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# Venezuela's Social-Based Democratic Model: Innovations and Limitations

STEVE ELLNER

*Abstract.* Under the Chávez government, the incorporation and participation of popular sectors, which is the essence of 'social-based democracy', has been quantitatively and qualitatively different from socialist government and welfare-state strategies of the past. Venezuela's social-based democracy focuses on education, job skills, ideology, transformation of values and empowerment, achievements which Chavista leaders consider to be imperatives for socialist development. However, Chavista social programmes have been undermined by institutional weakness, are sometimes not cost-effective, and are politicised. Conflicting views among the Chavistas on the role of the state hinge on the issue of whether initiatives from above in favour of social-based democracy represent a viable strategy for far-reaching change. The Venezuelan government's changing priorities after 2007 have detracted from the primacy of social programmes.

*Keywords:* Chávez, social programmes, institutions, community councils, empowerment

The brand of socialism that has emerged in Venezuela under the presidency of Hugo Chávez differs in fundamental ways from orthodox Marxism and past socialist experiences in the rest of the world in large part because of its emphasis on social as opposed to economic objectives. In addition, in contrast to leftist doctrines associated with 'really existing socialism', the Venezuelan government's social policies appeal to the non-wealthy in general but prioritise the needs of the non-proletariat, underprivileged sectors of the population, specifically workers in the informal economy, those employed in small non-unionised firms in the formal economy, and the rural workforce. The Chávez government has placed a premium on the incorporation of these excluded and semi-excluded groups into the political, economic and cultural life of the nation and their participation in decision-making, particularly in the local arena.<sup>1</sup> This article uses the term 'social-based democracy' to refer to the



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<sup>1</sup> In the socio-economic sphere, 'excluded groups' refers to members of the informal economy while 'semi-excluded' refers to low-paid, non-unionised workers in small businesses in the formal economy.

Chavista strategy of promoting incorporation on a massive scale in a way that is designed to enhance the legitimacy of a government whose democratic credentials have been consistently questioned by its adversaries.

An underlying assumption accepted by much of the Chavista movement is that the non-incorporated, non-privileged sectors in Venezuela have a high level of political awareness but lack the experience, organisational skills and discipline to play a protagonist role in the process of radical transformation. For instance, Chavista leaders and activists attribute the failures of a significant number of cooperatives and community councils to a lack of preparation on the part of their members. In an attempt to stimulate interest and enthusiasm for social programmes such as cooperatives and community councils, the government effectively jump-started them by injecting into rudimentary structures large sums of money provided by exceptionally high oil prices. The institutional flexibility and leeway and the lack of strict controls over the massive allocations used for these programmes are designed to encourage the participation of those who have been traditionally apathetic, sceptical and imbued with a sense of powerlessness.

Orthodox Marxism has framed the issue of backwardness and the lag in conditions essential for socialist transformation along different lines. Soviet communists after 1917 viewed the main challenge facing their revolution as the need to expand the nation's industrial productive capacity in order to increase the size of the proletariat, which was considered to be class-conscious and the main agent of socialism. This imperative became all the more urgent in the 1930s, when rapid industrialisation became a logical response to the imminence of a German invasion of the Soviet Union. In addition, Marx, Lenin, Trotsky and orthodox communist parties in Latin America (unlike unorthodox communist thinkers such as José Antonio Mariátegui) held ambivalent attitudes toward the peasantry, which was often considered an unstable ally due to its petty-bourgeois makeup.<sup>2</sup> The focus on objective conditions, namely the structural transformation of the economy and the workforce, was designed to enlarge the working class in developing nations and reduce, if not completely eliminate, the peasant class. This process was seen as a sine qua non for achieving true socialism in regions such as Latin America, as well as for achieving true communism. In contrast, throughout most of his presidency Chávez has stopped short of glorifying the organised working class, at the same time that the Chavistas have emphasised the transformation of the

<sup>2</sup> V. I. Lenin, *Two Tactics of Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution* (New York: International Publishers, 1935), p. 83; Manuel Caballero, *Latin America and the Comintern, 1919–1943* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 94–6, 103–5; Prabhat Patnaik, 'Socialism and the Peasantry', *Social Scientist*, 23 (2009), p. 23.

values and capacities of the underprivileged in general, which the social programmes were designed to promote.

Chávez's rule in Venezuela is different from really existing socialism in other ways. **The Chavistas' call for a democratic, peaceful, gradual path to socialism is the complete opposite of the one-party system that communists defended in Eastern Europe, China and Cuba. Furthermore, the Venezuelan model draws on the tradition of radical democracy dating back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, with its defence of majority rule and direct participation in decision-making.** In contrast to communist nations of the past, a key dimension of participation in Venezuela has been activity channelled along electoral lines. Under the Chávez presidency a record number of elections, including referenda, recall elections and party primaries, have been held. At the same time, the Chávez government and movement have stimulated the mass mobilisation of non-privileged sectors and their participation in organisations and social programmes in accordance with their conception of social-based democracy.



**Radical democracy and social-based democracy are often conducive to weak institutions, however.** The concept of majority rule embodied by radical democracy discards the institutional mechanisms that are designed to protect minority rights under liberal democracy and thus may end up weakening a nation's institutional framework. Social-based democracy, for its part, promotes flexibility and avoids strong institutions and institutional rules in order to avoid discouraging participation by those who lack organisational experience. This article will argue that the Chavistas, in their determination to achieve radical and social-based democracy, have to an extent sacrificed the goal of institution-building.



In general, this article will look at the way social-based democracy has played out in Venezuela. Specifically, it will differentiate between social-based democracy, which sets as a basic goal the incorporation of previously excluded sectors on a number of fronts, and reformist governments that promote welfare programmes with a heavy dose of paternalism aimed at alleviating pressing economic problems. The article argues not only that Venezuela's social-based democracy is qualitatively different from these welfare-state approaches, but also that the trade-offs and zero-sum game that characterise it have no equivalent among moderate reformist governments. The article will then examine the debate within the Chavista movement over such issues as subjective conditions, the role of the state and the pace of change, all of which have a direct bearing on the strategies underlying social-based democracy. The final remarks place Venezuela's social-based democracy in a broader context and show that diverse political challenges as well as conflicting priorities and ideological formulations bear heavily on the prospects for the model's consolidation.

The article breaks new ground by centring on the originality of the Venezuelan experience under Chávez vis-à-vis other leftist experiences throughout the world. The uniqueness of the Venezuelan case stems from the combination of social-based democracy, featuring social incorporation on a massive scale, and radical democracy, whose salient characteristics include extreme polarisation and a commitment to eliminating capitalism.

*Social-Based Democracy in National and International Contexts*

The Chavista movement, which emerged within the military in 1982 and organised an abortive coup ten years later, embraced increasingly far-reaching policies and goals over the course of Chávez's first 12 years in office. During the presidential campaign for the 1998 elections and Chávez's early rule, radical socio-economic goals were subordinated to the drafting and ratification of a new constitution that promoted 'participatory democracy'. The emphasis changed in 2001 when the government passed legislation that reversed neoliberal economic measures introduced in the previous decade. In 2005 the government committed itself to socialism at the same time that it turned over to the workers the management of several companies that had closed down. Following Chávez's third presidential election in 2006, the government nationalised various strategic industries and subsequently expropriated a larger number of smaller enterprises for diverse reasons.

