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Jorge Capetillo-Ponce

University of Massachusetts Boston, jorge.capetillo@umb.edu

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Venezuela in the Times of Chavez: A Study on Media, Charisma, and Social Polarization

Mankind in general judge more by their eyes than their hands; for all can see the appearance, but few can touch the reality. Everyone sees what you seem to be, but few discover what you are

Machiavelli
The Prince

1. Introduction: Media War and Social Polarization

When one arrives in Caracas and listens to the radio or turns on the TV or browses through the newspapers, one is immediately struck by the black-or-white presentations of Venezuelan reality: either continuous attacks launched against President Hugo Chavez and his supporters by private media outlets, or almost unquestioned support by the public media and a number of supportive private media outlets. Soon I discovered, when traveling around the country and meeting people from different professions and walks of life, that socio-political polarization permeates not only the media but all of Venezuelan society.

Venezuela's traditional ruling elite has relied extensively on the private media to orchestrate its efforts to overthrow Chavez. Virtually all of Venezuela's homes have at least one TV set, and yet the tone of private media discourse is notably reflective of the expensive tastes of rich, white, and fashionable Venezuelans. In fact, one has to turn on state television programs (the VTV program *Barrio Adentro* comes to mind here) to catch a glimpse of the actual cultural and racial diversity of Venezuelan society. Prior to the advent of Chavez, it was rare even in government TV to see an Afro-Venezuelan, even though they comprise a significant sector of the population.

Such an elitist worldview can be seen especially in the various *telenovelas* (soap operas), reality programs, and commercials that appear in the main private television stations -- Venevision, RCTV, Globovision, Televen, and CMT -- which control close to 90 percent of the market. The news programs in these TV stations, as well as in the private radio networks, and 9 out of the 10 major national newspapers -- including *El Nacional*, *El Universal*, *Tal Cual*, *El Impulso*, *El Nuevo Pais*, and *El Mundo* -- highlight the viewpoints and personalities of the traditional elite sidelined by the Chavez government, and ceaselessly derogate the government's policies, focusing on looming economic recessions, corruption, and crime.¹

In contrast to the elitism found in the private media, a growing number of media outlets cater to Chavez's own project of "left populism," a vaguely-defined term referring to political power gained and sustained by appealing to the poor and common folk, and by opposing the elites that historically have run the country. The most important of these are the public-television channels, particularly VTV (Channel 8) but also Vive, Asamblea Nacional TV, Avila, and Telesur; also supportive of Chavez is the national public radio network, the official Bolivarian News Agency, as well as such pro-Chavez newspapers as *Ultimas Noticias*, *Quinto Dia*, and *Vea*. And while these outlets are numerically fewer than the private ones, they are rapidly growing in number and have a large and loyal following, especially within the nation's lower economic strata, a sector that comprises more than 60 percent of the population. In today's Venezuela it is commonplace to see, hear, and read angry denunciations of the *cogollos* (corrupt traditional elites), with antagonists to Chavez being labeled "*los escualidos*" (the squalid ones), former Chavez supporters *traidores* (traitors), and participants in strikes *golpistas* (coup-plotters).

A precarious balance of the media voices of left and right was holding up to the December 2006 presidential elections, which brought the 11th straight national electoral victory for the pro-

Chavez forces. And yet, as early as the year 2001, members of those *Chavista* groups known as *Circulos Bolivarianos* have been staging noisy, threatening rallies outside of privately-owned newspapers and television stations or against specific anti-Chavez journalists. There has also been increasing governmental regulation and enforcement. In 2004 Venezuelans saw the enactment of a law requiring “social responsibility” in the media, while on May 2007, RCTV, the oldest TV station in the country, sent out its last transmission, its license being revoked with the justification that it had participated in subversive activities. It was replaced by the pro-Chavez station TVEs.

My main objective in this study is to deepen the reader’s understanding of Venezuela’s ongoing socio-political conflict by focusing on the struggle for control over one of the key agents of mobilization and politicization in the country: the media outlets, and particularly television. My methodology strives to interweave the chronological record of events with analysis of the equally relevant theoretical, institutional, political, economic, and cultural components that helped to create those events. Central to my presentation is its analysis of the decline of Venezuela’s two traditional parties and the emergence of a charismatic and populist form of leadership.

A key element of my methodology can be found in the seventeen interviews I conducted with renowned media experts, journalists, scholars, politicians, and individuals in other professions -- hailing from a wide range of political positions -- during the three research trips I took to Venezuela in 2004, 2005, and 2006. I rely on them frequently in order to offer the reader a balanced understanding of the sometimes widely different interpretations of specific events, personalities, and other relevant components found in my study. In addition, I learned a great deal about media and social polarization in the country through informal meetings with high officials and journalists at Venezolana de Televisión (VTV) and the Ministry of Communication and Information (MINCI) during my first trip in 2004, and through my participation, in 2006, in the monthly meeting of the Editorial Board of the Gumilla group, a think tank devoted to media and

communicational issues that publishes the prestigious journal *Comunicación*. My methodology also includes participant observations, image and discourse analyses of television programs, textual analyses of print-media pieces, and my review of the relevant scholarly literature.

