, and it was so outrageous, because it was the poor who had to do the sacrifice, right? We would have to pay for their riches, we will have to pay their taxes, we will have to pay all their expenses... and the next week the prices on the bus tickets went up, and then [el

Caracazo] exploded...it was like ten years where more and more things came up combined, do you understand? People were already like a pressure cooker that was about to explode any minute.

Rosa's narrative brings out how many people conceptualised the structural and political underpinnings of poor people's suffering. Concurrently, the association between the politicians of the past, and their continuous presence in opposition ranks, was epitomised in the slogan that was coined after the 2002 coup: *no volverán*—"they will not come back." To many people in the barrios, the Bolivarian process *was* (and is) a class war, because if the opposition ever returned to power, they were bound to reinstall a self-serving neoliberal regime and oppress popular protest with violence if necessary as they had done in the past.

ALTERING THE "NATURAL ORDER"

The account above is quite unidimensional in the sense that it says nothing about the multiple conflicts, struggles and contradictions that characterised both "the Bolivarian space" as well as the unfolding of the Bolivarian process and the actions of the Chávez government as such. However, this is a subject that I have treated extensively elsewhere (Strønen 2016, 2017). In the context of this chapter, the purpose of the section above is to tease out a broad panorama of the qualitative shifts in the texture of relations (Gupta 1995:215 in Sharma and Gupta 2001) between formal power and the formerly marginalised segments of the populations.

By way of contrast, the former political and economic elites, and many from the middle and upper classes, felt threatened and alienated not only by Chávez *per se* but also by the alteration of what they had historically perceived as the "natural social order." This had always been a hierarchical social order defined and controlled by the whiter and wealthier, circumscribed by a long colonial and post-colonial legacy that naturalised socio-cultural and socio-economic inequalities. The white and economically privileged did not only dis-recognise the legitimacy of Chávez—being of afro-indigenous heritage and a poor socio-economic background—but they also felt deeply uncomfortable with the new role that Venezuela's poor and coloured held in Venezuelan society. This, in turn, translated into accentuated political polarisation in the country with profoundly classist and racialised overtones (Fernandes 2010, Duno-Gottberg 2009, 2011). Expression such as *negros*, *monkeys* and *savages* were commonplace,

accentuating Cannon's observation that "race, or rather racism, is an essential but extremely subtle, ingredient in opposition discourse rejecting Chávez and those who follow him" (Cannon 2008:732). However, in order to understand the historical context for these racialised expressions of conflict, it is necessary to explore how they reverberate with historical templates informed by the country's historical legacy.

CLASS AND RACE IN VENEZUELA

Historically, the Venezuelan myth of national racial heritage was that of *café con leche* (coffee with milk) (Tinker Salas 2009:133), allegedly a product of centuries of slow racial mixing (Wright 1990:1). Racial origins in Venezuela overlap to a large degree with people's class. The majority of poor inhabitants are black or *mestizo* (of a mixed race), whilst the higher classes are for the most part whiter and more European-looking.

In the post-emancipation period, Venezuelan elites regarded blacks as inferiors because they were associated with their status as slaves, perceived of as a separate cast designed to work for the whites (Wright 1990:5). Hence, the elites did not consider themselves racist, but rather attributed their contempt for blacks to the fact that they were poor—a just socio-economic classification in the elites' eyes, rather than a racial categorisation (Wright 1990:5). This perception of race and status coincides with what has come to be the dominant racial interpretative scheme in Latin America. As Mullings writes, "the Latin American model [has] generally 'privileged culture over race,' in which extensive racial discrimination coexists with the absence of formal laws enforcing racism and an official ideology denying racism" (Mullings 2005:678) (Photo 7.1).

By the mid-twentieth century, Venezuelan elites had accepted a fluid concept of racial distinctions that allowed a socio-racial flexibility on the scale of the status hierarchy (Wright 1990:5). Processes of miscegenation served as a racial transitional buffer between white elites and black masses, preventing people from "getting stuck" in endogenous racial categorisations (Wright 1990:5). This also impeded the enforcement of racial segregation (Wright 1990:5).