Radicalisation in general and social-based democracy in particular were responses to the opposition's increasingly aggressive tactics that culminated in the April 2002 attempted coup and the two-month general strike of 2002–3.

As a result, the Chavista government went beyond the rhetoric of participatory democracy by implementing social programmes that appealed to the popular classes, which had actively and massively supported *chavismo* during both crises. On the social front the government prioritised the 'missions', makeshift programmes in the barrios in the areas of health (the Barrio Adentro Mission), education (Robinson, Ribas and Sucre Missions) and food distribution (MERCAL). In subsequent years, government funding stimulated the creation of approximately 60,000 worker cooperatives and, after 2006, 30,000 community councils concentrated in underprivileged communities. The community councils design and execute public works projects in their communities and ensure preferential hiring for neighbourhood residents.

Although the radicalisation of the Chávez government was a reaction to the insurgent tactics of the opposition, the arguments for social-based democracy and radical democracy were in large part a response to the failures of both Venezuela's liberal democracy and the socialist bloc in Eastern Europe. Both before and after the abortive military coup led by Chávez in 1992, the



Chavista movement lashed out at the deficiencies of Venezuela's 'model of liberal democracy' or 'pseudo-democracy' and at the ineffectiveness of the system of checks and balances, as well as of the watchdog and counterbalancing bodies.<sup>3</sup> In a document written from prison shortly after the 1992 coup, Chávez's group argued that in practice 'no separation of powers exists in Venezuela, since the political parties, deliberately violating their function as intermediaries between society and the state, conspire to usurp popular sovereignty and allow the [national] executive to assume all state power'. The document went on to claim that 'the legislative branch is subservient to the executive while appointing all members of the judiciary'.<sup>4</sup> The early Chavistas also claimed that Venezuela's liberal democracy discouraged and blocked popular participation in the political life of the nation. As a corrective they initiated a campaign in favour of a constitutional assembly. The convocation of the assembly would be the result not of an 'artificial decree', but rather of a 'process' that would stimulate 'the latent potency of the people'.<sup>5</sup>

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 affected Chávez as well as leftists throughout the world in different ways. Many on the Left began to call for a humanistic socialism that placed people's needs over the production targets that the Soviet Union had stressed throughout its existence. At the time, Chávez advocated a 'humanist model' that borrowed elements of capitalism and socialism. Chávez and other Chavistas attributed the collapse of the Soviet Union to the dogmatism and economism of its leadership, an orientation that downplayed popular participation and the transformation of values. Similarly, after embracing socialism in 2005, Chávez emphasised socialist values and international solidarity over purely economic achievements and argued that educational and cultural development was a sine qua non for socialist construction.<sup>6</sup>

Prior to reaching power, Chávez also began to question the Marxist doctrine of the central role of the working class in the revolutionary process. According to Chávez, Marx's prediction that the workplace is the locus of revolutionary struggle had not been borne out in practice. He added that the gradual disappearance of the middle class was reducing society to two classes: 'a minority of exploiters and the great majority of exploited'.<sup>7</sup> Leftist

<sup>3</sup> Agustín Blanco Muñoz, *Habla el comandante* (Caracas: UCV, 1998), p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> Angela Zago, *La rebelión de los ángeles: reportajes – los documentos del movimiento* (3rd edition, Caracas: Warp Ediciones, 1998), p. 177.

<sup>5</sup> Blanco Muñoz, *Habla el comandante*, p. 529; Marta Harnecker, *Understanding the Venezuelan Revolution: Hugo Chávez Talks to Marta Harnecker* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2005), p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> Blanco Muñoz, *Habla el comandante*, p. 611; Mario Sanoja and Iraida Vargas-Arenas, *La revolución bolivariana: historia, cultura y socialismo* (Caracas: Monte Avila, 2008), p. 296; Freddy J. Melo, *Reforma y revolución* (Caracas: Ediciones UVB, 2008), p. 403.

<sup>7</sup> Blanco Muñoz, *Habla el comandante*, pp. 392, 397.

theoreticians who are closely tied to the Chavista movement have asserted that in the twenty-first century the revolutionary bloc takes in more than the proletariat as it includes members of the informal sectors. In so arguing, they criticise the 'workerist' tendency to privilege the proletariat that is characteristic of the traditional Left.<sup>8</sup> Given this broader view of agency, it is not surprising that the Chavista movement has stressed the goal of incorporating the mass of unrepresented Venezuelans in accordance with social-based democracy, rather than singling out trade union struggle for special treatment. The focus on the mass of the population rather than on the corporate interests of the industrial working class is compatible with the themes of social-based democracy, participatory democracy, nationalism and humanism that figure prominently in the Chavista discourse.

Chávez's notions of state power and centralised control presaged the concentration of power in the executive branch of government that has characterised his rule. In the 1990s, many leftists throughout Latin America were influenced by the thesis that capitalism had achieved overwhelming hegemony in the age of globalisation and that gaining local power was thus the best the Left could hope for during the current stage.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, Chávez claimed that only control of state power at the national level could lead to meaningful change. As a result, Chávez clashed with Francisco Arias Cárdenas, the second-in-command at the time of the 1992 revolt, who in 1995 was elected governor of the state of Zulia. Chávez argued that Arias 'lacks sufficient power in his hands to generate transformations' or to come close to achieving the 'original objectives' of the movement.<sup>10</sup>

The Chávez government's social programmes have been designed to serve as a corrective to developments that undermined the nation's democracy and distorted social relations during the 1990s, a period that was characterised by neoliberal economic policies and political crisis. Political scientists writing in the 1990s generally viewed Venezuela's political system as having entered a period of stagnation and crisis as a result of institutional ossification that excluded large segments of the population and stimulated apathy and electoral abstention.<sup>11</sup> In addition, privatisation and multinational takeover of entire sectors of the Venezuelan economy led to the transfer of large numbers of workers from the formal to the informal economy, in the process depriving

<sup>8</sup> Marta Harnecker, *Rebuilding the Left* (New York: Zed Books, 2007), paras. 368–71.

<sup>9</sup> Perry Anderson, 'Renewals', *New Left Review*, 1 (2000), pp. 5–24.

<sup>10</sup> Blanco Muñoz, *Habla el comandante*, p. 209.

<sup>11</sup> Brian F. Crisp, Daniel H. Levine and Juan Carlos Rey, 'The Legitimacy Problem', in Jennifer McCoy, Andrés Serbin, William C. Smith and Andrés Stambouli (eds.), *Venezuelan Democracy under Stress* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995), pp. 153–8.

them of organisational membership and representation at the local and national levels.<sup>12</sup>

These diverse antecedents to Chávez's rule help shed light on Venezuela's emerging model of social-based democracy. Most importantly, significant numbers of Venezuelans, particularly those previously marginalised from the nation's life, have been given the opportunity to participate in discussion and activity in community, workplace and political arenas and have been continually mobilised along political lines. At the same time, the old mechanisms of checks and balances designed to avoid abuse of power – which the Chavistas considered ineffective – have been largely passed over in the name of majority rule or 'radical democracy'. The resultant institutional deficiencies have to an extent detracted from the smooth functioning of the community councils, cooperatives and educational missions that underpin social-based democracy.