2. Weak Parties, Strong Media

Venezuela is a petro state, with the revenues it garners from its state-owned oil industry serving as a lubricant that eases the frictions of rapid social change. Under the aegis of the 1958 pact known as *Punto Fijo*, the major political elites and the labor and business associations put aside their differences to enact a host of measures that have brought the country consistent economic growth, low inflation, a certain degree of social mobility and mass education, a professional class, and a subordinated military. It made possible the creation of a centralized state financed by steadily rising oil revenues, and the emergence of two strongly organized national parties. Acción Democrática (AD) on the left and Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (COPEI) on the right, would go on to monopolize political action and control Venezuela's social movements the next three decades or so. Toward the end of that time-span, however, a series of traumatic events brought Venezuela from stability to crisis.

On February 18, 1983 (known as Black Friday), the currency collapsed, initiating a period of depreciation and stagflation that continues to afflict Venezuela today. Six years later came the bloody urban riots of February 1989 known as *El Caracazo*, those having been the public's angry and spontaneous response to the new government's structural-adjustment package, which entailed price hikes and product shortages. 1992 brought not one but two attempted military coups: that of February 4th, which had Chavez as one of its leaders, and another on November 27th. Further shocks were inflicted via the impeachment and removal from office of President Carlos Andrés Perez and the subsequent election win, in December 1993, of former president Rafael Caldera.

Significantly, since it rang the death-knell of the old, relatively stable two-party system, in that election Caldera abandoned the party he himself had founded (COPEI) and instead ran an explicitly anti-party campaign. Each of these events, as Crisp and Levine have pointed out, “undermined or removed a key pillar of the old order: economic growth (Black Friday); social pacts and civil order (*El Caracazo*); a depoliticized and well-controlled military (the 1992 coups); and unquestioned executive dominance and party hegemony (the impeachment of Perez, and Caldera’s anti-party campaign)” (Crisp and Levine 1998:29).

There has been no lack of studies speculating as to the likely causes of the decline of Venezuela’s traditional parties. Coppedge (1994) believes that the two major parties’ excessive penetration of civil society, right through the 1980s, suffocated citizens and excluded new entrants; Kornblith (1998) thinks that the late-eighties fall off in oil revenues undermined the ability of the two parties to broker privileges to large sectors of the population; Corrales (2000) blames the parties for their lack of internal democracy, which shut down potential leaders and debarred ideological renewal, and also points to the repeated failure of the party in power to carry through any cogent package of economic reforms, with that ultimately causing Venezuelans to grow weary of unfulfilled promises; Lalander (2006) believes that the decentralization process already in place before the rise of *Chavismo*, with direct elections of mayors and governors, undermined the previous two-party hegemony. Other researchers (e.g. Levine and Crisp, 1998 and Ellner, 1995) have come up with their own combinations of the above factors.

I would add two more factors to the list. First, in the 1970s and 1980s the homogenizing tendency of globalization, whether actual or perceived, served to defuse most ideological confrontation. For whereas in the 1950s and 1960s AD attracted chiefly the country’s working and lower classes, while COPEI the nation’s emerging middle class and members of its economic elite, in the 1970s both parties began to gravitate toward the political center. Political loyalties based on

class identity waned, and the two parties devolved into mere "machines for extracting rents from the public arena" (Karl 1997:93) and distributing them as political patronage. Venezuela became a depoliticized democracy, in which administration replaced politics and government. It was at this juncture that the seeds were sown for a widespread feeling that the public realm needed to be repoliticized. The reality on the ground became that of an electorate contemptuous of traditional party platforms and determined to cast its vote on the basis of a candidate's proven performance and personality. While political parties still exist today, they have fragile internal structures that depend highly on personalities. In fact, since the 1998 election of Chavez Venezuela's "traditional two-party system has been replaced by a loose system composed of Chavez supporters, or *Chavistas*, and anti-Chavez activists" (Sainz Borgo and Paz 2005: 91).²

Second, as the old parties' traditional social bases of support were eroded away, politicians looked more upon the media as representing the central arena of political communication with the citizenry. As Panebianco (1988) has pointed out, the transformation of political communication has caused an earthquake within parties, as media coverage empowers the parties' elected representatives, along with their media advisors, while undercutting former bases of power enjoyed by party members and bureaucrats. Members of AD and COPEI adapted their activities to the logic of the media – a shift to a more image-oriented political life that underlines the personalization of the political sphere and the emergence of "political celebrities" – and in the process they lost their central place as organizers of the country's political life. This media logic usually places the sphere of government and politics on "safe" ideological grounds, discouraging politicians from speaking painful or complex truths. This was increasingly the case with the traditional *Punto Fijo* leadership in Venezuela, which became representatives of what Ranney (1983:103) calls "nice guy politics," a form of bland populism where presentation and style are more important than ideology, policy, and principles.

The emergence of the Venezuelan private media as a political force was aided, according to Tucker, by “the concentration of media ownership and lax government regulation.” This failure to enforce codified regulations “established the early expectation among commercial broadcasters for a *laissez-faire* relationship between government and private media” (Tucker 2004:8). From being subordinated to the political/military elites during the dictatorship years (until 1958), after democracy took hold in Venezuela in the 1960s, and a modern capitalistic and commercial mindset became prevalent in the political sphere, such large electronic media corporations as the Cisneros group and the Bottom & Granier group, as well as such print-media groups as Capriles, Otero-Calvo, and Mata-Nuñez, grew exponentially both in economic and audience power, and in that process gained increasing independence from the government and the two hegemonic parties. In fact, as scholar and media expert Marcelino Bisbal pointed out in an interview for this study, “while the political parties, directly subsidized by the state, spend massively on advertising, the Venezuelan private media actually helped to foster in the public’s mind the image of a wealthy country being mismanaged by corrupt or ill-prepared politicians, which proved to be a key element in eroding the influence of the traditional parties” (Bisbal 2006).