According to Wright, blacks and non-whites have played a larger role in political and social institutions in Venezuela than elsewhere in the Latin American continent (Wright 1990:9). Black and coloured people held important positions amongst regional and national elites after Venezuela's independence in 1830. The lack of a strong central state allowed black and coloured individuals to establish themselves as regional caudillos deriving



Photo 7.1 Statue of Simón Bolívar in Paseo de los Próceres in Caracas. Note the wall carvings behind him. Bolívar liberated Venezuela and several of the surrounding countries from the Spanish Crown. He was from a wealthy creole family, and, driven by his political ambitions and his (for the time) progressive, egalitarian views, he split off from his class background. This is also what has given him such mythical qualities in the context of the Bolivarian process (Photo by the author)

their power from military might (Wright 1990:10). Moreover, *pardos* (the racial amalgam of Europeans, blacks and Indians) were also found in the federal agencies and military organizations (Wright 1990:10).

However, starting in the 1890s, leading intellectuals talked about the need to “whiten the race” by encouraging the immigration of white Europeans whilst blocking the immigration of non-whites (Wright 1990:2; Tinker Salas 2009:133; Derham 2010:69). They were influenced by a Spencerian positivism and by related European racial theories, and openly stated that they perceived Venezuela’s political instability and economic stagnations as a consequence of the predominance of a mixed population (Wright 1990:10). Attributing racial dispositions to genetic deficiencies (Derham 2010:69), they didn’t perceive blacks and *pardos* as compatible with democratic self-rule, and advocated for a strong centralist government that they eventually found in Juan Vicente Gómez’s regime (Wright 1990:10). Following Gómez’s death in 1935, the subsequent heads of state took a more “open-minded” stance on the correlations between race and democratic inclinations, allowing Acción Democrática to form its party with a leadership drawing from mixed-race and middle-class groups. Moreover, Acción Democrática soon found alliances with *pardos* and black masses (Wright 1990:10), turning the notion of racial democracy into their official party ideology (Wright 1990:11). Within Acción Democrática there were central figures that favoured the “whitening” strategy, such as Arturo Uslar Pietri, Alberto Adriani and Andrés Eloy Blanco (Wright 1990:12; Derham 2010:69). However, the focus nevertheless shifted from differences based on race to those based on class, forming the basis for a “colour-blind” cultural nationalism (Wright 1990:11).

These changes were seen as threatening by the white elites, not necessarily because of the threat of colour but rather because of the threat of the mobilisation and rise of the lower classes (Wright 1990:11). During Acción Democrática’s short governmental interlude between 1945 and 1948, the party tried to carry out reforms that impacted immigration laws and those public facilities that were designed to cater to North American oil workers, thus improving conditions for the non-whites (Wright 1990:11). The state bureaucracy was opened to non-whites, and the economic expansion created job opportunities for these groups (Wright 1990:11–12). As Acción Democrática and COPEI consolidated their governance following 1959, racial democracy became the dominant official ideology.

The Venezuelan lower classes occupied a legitimate position in the social landscape until the social breakdown in the 1980s. They were portrayed as *el pueblo*, “as virtuous, albeit ignorant, and therefore in need of

guidance” (Coronil and Skurski 2006:199). The masses were contained and controlled with a carrot or stick approach, that is, either through populist discourse and clientelistic paternalism, or with violence. However, as social unrest increased from the early 1980s, the poor and coloured were increasingly blamed for the country’s ills (Cannon 2008:736). Concurrently, the founding myths of the modern Venezuelan nation state—cross-class harmony and racial democracy—started to crack.

SAVAGERY AND CIVILISATION

Coronil and Skurski (2006:123) quote Sofia, a Harvard-trained lawyer, on uttering after el Caracazo: “I would have killed all those savages, as I am sure that they would have killed us if they had a chance. They hate us.” The “savagery” and “civilisation” tropes hold deep roots in the construction of a Venezuelan national cosmology, as in the rest of Latin America. In political discourse, and particular at critical political conjunctures where class conflicts are surfacing, these tropes have been used to evoke notions of the poor masses as representing savagery in contrast to the civilised nature of the middle and upper classes.