### *Social Incorporation*

In the aftermath of the failed coup and general strike of 2002–3, the Chavistas prioritised social programmes designed to further the educational and cultural preparation of mass numbers of Venezuela's popular sectors, which had come to the defence of the government during both conflicts. These 'missions' created a unified system that ranged from literacy classes to primary, secondary and university education and included the insertion of trained personnel in the workforce. The Vuelvan Caras (About Face) Mission was the centrepiece programme, referred to as the 'mission of missions'. It consisted of training sessions lasting from six to 24 months that provided skills to facilitate the transition from education to employment, specifically membership in workers' cooperatives. The key figure in many of these social programmes was the *facilitador* (facilitator), who provided advice and assistance to individual community councils and cooperatives and, in the case of the education missions, served as a teacher in what was conceived of as a horizontal relationship with students. These programmes targeted the excluded sectors. Exclusion in Chavista discourse was best symbolised by those lacking employment in the formal economy, those who were unable to read or write, and those who were denied a university education even though this had long been considered a basic right for all high school graduates, subsequently recognised by the 1999 Constitution (Article 103).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Steve Ellner, 'The Tenuous Credentials of Latin American Democracy in the Age of Neoliberalism', *Rethinking Marxism*, 14: 3 (2002), pp. 77–8.

<sup>13</sup> Between 2007 and the present I have conducted 58 in-depth interviews with members of cooperatives and community councils as well as Chavista activists and political leaders throughout Venezuela as part of a project entitled 'El Estado y Organizaciones Políticas y

Chavistas throughout the movement have stressed the importance of the educational and cultural preparation of underprivileged sectors as part of an integrated effort. Multiple objectives include education instruction at all levels, job training, political and ideological formation and cultural transformation. Some Chavista leaders were influenced by the strategy designed by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), which viewed the development of human resources, encompassing education, vocational training, communications, interpersonal relations, culture and politics, as a basic requisite for economic development.<sup>14</sup>

Carlos Lanz, a former guerrilla and a leftist and educational theoretician, applied this strategy as presidentially appointed adviser of the Vuelvan Caras Mission and then as president of the state aluminium company ALCASA, positions that he used to promote worker and community input in decision-making. In addition, Lanz helped draft educational legislation that linked schools with the surrounding communities, whose members were to be incorporated in the learning process. Lanz wrote that 'the Bolivarian revolution requires a campaign of permanent education for the formation of the exploited and the oppressed', and that this campaign should encompass the socio-political arena as well as the cultural one and facilitate the 'democratisation of knowledge and citizenship'.<sup>15</sup> Another leading Chavista, the mayor of Carora, Julio Chávez, affirmed, 'We have to give greater weight to the preparation of all actors who participate' in decision-making activity such as 'participatory budgeting', and to 'equip our people with the instruments that will permit them to effectuate the transformation of the state'.<sup>16</sup> Along these lines, shortly after his re-election in 2006 Chávez announced that a major thrust of his government was to be 'moral y luces' ('morality and illumination'), which he defined as 'education with socialist values' and going 'beyond the classroom' by 'promoting education in all spaces'.

Government policy in general, and education programmes in particular, favoured the underprivileged sectors of the population. Thus, for instance, the student aid programme Gran Mariscal de Ayacucho, founded in 1975, began to give preference to low-income students as recipients of grants and loans to

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Sociales en la Democracia: El Caso Venezolano', financed by the Consejo de Investigación of the Universidad de Oriente. In 2008–10 I taught four courses in the university-based Sucre Mission in Barcelona, Anzoátegui state, in northern Venezuela, for students in the programmes of local management (*gestión local*) and law.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Elías Jaua, minister of the popular economy and future vice-president, Caracas, 27 Jan. 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Carlos Lanz Rodríguez, *Aportes para el debate del socialismo del siglo XXI* (Caracas, 2006), pp. 8–10.

<sup>16</sup> Marta Harnecker, *Transfiriendo poder a la gente: Municipio Torres, Estado Lara, Venezuela* (Caracas: Haciendo Camino al Andar, 2008), pp. 37, 76.

study abroad. In the past, the student was required to have a bondsperson in order to guarantee repayment of loans. The Chávez government considered the requirement discriminatory against low-income students and lifted it; at the same time, it sent a larger number of students to third world universities while excluding US institutions from the programme.

The social programme that has had the biggest impact in activating marginalised sectors of the population and facilitating their participation in decision-making is that of the government-financed community councils. Following enactment of the Law of Community Councils in April 2006, 20,000 community councils sprang up throughout the nation. The councils each take in 200 to 400 families who meet in neighbourhood assemblies to discuss priority projects. In some cases the community councils design and administer public works projects and housing construction, activities that were previously carried out by the municipal, state or national government. The community council leaders, called *voceros* (spokespeople), perform their duties free of charge and are of equal rank to each other. The *voceros* belong to different community council bodies, such as the communal bank (which until 2009 was organised as a cooperative) or a 'social controllership' (*controlaría social*) that monitors spending.

Other programmes that are linked to the communities and have enrolled hundreds of thousands of less privileged Venezuelans are the educational missions, consisting of literacy classes (Robinson Mission) as well as education at the high school (Ribas Mission) and university (Sucre Mission) levels. The Robinson and Ribas missions use video cassettes and facilitators in place of teachers as a practical innovation that reduces costs, though this also reduces quality. Sucre Mission students take courses called 'projects' in which they gather information and participate in activities at the neighbourhood level and, in some cases, design proposals used by the community councils to apply for state funding. Various majors in the Sucre Mission programme are centred on community participation, such as in the areas of sociology (*gestión social para el desarrollo local*), medicine (*medicina integral comunitaria*) and environmental studies (*gestión ambiental*).

In spite of their underprivileged backgrounds, those enrolled in the Sucre Mission appear to have the same, or nearly the same, learning capacity and motivation as their counterparts in regular universities, but lack the high grades, resources and influence to enter the traditional university system and progress at a regular pace.<sup>17</sup> The Ribas and Sucre missions do not have the organisational infrastructure of established public schools. In most cities, the Sucre Mission lacks a campus and classes are held at night in different

<sup>17</sup> The above statement is based on my experience teaching in the programme in two schools (known as *aldeas*) in two different fields of study.

public schools. Furthermore, even though the mainstream universities that collaborate with the Sucre Mission issue diplomas in their own name rather than in that of the mission, their role is mainly limited to designing course programmes and evaluating theses. In all three missions, voceros representing students at each grade level collaborate with school authorities.