Still, Bisbal, along with Lugo and Romero, considers that a relation of “symbiotic dependence” had existed for decades – up until Chavez arrived to the presidency and followed his own media agenda -- between media corporations and government in Venezuela. It was an undeclared pact based on a relationship “characterized by the duality between the influence that the media, especially television, has on Venezuela’s public opinion against the hidden and tangible controls that the government has politically, legally, and logistically over the media” (Lugo and Romero 2003:11). In other words, the media-government relationship took place in the midst of a complex system of socio-economic and political interests based on balances and counter-balances of power that maintained a high degree of socio-political stability through their engaging each other in continuous dialogue and negotiation.

3. Chavez and the Media: A Marriage Made in Heaven and Hell

It is ironic that the media's critical portrayals of traditional politicians and political parties have not only strengthened anti-elite sentiments within the population, but have brought populist actors -- and Chavez above all -- not just a receptive audience but a highly receptive medium over the years. Most Venezuelans got their first glimpse of Hugo Chavez during the waning hours of the attempted military coup of February 1992. Chavez was allowed to appear for 72 seconds before the television cameras to tell his troops to lay down their arms:

Impeccably dressed in uniform, showing no sign of fatigue or stress, Chavez delivered a short speech, first emphasizing his Bolivarian values, then stating: "Unfortunately, for now the objectives we sought were not achieved in the capital city. That is, we in Caracas could not take control of power. You, there in the interior, did a great job. But it is time now to avoid further bloodshed; it is time to reflect. We will have new situations. The country definitely has to embark on the road to a better destiny" (Naim 1993: 101-102).

That brief exposure to Chavez, which also made visible the nation's crisis of legitimacy, was all it took to put this newcomer at the center of the political map. For here was a compelling and uncommon sight for television viewers: a new face that managed to maintain its composure even at the moment of defeat, and a firm voice that made no attempt to evade the repercussions of his actions. Thus, short as it was, the first genuinely "mediated" encounter between Chavez and the Venezuelan people was so resonant that even six years later, when Chavez ran for president, it assured him a basic substratum of national recognition and tentative popularity. The growing media attention during his 1998 campaign allowed Chavez to effectively denounce party leaders, accusing them of squandering the nation's oil bonanza and draining the political system of its

democratic content, even as he extolled the people as naturally gifted agents of change and reconstruction. His campaign style was intensely personal and direct, emphasizing his association with the 1992 coup by sporting the red beret from his military uniform, which became the symbol of both his leadership quality and his commitment to change.

After so many years in which the Venezuelan media had purveyed a strictly bland and upper-class sort of populism, one can understand how so many Venezuelans could have found themselves attracted by Chavez's media image that projected a rogue, unconventional, yet strong leader interested in the problems of the common people. As journalist Ernesto Villegas pointed out in an interview for this study, "Chavez's media image was the antithesis of the traditional leadership that had come out of the *Punto Fijo* pact, and his charismatic powers quickly unified a previously fragmented left, attracting even those voters that were not convinced socialists, and utilizing for his personal gain the media's appetite for the unconventional" (Villegas 2006). The media facilitated the promotion of individual over organizational forms by labeling his ideas *Chavismo* and his supporters *Chavistas*.³ No other candidate in the 1998 presidential race was afforded this level of personal elevation. On the other hand, as Lugo and Romero point out, it is a myth that Chavez won the elections with no elite support and against the frontal opposition of all the mainstream media corporations. Once he became a credible candidate, "*El Nacional*, *Venevisión*, and partially *Televen* offered him his support, which became a crucial element for his electoral success" (Lugo and Romero 2003:4). Chavez did have a party, the *Movimiento Quinta Republica* or MVR (see endnote 2), but it was highly dependant on his mass appeal, and a personality cult emerged based mostly on Chavez's high media profile.

Chavez's electoral triumph at the end of 1998 gave his coalition complete control of the legislature, and with the poor showing (some would say demise) of AD and COPEI at the polls, the private media was seen by the Venezuelan middle and professional classes,⁴ who feared a

decline in their standard of living under Chavez, as the only credible institution left in the country capable of bringing together under one tent the wildly disparate opposition to Chavez, which ranges from former guerrillas to social democrats to ultra-rightists. Venezuela's private media corporations -- which dominate the media landscape of the country from production to distribution across virtually all media forms and technologies -- are owned by a few families who have a serious financial stake in wanting to see Chavez fall, especially after the undeclared pact, the historical dialogue between media and government, suddenly ended and was replaced with permanent confrontation. Further, according to Venezuelan journalists interviewed for this study, in Venezuela journalism has gradually fallen into the hands of businesspeople and managers who have only a layperson's exposure to its critical watchdog functions and its protection of freedom of expression. Thus, the private media leadership's immediate reaction was to defend their economic interests and orchestrate a permanent anti-Chavez media campaign that quickly moved from open confrontation to subversion.