The dual imageries of savagery and civilization are a legacy of the colonial reality established in the New World after the Spanish conquest, whereby “the Indian and African *irracionales* became compliant to the reason of small number of white Christians” (Taussig 1987:5, cursive in original). As Quijano (2000) has noted, Latin America was never fully really decolonised after independence. Rather, preceding over the construction of emerging nation states, white Creoles selectively imported the Enlightenment ideas that fit best their needs and local realities. Equality was not part of this imaginative or interest-based horizon, since the ruling elites thrived on subordination and economic exploitation of those considered ethno-racially and socially inferior (Grosfoguel 2000:368). This translated into the crafting of political, economic and cultural, as well legal structures that favoured white (male) elites (Grosfoguel 2000:368; Wiarda 1971), and the continuation of classificatory schemes that placed colonial subjects outside the imagined political community of the nascent nation states (Grosfoguel 2000:368).

Serving as an interpretative scheme for classifying and attributing supposedly inherent qualities, capacities and ideas to different social groups, the savagery/civilisation juxtaposition has run as an (sometimes explicit) undercurrent in Venezuelan political discourse. More precisely, this dichotomy has been articulated by the powerful to question the civilisational

potential and hence the social legitimacy of the supposedly more savage and less civilised masses. As Coronil and Skurski (2006) have demonstrated, the most sublime expression of the civilisation/barbarity tropes in Venezuelan national cosmology is found in the novel *Doña Bárbara* (1929) by Rómulo Gallegos, considered the greatest expression of Venezuelan identity (Coronil and Skurski 2006:91). The novel depicts the struggle for the “domestication of unconquered nature and uncivilized humans” (Coronil and Skurski 2006:92), transcended into a struggle for the nation’s soul. Indeed, as Coronil has argued in “The Magical State” (1997), the very idea of the modern Venezuelan nation state after 1959 was based on the rejection of the barbarous past represented by the caudillos of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The new era, as represented by Acción Democrática and COPEI, was cast as a civilisatory mission designed to bring the country out of its backwardness and on the road to prosperity, modernity and development. However, as the myth of social harmony lost grip in the 1980s, the increasing tensions between the elites and the poor transformed *el pueblo* from a noble mass, as they had become depicted within the nationalist-populist discourse, to an unruly mass that threatened the civilisational harmony of the nation. As Coronil and Skurski demonstrate through a minute analysis of the public reactions to the so-called Amparo massacre in 1988 and *el Caracazo* in 1989, both instances “made salient suppressed conceptions of the poor as disposable savages” (Coronil and Skurski 2006:123). The trope of “uncivilised savages” continued to be expressed in the Chávez era, but then in the context of a political turning of tables whereby the dominant classes no longer found themselves in a position of social hegemony. Yet so, even if the poor were in a position to vocally express their contempt against the underlying schemes and assumptions articulated through these tropes, that does not imply that the dominant classes adapted a self-reflective stance on the founding premises of their social models. Rather, the opposite happened. Popular political agency in the context of the Bolivarian process was labeled as politically illegitimate and irrational, advanced by socio-culturally inferior groups—a tautological relation that reinforced its/theirs illegitimacy.

THE DENIAL OF POLITICAL LEGITIMACY

Oppositional labeling of Chávez’ supporters commonly included the usual usage of expressions such as “negros” and monkeys (*monos*). Other common expressions were *hordas* (hordes), *chusma* (lowlife, scum), *turba*

(mob), *marginales* (marginals), *ordinarios* (simple) and *lumpen* (poor, vulgar, brute). Yet another expression, *tierruos* (from *tierra*/soil), refers to when *barrio* inhabitants could be identified by their soiled feet (because *barrio* streets were not asphalted) upon entering the city centres. Yet another idiosyncratic expression is *pata en el suelo* (hoof on the ground), referring to a person who cannot afford to buy shoes and thus walks barefoot.