Another government-promoted activity with important social implications was the worker cooperative movement, which received a massive injection of credit between 2004 and 2006 when it was largely eclipsed by the community councils. Cooperative members, whom President Chávez urged to discard the 'profit motive', were obliged to carry out in their respective communities projects such as maintenance work in schools. To its credit, the cooperative movement took in large numbers of poor people with little experience in the formal economy who learned administrative skills and were exposed to new attitudes toward cooperation and solidarity. Thousands of cooperatives have survived the test of time and carry out community work free of charge, even while some of their practices do not conform to the vision of a revolution in values. Nevertheless, most of the cooperatives were small, consisting of five members (the minimum number required by law) who were related to one another. Some were private companies that disguised themselves as cooperatives in order to receive contracts, loans and tax-exempt status.<sup>18</sup>

Social programmes and other aspects of Venezuela's social-based democracy contribute to the empowerment of the popular sectors. Empowerment occurs when people are convinced that their collective efforts have produced the desired results and will continue to do so in the future. The concept implies assertion of autonomy, even though in the Venezuelan case the state is very much at the centre of the effort to stimulate social participation. Examples include community council members when they successfully complete a public works project or when authorities respond positively to their request to establish a MERCAL store in their community. A similar sense of efficacy is manifested in the assertion by Sucre Mission students that their degrees represent the same academic input as those of their counterparts in traditional universities, as well as in the Chavista Universidad Bolivariana, and should therefore receive the same recognition. Finally, routine conversations among barrio residents sometimes revolve around the details of social programmes, and in the process create a sense of social identification and shared experiences

<sup>18</sup> For a book-length collection of testimonies by participants in the Venezuelan cooperative movement that documents both the positive and negative features discussed in this article, see Héctor Lucena (ed.), *Cooperativas, empresas, estado y sindicatos: una vinculación necesaria* (Barquisimeto: Fondo Editorial Universidad Centroccidental Lisandro Alvarado, 2007).

that are conducive to empowerment.<sup>19</sup> The Chavista discourse of people's power and the community base of the programmes also enhance empowerment and help distinguish Venezuelan social-based democracy from other types of government whose social policies are driven by paternalistic assumptions.

The government's social programmes also contain negative and controversial features, although some actions have been taken in the way of correctives. Firstly, the government failed to establish effective mechanisms for penalising members of community councils and cooperatives in cases of unscrupulous or negligent handling of public funds. Until now the Chávez government has been reluctant to take stringent exemplary measures against wrongdoers such as those who squander public funds, particularly in the case of low-income groups. On the other hand, state agencies that fund community councils have implemented diverse inspection procedures in order to avoid granting new allocations to community councils that fail to satisfactorily complete state-financed projects. This threat weighs heavily on neighbourhood leaders who have invested considerable time and effort in the founding of a community council.

Secondly, the incorporation of large numbers of low-income Venezuelans in a variety of programmes sacrifices quality for the sake of quantity, and in some cases represents a zero-sum game in that it favours certain groups at the expense of others. The Sucre Mission provides examples of trade-offs along these lines. The 'losers' are the students in the traditional public and private universities who end up having to compete in the labour market with the mission graduates, whose diplomas are in the name of various state-controlled universities and who tend to drive salaries down. The lower standards of the educational missions would argue against the issuance of standard high school and college degrees. Nevertheless, if the missions did not grant normal diplomas, they would not be successful in attracting such large numbers of low-income Venezuelans into their programmes. The missions' adverse effect on students at established universities undoubtedly contributed to those students' discontent and mobilisations against the Chávez government. Similarly, from a cost-benefit perspective, the allocations to community councils are open to criticism. In the short run private contractors could undoubtedly perform the same tasks more efficiently, but the councils promote the Chavista goal of popular participation in decision-making.

Thirdly, the social programmes have a political content and play a political role, thus violating the separation of powers and the divorce between the

<sup>19</sup> In another example, in 2008 the government heeded the steel workers' union's call for the nationalisation of the foreign-owned steel company SIDOR in the midst of a violent worker dispute, and in the process invigorated the nation's labour movement.

public and private spheres that are basic principles of liberal democracy. The Chávez government utilises social programmes to mobilise along political lines; thus, the voceros, who play a political activist role in addition to performing administrative tasks, are an institutionalised rather than autonomous feature of the Sucre Mission.

The outstanding features of Venezuela's social-based democracy differ from the welfare programmes and political practices of former Venezuelan governments. Firstly, the sheer number of social programme beneficiaries and participants has no equivalent prior to 1998. By 2009, for instance, over 600,000 students had graduated from the Ribas Mission. Similarly, as a result of the Sucre Mission, enrolment in higher education increased by 86 per cent between 1999–2000 and 2006–7. Secondly, largely due to the education missions in general, between 2000 and 2009 the period of schooling for the average Venezuelan over 15 years of age had increased from 8.2 to 9.8 years.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the social programmes of the Chávez presidency, unlike those of the past, prioritise the interests of the popular classes at the expense of other sectors of the population; thus, for example, MERCAL has opened grocery stores and supermarkets in lower-class (but not wealthy) neighbourhoods and sells subsidised products generally at 30 to 40 per cent discounts, thereby representing a form of 'disloyal competition' with regard to private commercial interests.

In addition to social policies, Venezuela's social-based democracy has promoted ongoing political mobilisation of popular sectors on a massive scale and for a duration unmatched in twentieth-century Venezuelan history. The creation of Chavista cells beginning with the campaign for the presidential recall election in 2004 has facilitated electoral and non-electoral participation. More recently, the 'battalions' (each consisting of several hundred supporters) of the five-million-member Chavista political party, the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (United Socialist Party of Venezuela, PSUV, which replaced the Movimiento Quinta República (Fifth Republic Movement, MVR) in 2007), engaged in campaign work for the November 2008 local elections. The following year the battalions were replaced with the 20- to 30-member 'patrols' (cells). In short, the political incorporation and involvement of large numbers of low-income Venezuelans over an extended period of time is without precedent in modern Venezuelan history and stands out as a major feat of the nation's social-based democracy.

After 12 years of Chavista rule, the balance sheet for the achievement of the goals of Venezuela's social-based democracy is mixed. This article has pointed to various ways in which social programmes, state-funded bodies, ongoing

<sup>20</sup> See Sistema Integrado de Indicadores Sociales de Venezuela (Ministry of Planning and Finance, SISOV), [www.sisov.mpd.gob.ve/indicadores/ED0600700000000/](http://www.sisov.mpd.gob.ve/indicadores/ED0600700000000/).

political mobilisation and the Chavista discourse on popular participation have contributed to the transformation of the popular sectors of the population. The essential elements of this process include: education; incorporation of excluded sectors; empowerment, as demonstrated by the belief among rank-and-file Chavistas that decisions taken by Chávez are a response to their demands; and input in decision-making, as occurs in public works projects undertaken by community councils. Nevertheless, in addition to institutional deficiencies (to be discussed below), Venezuela's social-based democracy has had several major shortcomings. Firstly, the high failure rate of cooperatives and community councils and the short life of Chavista social movements have discouraged some of their members from further participation. Secondly, there is little evidence of a fundamental change in ethical values, even among diehard Chavistas, as is recognised by government supporters who ascribe the malfunctioning of many cooperatives and community councils to the self-serving behaviour of those in charge.<sup>21</sup>



### *Radical and Social-Based Democracy: Institutional and Organisational Shortcomings*

The military rebels led by Chávez who staged the coup of February 1992 called for a radical overhaul of the nation's political system and went beyond the rules of electoral democracy in order to achieve their goals. Subsequently, however, the Chavista movement changed its course. Since Chávez's MVR took the decision to abandon abstentionism and participate in the 1998 presidential elections, the Chavistas have adhered to two fundamental rules of the established political system: electoral democracy and acceptance of the system of political parties. Electoral means were used to displace old structures that the Chavistas viewed as obstacles to radical change. Thus, in 1999, the National Constituent Assembly, an elected body controlled by the Chavistas, displaced the National Congress until new elections were held the following year for the National Assembly, which was considered more responsive to popular interests. In subsequent years, elections at all levels were characterised by declining levels of abstention and, with the exception of the opposition's boycott of the 2005 contests for the National Assembly, multiparty participation.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, President Chávez broke with Venezuela's corporatist tradition in accordance with radical democracy's emphasis on majority rule.