The constant glare of critical media publicity -- what Villegas calls "media overexposure" (Villegas 2006)-- against Chavez, in addition to an economic downturn in the three years immediately following his election, did have a negative effect, and Chavez's popularity declined. To counter this trend, Chavez regulated the private media through the various legal and political mechanisms he had available at hand. His initial strategy was based on implementing *cadenas*. The term literally means "chains" or "networks," but in fact it referred to Chavez's long and often rambling public addresses to the nation, which he obliged all of the television and radio networks to broadcast. With each passing year the *cadenas* grew both in length and number -- there were "13 of them just in January 2003" (Hawkins 2003:1156), during a general strike. Then in 2004 his government enacted a new law, popularly known as *Ley Resorte*, to be regulated by a commission (CONATEL) appointed by the president. This law makes virtually all daylight programming (from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m.) as "protected time" for children, which means that no program having any

objectionable content, be it sexual or violent or dangerous to health, may be broadcast. Under the cover of this "social responsibility" law the government can impose heavy fines and/or revoke broadcasting licenses even for such indefinable offenses as disseminating information deemed to run "contrary to national security." The law criminalizes the publication or broadcasting of any statement that shows a "lack of respect" for government authorities or that "insults" government leaders. It has been criticized by such advocates of press freedom as Reporters without Borders, The Committee to Protect Journalists, The International Federation of Journalists, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and The Inter-American Human Rights Commission, the last of these having expressed its concern that the law's "vague terminology" and "potentially excessive penalties" could intimidate journalists and media companies "into failing to report on matters of public interest" (The Economist 2005).

Objectionable as it may be, Chavez's media strategy came in response to real threats he perceived in the endless attacks by the private media in the three years stretching from his inauguration in January 1999 to the (in)famous event known as "the media coup" of April 2002.⁵ The private media elaborated "narratives that gave meaning to the events on the streets, constructing a social imagery that sought to legitimize certain subjects and disqualify others" (Gottberg 2004:118), and served as a 24/7 forum where all opposition figures could call upon the populace to join them in anti-Chavez demonstrations. My analysis of press photographs and TV images supports Gottberg's finding that the *Chavista* crowds were routinely presented in darkly negative images, as a mob or rabble, whereas the largely light-skinned marchers representing "civil society" were depicted in such heroic poses as that of a long row of women moving decisively forward, bearing a giant Venezuelan flag.

In the days leading up to the media coup, those four private TV stations that Chavez has dubbed "the four horsemen of the apocalypse" -- Venevision, RCTV, Globovision, and Televen --

preempted regular programming in order to air relentlessly anti-Chavez speeches, with these being interrupted only for "public service announcements" (actually sponsored by the oil industry, another key player in the conflict) calling on viewers to immediately take to the streets: "Not one step backward! Out! Leave now!" In the course of my interviewing I was struck by how strong the consensus was, right across the politically diverse range of my interviewees, that during the confusing coup period of April 10-14, 2002, the private media acted in a way strongly suggesting that it was a key accomplice in the plot to overthrow Chavez, and that they had stepped outside the law. This view has been effectively disseminated through various media formats, with the most famous being the documentary "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" by Irish directors Kim Bartley and Donnacha O'Brian, which was shot inside the Presidential Palace the day of the coup.

In the two days following the coup (April 12 and 13), the media decided not to present the adverse reaction of the popular sectors to the overthrow of Chavez, who was taken by the military from the presidential palace to an island prison. The headline in the front page of *El Universal* the day after the coup was "A Step in the Right Direction," and the main governmental television station, VTV Channel 8, had been taken off the air. But the *Chavista* demonstrations being held in those days in front of the headquarters of major private media outlets, demanding that they inform their audiences about what was truly going on in the country, made it clear how well "the mob" understood that mediation through television guaranteed their own socio-political existence. And yet their ensuing mobilization to demand that Chavez be returned to power led to the imposition of a news blackout, with every Venezuelan station continuing with normal programming, which meant mostly soap operas and light entertainment. There was a reprisal factor at work there, for previously the privately owned networks had protested against Chavez's policy of decreeing *cadenas*. Now the private networks had instituted their own *cadena*.

Chavez was back in power only three days after the coup, and a short media cease-fire followed. This meant, according to media expert Andres Cañizales in an interview for this study, "both that Chavez recognized the power of the media to destabilize his government and that the media recognized the popular support of the President among wide sectors of the population. But there was little room for compromise, and both camps quickly restarted the media war, with the private outlets calling for a general strike at the end of 2002, and then calling for a referendum on Chavez staying on as president in 2004." Chavez went right back to his *cadena*s, while also using his weekly call-in show, *Aló Presidente*, to denounce specific news articles, programs, and even journalists. Little wonder then that "Venezuelans became more suspicious when approaching the media" (Cañizales 2005), given all of Chavez's accusations thundering out of the left, and the rightist private media's incessant proselytizing, between 2002 and 2004, for the holding of a popular referendum, one that, ironically enough, had been made possible by the new Bolivarian Constitution instituted by Chavez himself shortly after his electoral victory of 1998.⁶

The referendum was held on August 2004 and Chavez won it with close to 60 percent of the vote. After this Chavez victory, like every other, the private media owners felt the need (or the pressure) to fire their most outspoken anti-Chavez journalists. Such "victims" of the ongoing media war,⁷ of whom there have been many, loom almost as large as martyrs in anti-Chavista's eyes, given the way the media, in an ever-more-polarized Venezuela, has taken on a central leadership role within the opposition. Media giant The Cisneros Group, owner of Venevision, as well as Televisión, owned by The Camero Group, arrived at a *modus vivendi* with the Chavez government a few months after the referendum, one that entailed their dramatically toning down their attacks on the government. CMT was bought by the pro-Chavez international news network Telesur on December 2006. And Chavez's banishment of RCTV -- the oldest television station in the country and one of the president's fiercest critics -- from the airwaves in May 2007 (it resumed broadcasting in cable and satellite on July 16, 2007), has left Venezuela with just

Globovision, an all-news channel whose signal extends no further than the capital city of Caracas, as the single television outlet critical of Chavez.