The racial dimension of political opposition was also evident in the frequent portrayal of Hugo Chávez, and other coloured political leaders, as monkeys in cartoons (Fernandes 2010:118–119). A few years after Chávez took office, the US embassy in Caracas hosted a party where the guests were entertained with a puppet show portraying Chávez as a gorilla. Colin Powell, the United States foreign minister at the time, was not amused—perhaps for obvious reasons—and publicly reprimanded the embassy (Ali 2013). Furthermore, Hugo Chávez was frequently referred to as “*mico mandante*” by government opponents. The expression was derived from *mi comandante* (my commander)—an expression Chávez’ followers often used when referring to him, whilst *mico* is a small monkey. The pun therefore translates to “monkey-in-charge.”

Behind the obvious racist as well as class-contemptuous slant of these characteristics is a deeper meaning that harks back to the incomplete decolonisation process inscribed in the Latin American polity. Scholars have drawn attention to how both oppositional groups and affiliated private media consistently have portrayed themselves as “civil society groups,” whereas government supporters have been described as hordes, mobs and scum. As Fernandes notes, the exclusionary notion of civil society deployed by elite groups “has various race, class, and gender associations that mark out certain social groups and classes as unfit for participation in the public sphere” (2010:121). The exclusionary usage of the civil society concept is also symptomatic of its broader application in the neoliberal era; it is associated with certain social groups exercising “civil freedom,” but within the confines of class-defined symbolic markers and liberal values. This appropriation of the right to exercise “civic agency” was also remarked upon by Chávez’ supporters. To them, it illustrates the global dimension of Venezuelan class conflicts; they interpreted “civil society” as an ideological concept embracing a particular group of global citizens (see also Chatterjee 2004 for an analysis of its historical origins and its colonial adaption). From the point of view of many popular sector activists I spoke to, the opposition’s active and exclusionary branding of themselves as civil society

was used as a worldwide marketing strategy in order to gain international support for their cause; thereby legitimising and bolstering oppositional and middle-class political agency whilst simultaneously negating popular and pro-government agency.

The depiction of members of the popular classes as “hordes” was a recurrent feature in media representations of Chávez’ supporters, harking back to the old civilisation/barbary dichotomy. As Duno-Gottberg writes about how the private Venezuelan media portrayed the popular mobilisation during the 2002 coup: “As a mob, they were undifferentiated, faceless” (Duno-Gottberg 2009:160). They were cast as barbaric, irrational and violent, and deprived of political rationale (Duno-Gottberg 2009:160). Whilst these recurring media representations reflected deep-seated historical templates, they also reinforced political polarisation in the country through playing up to deep-seated fears about “the others.” Before the coup in 2002, inhabitants in rich neighbourhoods organised themselves in armed self-defense groups, fearing the “hordes” invasion and pillage of their residences (see Bartley and Ó Briain 2003). People were warned to keep an eye on their domestic servants in case they were collaborating in preparing an attack. Of a more recent date, a middle-class friend of mine told me of how residents in a gated condominium close to the city centre gathered during the riots referred to as “las guarimbas” in 2014. These protests started up as peaceful protests by oppositional student groups, but soon turned into violent riots. The riots caused massive destruction of public property and 43 casualties, most of them security personnel, government supporters and innocent passers-by. However, fearing that government supporters would descend on the city centre where most of the protests were taking place, the residents were discussing how they could strike back on an attack on their building. The suggestion gathering the most momentum was that they would stand on the roof and throw boiling cooking oil down on the “invaders.” As it turned out, the hordes never arrived.