<sup>21</sup> On the lack of change in ethical values, see Michael A. Lebowitz, *Build it Now: Socialism for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2006), p. 113.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Hellinger, 'When "No" Means "Yes to Revolution": Electoral Politics in Bolivarian Venezuela', in Steve Ellner and Miguel Tinker Salas (eds.), *Venezuela: Hugo Chávez and the Decline of an 'Exceptional Democracy'* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), p. 69.

Along these lines, he discontinued the practice of naming representatives of FEDECAMARAS (the Venezuelan federation of chambers of commerce), and the business sector in general, to top ministerial positions in charge of the formulation of economic policy. Furthermore, he discarded the decades-long policy of consensus and consultation with political parties of the opposition and other organisations, and the formation of tripartite commissions whose members were selected by labour and management leaderships. In doing so, Chávez took the line that the government should be in constant consultation with the people, not political elites. In another fundamental reversal, Chávez halted the trend toward decentralisation of powers that had advanced under the neoliberal governments in the 1990s. Rather than transfer authority from the federal government to gubernatorial and mayoral governments, the Chavistas promoted decision-making at the neighbourhood level, which they considered more conducive to the direct participation of the popular sectors.

These transformations produced institutional and organisational gaps that the organisationally weak Chavista movement was not well positioned to correct. The MVR failed to develop strong societal links and remained basically an electoral organisation until Chávez replaced it with the PSUV in the hope of strengthening his organisational base. Neither the MVR nor the PSUV had national or state-wide headquarters where the rank and file could meet with party authorities on a daily basis. Furthermore, given the relatively weak social movement tradition in Venezuela, it is not surprising that social organisations for the most part lack autonomy and have proven to be short-lived. They have thus failed to play a key role in such fundamental tasks as the naming of supreme court judges, members of the National Electoral Commission, the attorney general and the national controller, as was envisioned by the 1999 Constitution (Articles 264 and 279). Finally, Venezuela's extreme polarisation and politicisation (also incomparable to previous years), in which Chavistas and the opposition were in a state of permanent confrontation, militated against the system of institutional checks since any exposure of wrongdoings on the part of government officials was immediately transferred onto the political battlefield.

From the very outset, the executive branch of the Chavista government assumed greater power at the same time that Chávez became the undisputed leader within the Chavista movement, thus ruling out any kind of formal collective decision-making or the emergence of a second-in-command. The 1999 Constitution increased executive authority on various fronts, such as in the promotion of military officers, which became the exclusive preserve of the president without input from the National Assembly. The Constitution also reversed the trend toward decentralisation by creating a body to facilitate federal input in decisions that had previously been under the exclusive purview

of the gubernatorial and municipal governments.<sup>23</sup> In 2009 the national executive took back control of airports and ports that had been transferred to the states in 1989.

While some Chavistas express concern about Chávez's accumulation of power but view it as a necessary expedient to face the movement's powerful adversaries, others consider it a positive feature of Venezuelan politics. In an example of the latter viewpoint, national student leader Robert Serra characterised Chávez as 'unsubstitutable' and as having a 'magical relationship' with the people.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, political scientist Diana Raby points to specific incidents in which Chávez has responded to a popular clamour by interpreting it and transforming it into concrete proposals. Raby describes this interaction as a 'dialectic between Chávez and the people', or more specifically his 'hard-core' followers. She goes on to state that this dynamic 'may arouse suspicions of populism or caudillismo ... [but] so far it has proved ... more sensitive to the real feelings of the people and more democratic ... than any conventional party or government mechanism'.<sup>25</sup>

One negative side effect of Chávez's absolute authority in the government and his movement is that it discourages the rank-and-file selection of other Chavista leaders as serious contenders for decision-making power. This failure in turn holds back the clarification of distinct political and ideological positions within the movement.<sup>26</sup> In any political party, internal rivalry helps elucidate political differences, even while the membership may be largely swayed by the charisma of the party's leaders. In the case of the Chavistas, the institutionalisation of a movement leadership selection process that is free of state control could serve as a corrective to the lack of formal mechanisms for channelling the opinions of the rank and file in an upward direction.

The active role played by leading government figures in the affairs of the PSUV, as shown by the party leadership positions assumed by Chavista ministers and governors, deprived the organisation of the independence needed to serve as a check on state performance. Thus, for instance, the power yielded by the minister of energy and petroleum, Rafael Ramírez, who at the same time served as president of the state oil company PDVSA, illustrates the state's encroachment on grounds formerly occupied by political parties, politicians and social leaders. Ramírez was named vice-president of the

<sup>23</sup> Steve Ellner, *Rethinking Venezuelan Politics: Class, Conflict and the Chávez Phenomenon* (Boulder, CO, and London: Lynne Rienner, 2008), p. 93.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Serra, television interview by Carlos Croes, *Televen*, 18 Jan. 2009.

<sup>25</sup> D. L. Raby, *Democracy and Revolution: Latin America and Socialism Today* (London and Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2006), pp. 190–1; Alan Woods, *La revolución bolivariana: un análisis marxista* (Caracas: Fundación El Perro y la Rana, 2006), pp. 62–3.

<sup>26</sup> Juan Carlos Monedero, 'La reinención revolucionaria de Venezuela y los fantasmas del pasado', *Comuna: pensamiento crítico en la revolución*, 1 (July–Sep. 2009), p. 192.

PSUV for the Andean region and overtly supported the winning slate in the elections of the newly unified oil workers union, the *Federación Unitaria de Trabajadores del Petróleo ... de Venezuela* (United Federation of Venezuelan Oil Workers, FUTPV), held in 2009.

The MVR's limited presence outside the electoral and congressional arena reflected the organisational underdevelopment of the Chavista movement. As a reaction against the hegemonic practices of the establishment parties, MVR leaders made a conscious decision to avoid intervention in social and labour movements and thus eliminated the organic ties with social organisations established at the time of the party's founding in 1997. As a result, the MVR centred its efforts on electoral activity and its legislative role.