Thus, what the former Minister of Communication and the present President of Telesur, Andrés Yzarra, has dubbed a “*Chavista media hegemony*”(Cañizalez 2007) is becoming a reality in Venezuela. This hegemony is based, according to Bisbal, on “repressive tolerance” (Bisbal 2006), a sort of “selective enforcement” approach based on the legal framework that the government now has in place, which allows it to repress the private media in specific cases (for example RCTV), even though most of the time it assumes a position of tolerance.

4. Chavez’s Media-Fueled, Charismatic Leadership Style

Max Weber has famously distinguished three types of authority: traditional, legal, and charismatic. Liberal democracies overcame the old feudal, inherited forms of authority, and adopted legal authority, which is meant to be based on meritocracy. Gone are the days, however, when politicians and ministers were given at least an initial benefit of the doubt, out of respect for their presumed competence. Arguably that mediatization of political life which we have been looking at here has undermined the citizen’s perception of the elite’s competence and pushed the door wide open to the third type of authority, charisma, of which Weber wrote:

The charismatic structure knows nothing of a form or of an ordered procedure of appointment or dismissal. . . Charisma knows only inner determination and inner restraint. The holder of charisma seizes the task that is adequate for him and demands obedience and a following by virtue of his mission. His success determines whether he finds them. His charismatic claim breaks down if his mission is not recognized by those to whom he feels he has been sent. If they recognize him, he is their master – so long as

he knows how to maintain recognition through “proving” himself. But he does not derive his “right” from their will, in the manner of an election. Rather the reverse holds: it is the duty of those to whom he addresses his mission to recognize him as their charismatically qualified leader. [Weber 1958:246-7].

Chavez’s charismatic leadership-style has proven over time to respond closely to those parameters laid down by Weber. While he publicly recognizes the Bolivarian Constitution as the only legitimate source of governmental power, the real pillars of his administration have been his personality and mission. As Roberts (2003:53) puts it, “Chavez quickly replaced party-based mediation between state and society” with a media-based, “direct, personalistic relationship between the masses and a charismatic, though highly divisive, caudillo, who claims to represent ‘the people’ while his opponents represent a minority group of outsiders or ‘others.’”

The comments made to me by the pro-Chavez interviewees underline the charismatic nature of his leadership. As they see it, his is the voice of the rebellion of that “silent majority” that wants its politicians to know, as opposed to merely listen to, the people, and to implement policies that are in line with their wishes. They believe that Venezuelan voters support Chavez because they see in him extraordinary leadership qualities, and exchange votes for the promise of radical social change.

While charismatic leadership is not the same as populist leadership, there are important similarities, one of them being the weberian notion of charismatic linkage, where leader and people are one, a notion that we see emerging in the comments above. What differentiates the populist leader is that s/he stands in stark contrast to elitism, and stresses, in addition to her/his charismatic powers, a political discourse that relies on the idea of a popular will reminiscent of Rousseau’s conception of the term.

In any case, Chavez has cultivated the charismatic linkage by creating the *Misiones* (Missions), a bureaucracy that runs parallel to the traditional channels of representation and political mediation, and which has become the heart of *Chavismo*. The *Misiones* provide the masses with free education and health care, subsidized food, social services, land reform, and environmental protection, and have brought Chavez a direct payoff in the form of support and high participation levels among Venezuela's lower-income sectors. And yet the *Misiones* --created by Chavez with the justification that governors, mayors, ministers, and bureaucrats have been too slow to meet the people's needs -- answers to no one except the President, and its lack of transparency has sparked allegations of corruption and patronage that have haunted his administration until today.

And while Chavez's institution of the *Misiones* is in keeping with Weber's dictum that "the holder of charisma seizes the task that is adequate for him, and demands obedience and a following by virtue of his mission," we of the twenty-first century know at least one thing about charisma that early-twentieth-century Weber very likely did not: It is a gift of the media as of the gods. The media outlets have been central to the development of Chavez's sociopolitical worldview, for he understood very well from the very beginning of his career that he needs continuous access to them in order to show the people his extraordinary character and indoctrinate them in order to create the potential for mass mobilization. Little wonder, then, that Chavez has brought so many media people into his inner circle of advisors,⁸ and that he gives so much importance to the maintenance of his image as a man both personable and approachable.

We can say that Chavez and the mass media were made for each other, but their marriage was made both in heaven and hell. The problem that Chavez has encountered is that the beloved medium, the one he depends on, keeps on rebelling against him. The conflict between Chavez and the private media outlets has been over the interpretation of not only national and international

reality, but of the future of the nation. His efforts at the all-important task of image-making -- which really means the promotion of a personality cult -- have been continuously sabotaged by the private media through their reinterpretation of the positive media images that Chavez designs for public consumption to fit into such negative stereotypes as the leader of the mob, or the authoritarian *caudillo* who is working with Fidel Castro to turn Venezuela into a totalitarian state.