DESERVING AND UNDESERVING POOR

The denial of not only the political legitimacy of the popular classes but also of their social legitimacy also undergirded widespread resentments against government spending on the poor. Commonly, government supporters were referred to as *resentidos* (resentful), implicating that they were “envious” towards the rich, and by extension, trying to get their

hands on wealth that they did not deserve nor had worked for. Oscar, a community activist in the popular parish of 23 de Enero, once spoke about a friend of his and her experience as a poor student attending what is traditionally a university for the privileged:

Look, a friend of mine who studies in la [Universidad] Católica, en la Andrés Bello, she is from a humble origin but she is there on a scholarship, she told me how they talk...she hears different expressions from *mono* (monkey) to *esos pobres de mierda* (those shitty poor) who want to take everything away from us, those lazy people, what they want is what we produce...

Similar sentiments, yet in a stronger language, can be discerned in a commentary written by “Lara Lopez” under a YouTube video showing a discussion about the 2013 elections of Nicolás Maduro:

Chavistas take off to Cuba so you can continue to eat shit...CONFORMISTS you are thugs and whores who don't want a better country because you live in misery and feel envy for those who have worked hard for everything they have achieved, and you have expropriated it!! Marginal thieves, just like your ex-president and mister potato face (Maduro). YOU ARE A FRAAAAAAUD.⁴

Underlying these portrayals of the poor one can identify deep-seated notions echoing the idea of a culture of poverty (Lewis 1966), namely, that the Venezuelan poor were poor due to laziness, low morals and sloth. Within this interpretative scheme, government “hand-outs” only served to bolster these character traits. This view was expressed through referring to government supporters as having a *bozal de arepa*. Arepa, Venezuela’s prime staple food, is a flat, round bread baked on corn flour, and the significance of this saying is that they were led haplessly like a horse or a donkey by an arepa-filled muzzle offered by the government.⁵ These ideas are not unique to Venezuela; as noted in the introduction to this volume, the Brazilian middle and upper classes also revolted against the idea the poor would get access to state benefits and consumer items that they did not “deserve.” Likewise, the Venezuelan poor were framed as undeserving recipients of state-supported material well-being, and by the same sleight of hand, the fundamental issue of the historical constitution of Venezuela as a fundamentally unequal society, and the question of how to challenge this legacy, was removed from view.

DIFFERENTIATED LIFE WORLDS

One of the first days upon my arrival to Venezuela in 2005, I was told by Maria, a Chávez supporter in her mid-40s:

They [the opposition/middle and upper class] never knew anything about the living conditions in the rest of the society. They didn't have to use public transport because they had their own cars. They didn't need to use public hospitals because they were insured at private clinics. They didn't have to care about pensions or social security because they had money. They didn't have to worry about crime because they had their private security firms. They knew nothing about all this and they don't understand what is happening here because they don't understand the background for it. It is like Chávez once said: even if we placed the opposition on a pedestal covered with diamonds, they would still hate us.

Her words underlined the fundamental characteristics of Venezuelan society; it is built upon a fundament of entrenched social, spatial and social-cultural inequalities. In turn, this translates into completely different life experiences and perspectives through which different social groups ground their identities and political subjectivities. To many in the middle and upper classes, popular sector neighbourhoods are perceived as dangerous and uncivilised spaces, occupied by uneducated, unsophisticated people. Most middle-class people that I met during my time in Venezuela were shocked to hear that I actually lived in a popular sector neighbourhood, and occasionally “lectured” me on the violent nature of these areas as well as its residents' less-refined intellectual capacities (Photos 7.2 and 7.3).

However, most middle-class people had never set their foot in a *barrio*, and would never do so. A friend of mine once said that rich people, rushing by in their SUVs on their way home to eastern Caracas, probably just close their eyes when they pass the Western *barrio* communities, pretending they are not there. In Venezuela, as in other Latin American countries, the spatial and social divisions between different social groups frequently preclude middle and upper class contact with people on the other side of the social fence, except from encounters marked by defined status ascriptions such as labourers, waiters, shop clerks and domestic servants. As Maria alluded to above, the poor and the rich live their lives on widely divergent social and spatial arenas. Indeed, the secluded view from the predominantly prosperous eastern valley of Caracas⁶ meant that many people would still, after two decades of social misery and unrest during the 1980s and 1990s, repeatedly state that “Chávez destroyed the harmonious society that we once had.”