Various internal elections held by the Chavista party were designed to open the organisation to the rank and file and check the bureaucratic tendencies that Chávez vigorously criticised. Article 67 of the Constitution requires this procedure for the selection of candidates and the national leadership positions of all political parties, although the provision was almost entirely ignored by the opposition. The first Chavista internal election was held in April 2003 for the MVR's national authorities, and the second in April 2005 for municipal council candidates. Subsequently, the PSUV held primaries in June 2008 for the party's gubernatorial and mayoral candidates for elections in November, then in 2009 to select delegates to the party's Extraordinary Congress, followed by internal contests for the September 2010 race for the National Assembly. In one move that generated considerable internal discontent, Chávez named his former vice-president Diosdado Cabello to important party and ministerial positions in 2009 even though Cabello had fared poorly in both internal and gubernatorial elections, while passing over the highly popular Aristóbulo Istúriz, who had been nominated to be the PSUV mayoral candidate in Caracas with 94 per cent of the Chavista vote.

The PSUV's three primaries demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of the democratic model that emerged under the Chávez presidency. In all three elections, 40–50 per cent of the party's eligible voters participated. Furthermore, the PSUV prohibited the use of paid propaganda in these contests in order to level the playing field, although in some cases incumbents and those supported by them utilised state resources. In at least two states (Guárico and Mérida) the candidates endorsed by a highly unpopular or controversial governor were defeated in the 2008 primaries. Following the 2009 primaries, specific topics were discussed simultaneously by the party's congress and patrols, which formulated recommendations for consideration by the delegates.

On the downside, a large number of Chavistas objected to procedures that lent themselves to manipulation and passed over the will of the party's rank

and file.<sup>27</sup> In many states, for instance, Chavista governors and mayors controlled the electoral process, using their resources and taking advantage of their influence over public employees to promote slates consisting of their loyalists. At the centre of the problem was the lack of separation between party and state (including governors, mayors and ministers), a principle that liberal democracy emphasises but which Venezuela's radical democracy has tended to overlook.

Several important figures, including former PSUV vice-president Alberto Müller Rojas and the renowned Chilean Marxist Marta Harnecker (who was based in Venezuela and was a Chávez adviser), called for greater party independence. Harnecker called on the Chavista movement to undertake programmes to train party activists in order to avoid overlap of government officials and party leaders.<sup>28</sup> On the 6 December edition of his weekly televised programme *Aló Presidente*, which was held at the PSUV's Extraordinary Congress, Chávez seemed to take into account this viewpoint as he called on Chavista mayors and governors who had been elected as delegates to step down from the latter position on the grounds that they could not carry out the two functions simultaneously. Although Chávez's statement hardly went to the root of the problem of party subordination, it encouraged the rank and file to assume a more assertive position. Some congress delegates began to use Chávez's line of reasoning to question the appointment of ministers as party vice-presidents. The issue of party autonomy was largely skirted, however, as delegates who were at the same time elected officials were allowed to choose substitutes to attend the congress in their absence.<sup>29</sup> Similarly in 2010, Chávez called on governors and mayors to refrain from interfering in the party primaries for the National Assembly, but his plea went mostly ignored.

Chávez's announcement that primaries would be held to choose candidates for the 2010 National Assembly elections also showed his receptivity to the demands of his movement's rank and file, a dynamic that has characterised his presidency from the outset.<sup>30</sup> Previously, other PSUV leaders, as well as Chávez himself, had hinted that another procedure would be used, as was favoured by a majority of the delegates to the PSUV's Extraordinary Congress.

<sup>27</sup> Sujatha Fernandes, *Who Can Stop the Drums? Urban Social Movements in Chávez's Venezuela* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 85–6.

<sup>28</sup> Marta Harnecker, 'Latin America and Twenty-First Century Socialism: Inventing to Avoid Mistakes', *Monthly Review*, 62: 3 (2010), p. 70; 'El Estado debe facilitar y no suplantar al poder popular', *Comuna: pensamiento crítico en la revolución*, 1 (July–Sep. 2009), pp. 148–9; and 'Sí necesitamos una nueva izquierda' (27 Nov. 2009), [www.aporrea.org/ideologia/n146141.html](http://www.aporrea.org/ideologia/n146141.html). See also Jeffery R. Webber and Susan Spronk, 'Venezuela: Voices on the Struggle', *Against the Current*, 148 (2010), p. 33.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Evaristo Zambrano, mayor of Palmira (Táchira), Palmira, 30 Dec. 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Raby, *Democracy and Revolution*, pp. 186–94.

The PSUV's failure to create structures to assume full control of electoral campaigns was another demonstration of the party's weakness and lack of autonomy. Education missions, community councils and other state-sponsored programmes partly filled the gap. They played a particularly active role in the February 2009 referendum on Chávez's proposal to lift term limits. During the campaign, Chávez drew attention to the fact that 'for the first time, the missions have presented themselves as political actors and as a vanguard of the revolutionary struggle'.<sup>31</sup> In the case of the education missions, teachers and voceros organised committees of between six and eight members to campaign in favour of the proposed constitutional amendment. The 'Mission Front' brought together these committees at the state level, while similar committees created by the community councils belonged to the 'Social Front'. In an additional demonstration of the state's exercise of power traditionally assumed by political parties, the pro-Chávez mayors – who controlled 80 per cent of the municipalities at the time – headed the Chavista campaign organisation in their respective localities. In contrast, the PSUV, whose battalions had campaigned heavily in the state-municipal elections held three months earlier, were less central in the Chavistas' February 2009 campaign effort.

Different aspects of the models discussed in this article explain the institutional and organisational weaknesses of the Chavista presidency. Firstly, the Chavista movement's rejection of the system of liberal democracy has been translated into the blurring of the divide between the state and political party spheres. The state's incursions into the political arena and its open politicisation of old and new spaces have detracted from the role of the governing parties. Secondly, aversion to liberal democracy has led to the dismantlement of corporatist mechanisms that had provided sectoral organisations such as FEDECAMARAS and the labour movement's national leadership with an ongoing input into decision-making for several decades. The establishment of institutional alternatives to corporatist structures has been held back because social organisations, which according to the 1999 Constitution were to play an important consultative role, have tended to be short-lived. Thirdly, Chavista leaders have always lashed out at pro-establishment political parties for having exercised tight control of labour and other social movements prior to 1998, a practice that some political scientists characterised as 'party democracy'.<sup>32</sup> MVR leaders overreacted to 'party democracy' by refraining from developing organic links with social movements that could have facilitated a two-way flow of information and advice between

<sup>31</sup> Speech delivered in Zulia, 20 Jan. 2009.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Coppedge, *Strong Parties and Lame Ducks: Presidential Partyarchy and Factionalism in Venezuela* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

the two spheres, thus forfeiting their party's organisational development and confining themselves largely to congressional and electoral arenas.

The Chavista embrace of social-based democracy and radical democracy has also stunted organisational and institutional growth in some ways. The advocates of radical democracy and majority rule justify the expansion of the executive branch and Chávez's assumption of unrivalled authority within his movement on the grounds that the popularity of the president has no equivalent among those under him. This hegemonic position has discouraged internal debate that could have strengthened the MVR and PSUV and led to the rank and file's direct selection of party leaders.