In the absence of the traditional consensus between the government and private media outlets in Venezuela, and very little interest in negotiation in either camp (especially during Chavez's first five years in power), the confrontational relations between these two actors expanded exponentially. The increasing subversive nature of the private media outlets clashed with an increasingly authoritarian administration, with the result being wider social polarization. Chavez decisively pushed for greater media access through various methods. I have mentioned *cadena*s. Another has been favoring with official propaganda (TV, radio and newspaper ads) those media outlets with editorial content favorable to the government (UCAB/Cañizalez Study 2006). This move consolidated even further the traditional ties of the private media with such opposition business organizations as FEDECAMARAS, FEDENAGA, CONSECOMERCIO, and CONINDUSTRIA, which are the main consumers of media ads outside the government.

Moreover, once Chavez had a brief breathing space after the failed media coup and the 60-day general strike of December 2002 and January 2003, he advanced a prominent media project, Telesur, a South American news network designed to undercut the international dominance of CNN Español and BBC Mundo, and to serve as an international outlet sympathetic to his vision and personality. A new Ministry of Communication was created in 2003 to replace what had been the Ministry of Information. The logic behind this move was that the latter institution had merely disseminated government propaganda, whereas the new Ministry, responsible for communicational strategy and setting up international media links, would also encourage a

grassroots revolution in media control and production leading to what has been called “community media.”⁹ He has turned the screws on the private media outlets through a long series of regulating measures that included the *Ley Resorte*, the Right to Retort (*Derecho de Réplica*) (2001), the ratification of the Norms of Disobedience (2003), and the obligation to belong to a professional organization to practice journalism (2004). In addition to penalties and legal obstacles there has been intimidation of both journalists and media organizations in the opposition, with the culmination of the government’s refusal to renew the license of RCTV. And last but definitely not least, he has effectively utilized his weekly program *Aló Presidente* to enhance his charismatic image and his mission, and at the same time weaken the opposition.

5. The Chat-Show Presidency

Every Sunday morning for several hours Venezuelans can tune in almost any television or radio station (they are in *cadena*) to watch or hear their beloved -- or despised, as the case may be -- leader in action. He seems to be merely playing the role of the friend and teacher who reveals what everyone wants to know, while chatting with members of the public live on air, but in fact he is channeling lower-class anger against the upper and middle classes by reinforcing the animus felt by “us” against “them” by invoking the Bible, the writings of Simon Bolivar, and popular sayings and songs. He deftly interweaves into his discourse such pragmatic elements as the distribution of low-cost housing, subsidized food products, new jobs, scholarships, and other tangible assets. Indeed, in a similar fashion as the *Misiones* have come to substitute many functions of the official social-welfare branches of the federal government, so too this chat-show presided by Chavez himself has taken over functions that in theory belong to the Ministry of Communications and other agencies of the federal government.

Chavez's televisual confrontation every Sunday in *Aló Presidente* with the Venezuelan "corrupt" elites and/or "American imperialism" and/or "capitalist globalization" has become in the eyes of his followers a sort of epic, justifying even his debasing of such democratic practices as pluralism, which rejects the Manichean worldview of both populism and elitism, and instead "looks at society as a heterogeneous collection of groups and individuals with often fundamentally different views and goals." While elitism highlights the extraordinary abilities and wisdom of members of a particular social group, populism, though a distinct ideology, is, according to Mudde (2004:544), "a thin-centered ideology" in the sense that it does not possess "the same level of intellectual refinement and consistency as for example socialism and liberalism." Populism has a moralistic rather than programmatic core infused by the normative distinction between the "elite" and "the people." This core can be combined with a wide range of political concepts and ideologies, as Chavez does in *Alo Presidente*, where he avoids delineating a clear political or economic platform, and instead he deftly uses colloquial language, joke-telling, and mimicry to combine into one such different ideologies as nationalism, socialism, and ecologism, throwing different types of national development strategies and historical insights into the mix.

In *Alo Presidente*, Chavez successfully adapted the chat-show format to his vision of creating a program to entertain, inform, proselytize, and mobilize the public. Its informal, conversationalist style allows Chavez to explore the logic of different political positions each week without the fear of major consequences, and change course if needed -- a strategy that some interviewees for this study call "ineffective and even dangerous," while others dubbed it Chavez's "pragmatist approach to politics." The program has evolved into a sort of forum that projects his ever-changing vision of "Socialism of the 21st Century" and what it will bring to the nation.

A distinctive element of the program is the presence of “the people” in the form of a large audience. Their chorus-like commentary invariably sparks a set of reactions and responses that connects viewers and members of the audience with Chavez himself, and provide a unique method for evaluating the actions of the Bolivarian revolution. It allows the television viewer, for instance, to participate with Chavez and members of the audience in making inferences about the character and competence of elected representatives and/or the success or failure of particular social projects on the basis of common sense performance evaluations.