Photo 7.2 Typical *barrio* homes (Photo by the author)

THE CRISIS OF MODERNITY

Tinker Salas eloquently summarises a widely held explanatory model amongst opponents to the Chávez government:

Many opposed to Chávez expressed a view of society that created a false distinction between an educated and enlightened opposition fighting to save the country and defend democracy and an uneducated multitude led by a charismatic yet unscrupulous popular leader who retained support by squandering government funds on his followers (Tinker Salas 2015:172).

Indeed, these views reflected that opposition supporters perceived of themselves as the gatekeepers and embodiment of the mythical model version of the modern Venezuelan nation state; a state that was moulded upon a class-defined social hegemony and Venezuela's compliance with the founding tenants of contemporary global modernity; liberal democracy and free-market politics. The Bolivarian process was incomprehensible for many from the upper and middle classes, as well as for many of the



Photo 7.3 Gated mansions in an affluent neighbourhood in the east of Caracas (Photo by the author)

country's intellectuals, who were oriented towards "consumption patterns, value orientations, and enjoyment of the 'modern' global good life" (Lander 2005:33). The new political orientation, away from Westernised imageries of modernity, Western political alliances as well as the allusions to nationalism, was interpreted as "an anachronism in a globalizing world, a return to unfeasible and historically Third World postures" (Lander 2005:33). To them, Chávez represented an uncivilised, caudillistic political order, and the socialist façade of the Bolivarian process represented a position on the wrong side of the global ideological fence.

However, in the final part of this chapter, I want to reflect upon the deeper implications of the dichotomised perception of local and global realities that were crystalising in the Chávez era. I suggest that, in essence, these also reflect the crisis of modernity in the Latin American continent. For the better part of the twentieth century, Venezuela was living the expectation of developmentalism and modernity; an expectation that harks

back to the very foundation of Latin American nation states. As Hellinger has written:

The model of political modernization bequeathed to political science by the French revolution and Enlightenment, suggests that Latin America will only progress once its traditional, personalist culture is replaced by civic culture populated with rational, educated citizens capable of completion in both the economic and political marketplace...secular modernist like Betancourt, Rómulo Gallegos, Luis Beltrán Figueroa, and others sought to tame la barbarie and, aided by oil rents, build a modern, Western democratic society. (Hellinger 2001:9)

What is important to capture is the increasing divergence between the official, middle- and upper-class narrative about the emerging modern Venezuelan society at the time and the actual experiences of living in that society from a subaltern perspective. The foundational myth of Chavismo rests on the schism that developed as Puntofijismo, and the social sectors it represented, increasingly alienated the popular sectors from an illusory cross-class society. Acción Democrática initial paternalistic attempt to save the popular sectors from themselves turned into an alienation of those very same sectors, as the chosen political and economic model turned into a system of exclusion rather than inclusion. For the popular sectors, liberal democracy became a facade for elite accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2005) that was blatantly intensified during the neoliberalisation of Venezuelan society. Moreover, the state's predisposition to crush dissent through violence and repression made it clear that it was not only unwilling to respond to popular sector needs, but it was also effectively outlawing them from the Venezuelan polity.

It was on this background that Chávez' portrayal of the world as historically and structurally unjust struck a deep chord amongst the popular sectors, because they never came to enjoy the fruits of global capitalism and liberal democracy as promised to them. From the popular sector's perspective, this ideology rather served to disguise the oppressive economic mechanisms that had relegated them to poverty, and to cover the violent oppression of subaltern dissent that was taking place across the world—a violence that had been deeply inscribed on their own social body. Thus, the espousal of a worldview aligned with the “Third World,” or what Hellinger has called *tercermundismo* (2001), rather than with western notions of modernity, allowed the popular sectors to create a



Photo 7.4 Labour Day in Western Caracas, May 1, 2011 (Photo by the author)

twenty-first century identity that incorporated them into a global narrative about subaltern struggle (Photo 7.4).