In addition, social-based democracy in Venezuela rests on the assumption that the state needs to be flexible and avoid the rigid application of rules and regulations in order to encourage the participation of marginalised sectors and their incorporation into experimental bodies such as cooperatives and community councils.<sup>33</sup> However, this practice holds back the development of effective institutional controls on the large sums of money that have been allocated to social programmes. More recently, the government has taken modest measures to correct this deficiency. The Organic Law of Community Councils passed in December 2009, for instance, is designed to broaden responsibility for fiscal transactions, which previously was often limited to the self-proclaimed head of the communal bank.<sup>34</sup> The law also opened up the possibility of intervention by the National Controllershship in individual community councils (Article 35).

In one other respect, Venezuela's social-based democracy, together with radical democracy, has organisational and institutional implications. The Chavista social base of support is the popular sectors of the population. Their ongoing mobilisation in social programmes and political rallies and their enrolment in the mass-based PSUV, which broke with the Leninist concept of a vanguard party, have led to empowerment and incorporation, both of which are cornerstones of social-based democracy. Mass mobilisation and participation also encapsulate the notion of majority rule, or radical democracy, which contributes to the legitimacy of Chavista rule in the face of an opposition that questions the government's democratic commitment. Given the emphasis on direct participation, the governing political party could serve as a partial substitute for traditional institutional mechanisms of checks and balances. Nevertheless, state bureaucratic control of the PSUV limits the effectiveness of rank-and-file participation in party decision-making, which

<sup>33</sup> Steve Ellner, 'A New Model with Rough Edges: Venezuela's Community Councils', *NACLA: Report on the Americas*, 42: 3 (2009), p. 14; Harnecker, *Transfiriendo poder a la gente*, p. 98.

<sup>34</sup> Carlos Martínez, Michael Fox and JoJo Farrell, *Venezuela Speaks! Voices from the Grassroots* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2009), p. 135.

some Chavistas view as an effective check on government performance. Checks and balances, although associated with liberal democracy, are a *sine qua non* for the institutionalisation of the Chavista model in a way that avoids the Soviet-style bureaucratic socialism firmly rejected by the Chavistas.

*Social-Based Democracy and the Debate over the Role of the State*

Two opposite positions on the role of the state – with gradations between them – have emerged in the Chavista movement, with important implications for the model of social-based democracy. A radical position recalls Lenin's insistence on the need to 'smash the state' in order to achieve socialism. It also posits the existence of an irreconcilable conflict between 'constituent power' (taking in social movements and the population in general) and 'constituted power' (the state bureaucracy and political party leaderships).<sup>35</sup> The radical approach considers the social programmes and social organisations representing the Chavista rank and file as effective arenas in which to organise against the 'constituted power', but places in doubt the capacity of the state to play a constructive role in promoting the goals of social-based democracy. The radicals assume a high level of consciousness among the popular classes and reach the conclusion that subjective conditions in Venezuela (specifically, eagerness to engage in the struggle for change) are ripe for far-reaching transformation.

A second, more moderate view recognises that the Chavistas inherited a bourgeois state as a result of their electoral path to power. The moderate view envisages a 'war of position', along the lines of the strategy developed by Antonio Gramsci, in which revolutionaries steadily occupy old and new spaces in the public sphere. Consequently the aim is not to smash the state as Lenin and even Gramsci believed would eventually happen, but rather to transform it, at least in part. Marta Harnecker, for instance, points out that under Chávez 'state institutions are run by revolutionary cadres that are aware they should ... work with the organised sectors of the people to control what the institutions do and to press for transformation of the state apparatus', and as a result it is feasible, 'with certain limits, for these institutions to work for the revolutionary project'. At the same time she calls for 'laying the foundations of new institutions ... [by] creating spaces from the bottom up'.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> The concepts of 'constituent power' and 'constituted power', which replace class struggle as the main locus of conflict, are used by writers such as Antonio Negri and inspired by postmodern and anti-statist thinking, as well as by those in Venezuela who adhere to the radical position on the state.

<sup>36</sup> Harnecker, 'Latin America and Twenty-First Century Socialism', p. 34. See also George Cicciariello-Maher, 'Dual Power in the Venezuelan Revolution', *Monthly Review*, 59: 4 (2007), pp. 54–5.

Those who defend the moderate position deny that sectors of the state and society are monolithic or can be reduced to 'constituent' and 'constituted' powers. They criticise the 'radicals' for directing their fire against the Chavista bureaucracy and in the process detracting from the struggle against the organised opposition. On occasion they call on the state bureaucracy simply to refrain from interfering with the struggle of the popular sectors, including organised labour, against their class enemies.<sup>37</sup>

The moderate position on the transformation of the state in the framework of 'trial and error' socialism is compatible with social-based democracy, which is designed to prepare subjective conditions for thoroughgoing structural changes. Most importantly, the moderate position values government programmes and other initiatives 'from above' that are designed to advance the goals associated with social-based democracy. Those who embrace the moderate viewpoint defend a non-dogmatic version of Marxist thinking that underlines the contradictions at all levels of society and its institutions and the need to struggle particularly on the ideological front, as Gramsci emphasised, in order to occupy new spaces.<sup>38</sup> In contrast, the radical position focuses in effect on head-on class confrontation even within the state sphere. It also discards the necessity of forestalling socialism in order to prepare the underprivileged sectors for the role they are to play in the new socialist society, a task that is the *raison d'être* of social-based democracy.

Influential advocates of the radical position on the state include social movement activist Roland Denis, who in 2002–3 was vice-minister of planning, and the British Trotskyist Alan Woods, who has occasionally met with and advised President Chávez. Following his exit from the ministry, Denis became increasingly critical of the government and Chávez himself for turning their backs on social organisations and the Chavista rank and file. Denis claims that the development of strong social movements and their slogan of 'people's power', which coincided with the economic contraction of the neoliberal period beginning in the late 1980s, laid the foundation for the 'constituent power' that emerged after 1998. He warns that the vibrancy of social movements is being threatened by the interventionist intentions of some PSUV leaders who call on the party to help orient the community councils as a smokescreen for exercising control.<sup>39</sup> At the same time he denies the claim of Chavista mayors that community councils have not been granted sufficient funding because they have failed to present viable proposals. Along similar lines, Denis and other 'radicals' accuse the Chavista political leaders

<sup>37</sup> Webber and Spronk, 'Venezuela: Voices on the Struggle', p. 30.

<sup>38</sup> Luis Bilbao, *Venezuela en revolución, renacimiento del socialismo* (Buenos Aires: Capital Intelectual, 2008), pp. 136–7.

<sup>39</sup> See also Santiago Arconada, 'Es necesario replantear la relación entre socialismo y democracia', *Comuna: pensamiento crítico en la revolución*, 1 (July–Sep. 2009), pp. 58–60.