Alo Presidente's wild blend of such ingredients as the sanctification of Simon Bolivar, the public criticism of Chavez's own party and members of his cabinet for moving too slowly on pressing issues, denouncing George Bush and other “imperialist” leaders for conspiring against the Bolivarian revolution, addressing the material needs of “his people,” remembering with nostalgia his military past, along with other intellectually serious, bemusedly whimsical, and heartwarming sentimental elements, has made the program an integral part of Venezuelan popular culture. Some of the interviewees for this study considered that *Alo Presidente* is arguably just as powerful an opiate of the masses as those private media products: the *telenovelas* and reality shows that reflect and even glorify the values of consumerist capitalism. Still, as Tolson (1991:178) observes, the chat-show has an ambivalence inscribed in it that the *telenovelas* do not: it is designed “both to inform and entertain; to appear serious and sincere, but also playful and even flippant.” These ambiguities, and the ironic reactions they evoke, can have negative political consequences – by making serious matters seem trivial – but it may also have positive democratic consequences, by informing the public of the government actions and projects regularly and promote mass participation.

6. Today's Venezuela: The Long Bout Continues

Following upon the December 2006 electoral victory in which he garnered close to 63 percent of the vote, Chavez said that the previous eight years of his government had constituted merely a “phase of transition.” Now, he insisted “we are entering a new era, the National Simon Bolivar Project of 2007-2021, which aims to construct ‘Bolivarian socialism’ or ‘Socialism of the 21st century.’” In that same speech, Chavez set forth “five motors” that were sure to advance the revolution: (1) an “enabling law” that would allow him for the first 18 months of his new six-year-term to pass laws by decree in order to implement changes rapidly; (2) a constituent assembly that will oversee constitutional reform and provide the legal framework for the planned changes; (3) Bolivarian education system, to instill socialist values; (4) changes in Venezuela geographical power-structure, designed to give more say to marginalized regions; and (5) a dismantling of the “bourgeois state” with it being replaced by an explosion “of communal councils.” (Munckton, 2007)

Chavez has been careful to deny that his envisioned new Venezuela will be communist in nature. In a speech broadcast given on December 3, 2006, he insisted that his brand of socialism is not really anything new, invented, or imported, but rather is “Indo-Venezuelan, homegrown, Christian, and Bolivarian.” In a speech a month later, on January 8, 2007, Chavez was a bit more explicit: his government’s aim is “social ownership over the strategic sectors of the means of production” (Riddell 2007)

Given these rather vague explanations and the concrete policies the Chavez government has pursued in the past eight years, is Venezuela really heading towards something that could be called a socialist, communist, or at least post-capitalist order? It cannot be denied, on the one hand, that the government has expanded non-private forms of ownership via cooperative, social-production enterprises (*Empresas de Producción Social*); public-private joint ventures, co-management (greater worker participation in the administration of private enterprises), and the

expansion of companies either managed or owned by the state. Notable among the several new state-owned enterprises Chavez has created are those in the areas of telecommunications, air travel, and petrochemicals. Such state-redistribution mechanisms do of course go against the basic principles of capitalism, but given the broader context within which they are working – most exchange in Venezuela still occurs in a free market context, the most important media outlets are still in private hands, the economy has been growing in the past two years (2005 and 2006) at rates above 9 percent (Severo 2006), its private sector now accounts “for more of the economy, 62.5 percent of GDP, than when Chavez was elected in 1998, when it stood at 59.3 percent” (Rendall 2007:4), and the Bolivarian trade-union movement is in disarray, wracked by factional divisions – the situation in Venezuela seems to fit better, at least at the present moment, within the social-democratic than the socialist camp.

On the other hand, it is important to highlight that Chavez has kept his hold on power through his deft avoidance of what Weber calls the “routinization of charisma.” Chavez has continually restocked his cabinet, has had a total of four vice-presidents, and has kept all political parties at bay by claiming that they merely create artificial divisions and put their interests above those of the people. Although two-thirds of the votes he garnered in December 2006 came to him under the aegis of his old party, the MVR (the rest were widely scattered) he explained shortly after his victory: “Let’s not fall into lies. Those votes were not for any party. . . They were votes for Chavez, for the people . . . The revolution requires a united party, not an alphabet soup.” He declared that the MVR’s “work is completed, it must past into history,” and that the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) will be his new party. It will differ from its forebears because it will “be built from the base by the popular committees that fought and won the election.” Those moved by those words doubtless did not include the old hands at the MVR and other parties that have contributed in bringing Chavez this far, for the man whom they had

worked so tirelessly for now made it clear that “You will not see me with the same old faces, the same party leaderships – no, that would be a deception” (Riddell 2007).

Many of this study’s interviewees shared with me their belief that the Chavez years have created a new elite that has become rapidly “bourgeoisified,” due to its recently-acquired wealth and political power, and that many of its members that are now being sidelined or shuffled to lesser positions in the government might join the opposition or work against new policies from within, simply because they consider that Chavez’s revolution is now taking a direction that can affect negatively their own interests. That is, these interviewees believed that the undoing of the Bolivarian Revolution will come from within, that it will be deformed by the particular interests of the people whom Chavez has chosen to surround himself with.

Be that as it may or may not be in the future, for the time being there can be no doubt that Chavez’s strategy to maintain himself in power, based on redistributing wealth and reducing poverty, has completely transformed Venezuelan politics. His chief adversary in the last election, Manuel Rosales, a free-market advocate and governor of the state of Zulia, adopted many of Chavez’s populist policies, in an attempt to cut into his base. He promised that every Venezuelan would receive a monthly stipend, funded by oil revenues, of at least 250 dollars per month, more than the current minimum wage. He also promised to pay students’ tuitions even at the private universities and raise considerably the wages of civil servants, but the most effective prong of his attack pointed to the nation’s high level of crime, undeniably a major problem.