In the Introduction (this volume) Strønen and Ystanes refer to the proliferation of alternative political horizons and projects emerging as part of the Pink Tide. As Motta has argued, these heterogeneous proposals represent different ways of imagining and practising the relationship between the market, the state and society (Motta 2009:43). It constitutes an opposition to “the cultural logics, social relations, and institutions that underpin and sustain the ‘system’” (ibid.) altogether, because “the system” (the state-capital nexus, as it has worked so far in Latin American history) is by default an oppressor to subaltern lives, needs and claims. On the other hand, the Latin American middle and upper classes have become progressively enmeshed in what may be epitomised through what de Sousa Santos calls “Americanization, as a hegemonic form of globalization” (de Sousa Santos 2001:185). In essence, this worldview hinges upon Euro-American notions of liberal democracy, market capitalism, consumer

society and the global media sphere. Through the lenses and normative frameworks of “Americanization,” subaltern struggles appear politically incomprehensible and illegitimate, advanced by socio-culturally unsophisticated and inferior groups.

Note that it is not my intent here to suggest that it is possible to draw up clear-cut binaries between “inside and outside” modernity. The complexities surrounding identity politics and symbolic representations of modernity in Venezuela are also extensively discussed in Strønen (2017). My aim is, however, to highlight how differentiated life worlds also shape different political, social, cultural and epistemological groundings for orienting, assessing and positioning oneself in the world. This schism became utterly visible in Venezuela, where the two different political camps came to ground their political struggle—for or against the Bolivarian process—on the basis of different conceptualisations of their nation, society and the world. This schism provides for a continuously unstable grounding for any future project of national building, implying that the contemporary crisis of governance and stand-off (as this chapter is written in April 2017) between the Maduro government and the opposition only serves to mask much deeper challenges for Venezuela’s political future.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has taken as a point of departure the socio-economic and socio-cultural hierarchies that characterised the formation of Venezuelan society since its inception. Through the ways in which race, racism and class became antagonistically articulated as part of the political polarisation following Chávez’ electoral victory, these hierarchical social matrixes gained renewed salience. Through the crafting of what I have termed a Bolivarian space, new collective consciousness and political subjectivities grounded in the counter-hegemonic identity politics and claims for redistribution gained political force and visibility. At the same time, this generated a counter-reaction amongst the dominant classes who had previously enjoyed political and cultural hegemony. However, I have also suggested that the cleavages that crystalised in the course of the Bolivarian process are reflecting the crisis of modernity in Latin America at large. As the promised gains of developmentalism, and subsequently free-market politics and liberal democracy, failed to materialise, Latin American nation-building projects are founded upon highly unstable grounding. Indeed, there is a growing

schism between those who are progressively enmeshed in hegemonic forms of globalisation, and those who are searching for alternative social, political and epistemological social models. In conclusion, the Pink Tide époque in Venezuela during Chávez' presidency represented a paradigmatic rupture in the nation's history, at the same time as it made visible and accentuated the inherently unequal, hierarchical and differentiated life worlds that characterise the Latin American polity.

NOTES

1. Poverty levels have now risen again after the onset of the economic crisis in the country. However, this is not the topic of this chapter as I am focusing on the particular dynamics characterising the Chávez era.
2. See Strønen (2017) for a discussion of the historical origins of and social meaning of corruption in Venezuela.
3. Pérez eventually stepped down facing a trial on corruption charges in 1993, but it has been suggested that he to a certain extent was designated as the scapegoat for the political and economic crisis at large.
4. YouTube. 2013. Ana Mercedes Díaz. Ex jueza electoral venezolana en Bayly. Video uploaded April 10. http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=rFfZ0HwSupk, accessed December 20, 2013.
5. I have discussed elsewhere both how to understand Chávez in relation to the concept of populism, as well as the historical legacy of clientelism in the Chávez government's relationship to its constituency and vice versa (Strønen 2017).
6. The city valley of Caracas is marked by an east-west divide, whereby the majority of the poor live in the west, and the east is predominantly affluent. The invisible, yet palpable line is drawn east of the pedestrian street of Sabana Grande.

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