Opposition leaders are in disarray not only because of the failure of their actions, but even more because of the nature of their tactics. That Chavez has the opposition on the run is shown in their widespread defeatism, which tries to pass itself off as a principled policy of resistance. I’m thinking here of the opposition unwillingness to play the democratic game, as seen during the

April 2002 media coup, the December 2002 oil industry shutdown, and the December 2005 mid-term elections boycott, which ended up packing the 167 seats of the National Assembly with *Chavistas*. Thus Chavez, who started as a fairly moderate politician back in 1998, has had plenty of political capital handed to him with each subsequent defeat of the opposition, capital he has used to become increasingly more radical.

Good as things now must look to Chavez, however, four factors remain the most likely obstacles blocking the long-term realization of his dream of a Bolivarian and socialist Venezuela. First, there is the media-fueled, charismatic leadership style that has gotten Chavez this far, which has resulted in an extreme dependency on his figure, eschewing such key strategic aspects of nation-building as the definition of a coherent political program and the consolidation of effective political organizations. Second, there is mounting evidence that new forms of patronage and discrimination are taking place, including officials in the government preventing anti-Chavistas from acquiring government jobs and certain services -- the most notorious case in this regard being that of the "Tascón List," which lists all Venezuelans who signed the 2004 petition asking for a recall referendum on Chavez. Such practices ultimately undercut efforts to create a society which embraces all people, regardless of their political outlooks. Third, there above-mentioned interests of the *Chavista* elites might slow or even derail the revolutionary process as it has been envisioned by Chavez. And fourth, Chavez's militaristic education has reinforced in him, and in those now running Venezuela, to adopt a top-down approach to problem solving that tends to make a mockery of Chavez's continual invocations of the opposite spirit, based on equality and participatory democracy, at the grass-roots-level of community building.

Those interviewees sympathetic to Chavez expressed that problems of the type described above are "minor" in the sense of their being the sadly inevitable byproducts of an otherwise genuinely progressive regime. What cannot be denied, however, and what the interviews opened my own

eyes to, is the way that the national mood of “us” versus “them” has ended up infecting even Venezuela’s leading intellectuals, scholars, and journalists who once had, and have now missed, their chance (from 2001 to 2004 just before the referendum, when the media war was still in a state that can be called a “standoff”) to rise above the fray and chart a middle course. Time and again I heard my interviewees, on both sides of the political spectrum, agree that Venezuela is passing through an “extraordinary time” and that the fundamental principles of journalism can be violated because the time is ripe to be “militant and loyal” while assuming that impartiality and objectivity will be able to reassert themselves at some hypothetical later date. The widespread prevalence of such an attitude can only be cause for dismay. For although a time like the one Venezuela is now undergoing heightens everyone’s sociopolitical consciousness, in fact what we are seeing is not the consolidation of a public sphere based on fair and equal dialogue, as Habermas (1991) would like it, but rather, as Luisa Azaje has put it, “a spiral of verbal violence” (Azaje 2002: 12) that is sucking both sides into its maelstrom.

When one looks at the private-media side of this war, the first fact one comes upon is that those media have been able to bring together the disparate elements of the opposition, but unable to present coherent proposals or alternatives beyond demanding the removal of Chavez, either by resignation or by the holding of immediate elections. Such a strictly negative agenda can’t help but lose steam over time. Further, the private media’s aggressively anti-Chavez stance has produced a growing public perception that they lack both rationality and a culture of tolerance, and do so because they are defending strictly private interests. One might assert that the private media have taken on the role of a political party, one that is unnatural, given that they continually reveal themselves against precisely that distanced objectivity at the root of true journalism.

And yet there are no simple solutions here, such as urging the private media outlets to forsake their scramble for center stage and instead go back to their role of mediators and bridge-builders.

For the fact is that again and again, in their long bout with Chavez, these companies have taken many solid hits and are now either fighting hard for their own survival – RCTV, now broadcasting through cable and satellite, and Globovision -- or have reached an agreement of coexistence with the government, as is the case with Venevision and Televen. Nor can anyone doubt that Chavez's obsession with media control, and his need for continuous coverage to fuel his ongoing cult of personality, have earned him more and more ground in the slow war of attrition he is waging against his media enemies.

The case for Hugo Chavez would have to begin by noting that when he assumed the presidency in 1999 he was well aware that the old social contract between people and government had lost whatever degree of substantiality it had once possessed – hence his desire to reconstruct it based upon his charisma as purveyed by televisual means. Over these past eight years that he has been in power, Chavez and his movement have instituted a progressive constitution and have redirected much of Venezuela's oil wealth toward social programs; the most important of the latter being the *Misiones*. Of course, whether any of that actually fulfills Chavez's self-imposed mandate of creating a socialistic alternative to neo-liberal economic development, and of working toward what he calls a "multi-polar world," must be left to every Venezuelan, and interested party, to decide. What is certain, according to all of my interviewees, is that Venezuela's public life remains riddled with clientelism, patronage, and corruption, and within this context the promulgation of Chavez's cult of personality has left space for few alternatives to be followed upon, even by those who are ready to support the generally progressive causes espoused by Chavez every Sunday morning on *Aló Presidente*.

References

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