(constituted power) of having held back the mobilisation of the rank and file at the time of the attempts to overthrow Chávez in 2002 and 2003, and of having ‘demonstrated a complete lack of commitment to holding power’.<sup>40</sup> In recent years Denis has argued that ‘centrists’ and ‘rightists’ have gained control of the key ministerial positions, and that these Chavistas cannot be viewed as separate from, or less dangerous than, the organised opposition.<sup>41</sup>

Theoretical writers such as Marta Harnecker, the German-Mexican writer Heinz Dieterich and the Argentine leftist Luis Bilbao, who have influenced the Chavista movement in favour of the moderate position on the state, differ from the ‘radicals’ in their evaluation of subjective conditions.<sup>42</sup> Bilbao points out that subjective conditions should not be overestimated as even the new structures created by the Chávez government are subject to the vices of the past as well as extreme fragmentation. Given the lag in subjective conditions, the PSUV should not, at least for the time being, call itself ‘Marxist’.<sup>43</sup> Bilbao, in accordance with Gramsci’s view on the importance of ideology in the achievement of hegemony, argues that the social programmes and movements are not just political instruments in the battle against adversaries but also play a leading role in ‘the ideological-political formation of the masses’. In essence, social-based democracy in Venezuela puts into practice a dynamic of gradual radical change that is less internally confrontational than that which the hardliners envisage. The government’s social programmes create the

<sup>40</sup> Roberto López Sánchez, ‘Autonomía sindical y soberanía popular’, in Margarita López Maya (ed.), *Ideas para debatir el socialismo del siglo XXI*, vol. 2 (Caracas: Editorial Alfa, 2009), p. 134.

<sup>41</sup> Roland Denis (interviewed by Raul Zelik), ‘Venezuela and the Popular Movement’, *Z Magazine*, 16: 10 (Oct. 2003); Denis, ‘Venezuela: The Popular Movements and the Government’, *International Socialist Review*, 110 (2006), pp. 29–35.

<sup>42</sup> For an optimistic evaluation of subjective conditions in Venezuela by a leading advocate of the radical position on the state, see Alan Woods, *Reformismo o revolución: marxismo y socialismo del siglo XXI; respuesta a Heinz Dieterich* (Madrid: Fundación Federico Engels, 2008), pp. 402–5.

<sup>43</sup> Bilbao, *Venezuela en revolución*, pp. 219, 151; Marta Harnecker, *Haciendo posible lo imposible: la izquierda en el umbral del siglo XXI* (Mexico and Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno, 1999), p. 65. For a discussion of Dieterich’s views, see Javier Biarreau, ‘¿El proceso de transición hacia el nuevo socialismo del siglo XXI? Un debate que apenas comienza’, in Mario Ayala and Pablo Quintero (eds.), *Diez años de revolución en Venezuela: historia, balance y perspectivas (1999–2009)* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Maipue, 2009), pp. 371–5. See also Rodolfo Sanz, *Hugo Chávez y el desafío socialista* (2nd edition, Caracas: Editorial Nuevo Pensamiento Crítico, 2007), p. 168; and Sara C. Motta, ‘Venezuela: Reinventing Social Democracy from Below’, in Geraldine Lievesley and Steve Ludlam (eds.), *Reclaiming Latin America: Experiments in Radical Social Democracy* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2008), pp. 86–8.

conditions for cultural transformation that facilitates the occupation of spaces by revolutionaries both inside and outside the state.<sup>44</sup>

The relationship between the Chavista movement and business interests lies at the heart of the differences between the first and second lines of thinking. The radical position on the state sees certain businessmen as intricately linked to pro-Chávez politicians and corruption as pervasive. For instance, Chavista governors and mayors (constituted power) who grant contracts to capitalist groups for public works projects instead of favouring cooperatives, community councils or small businesses end up becoming closely tied to elite sectors of the enemy camp. Those who support the radical position coincide with the Venezuelan opposition in asserting that widespread corruption has facilitated the rise of new bourgeois groups, referred to as the *boliburguesía*. They argue that in oil-rich Venezuela, unlike in most countries, the 'state creates the bourgeoisie' and not vice versa, and that this historical tendency has continued under Chávez. The 'radical' Chavistas point to Diosdado Cabello and, albeit to a lesser extent, the minister of energy and petroleum, Rafael Ramírez, as examples of Chavista politicians who are tied to private interests.<sup>45</sup>

Rank-and-file Chavistas often articulate the radical position by expressing outrage at the extensiveness of government corruption. Community council members, for instance, sometimes attribute the lengthy delays in the funding of projects and the general deficiencies in public services to a 'fifth column' within the government that has allegiances to business interests.<sup>46</sup> Many of these Chavistas draw the conclusion that an all-out war needs to be waged within their movement – what Chávez has called a 'revolution within the revolution' – in order to purge its ranks and sever its ties with opportunistic businessmen.

Those who defend the moderate position do not deny the existence of corruption and recognise that some businessmen have acquired considerable wealth as a result of contracts and other opportunities provided by the state. Nevertheless, the moderates argue that the existence of unethical businessmen with connections to the government is a far cry from a 'consolidated' Chavista bloc of the bourgeoisie and its penetration of the government sphere.<sup>47</sup> The moderates' analysis of the Chavista movement and government tends to focus on bureaucratic inefficiency and incompetence as opposed to corruption

<sup>44</sup> Toby Valderrama and Alejandro Mena, *Rumbo al socialismo* (Barcelona, Venezuela: Misión Ribas, 2005), p. 69; Sanz, *Hugo Chávez y el desafío socialista*, pp. 162–4; Bilbao, *Venezuela en revolución*, pp. 178, 219.

<sup>45</sup> Roland Denis, 'Hay una lucha histórica que no ha sido resuelta en veinte años', *Comuna: pensamiento crítico en la revolución*, 1 (July–Sep. 2009), pp. 108–9.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Naïke Infantino, director of Caracas' Office of Citizen Attention, Caracas, 11 Dec. 2008.

<sup>47</sup> Manuel Brito, 'Bocabulario Burgués (o sea, Ernesto, Vladimir, Mario Villegas)', [www.aporrea.org/ideologia/a92363.html](http://www.aporrea.org/ideologia/a92363.html).

and the influence of economic groups. At the same time, the moderates question the tendency of the opposition and the Chavista 'radicals' to accuse PSUV leaders of ongoing corrupt practices without providing concrete evidence to support their claims. In addition, they generally accept the Chávez government's dealings with new economic groups as legitimate during the 'transitional stage to socialism', but insist that such groups should not receive special treatment.<sup>48</sup>

The 'moderate' Chavistas warn that internal confrontation runs the risk of disrupting the unity of the Chavista movement, which Chávez constantly calls for as a political imperative. With their emphasis on the problems of inefficiency and misplaced priorities, as opposed to corruption, these Chavistas are more likely to campaign and vote for Chavista candidates who are not to their liking, unlike the more intransigent 'radicals'. Widespread abstention by Chavistas explained the movement's first electoral defeat in the national referendum on a proposed constitutional reform held in December 2007.

Until 2008, the debate within the Chavista movement over these issues was mainly confined to informal discussion.<sup>49</sup> With the December 2007 electoral defeat, however, Chávez called for an ongoing process of self-criticism in order to revitalise the movement by way of what he called 'reimpulso' ('new thrust'). Subsequently, critical viewpoints reflecting the two positions on the state were frequently expressed in opinion pieces on the Chavista website *Aporrea.org*, whose co-founder Gonzalo Gómez belonged to the Venezuelan Trotskyist organisation *Marea Socialista* (Socialist Tide) as well as to the PSUV.<sup>50</sup> Some Chavistas in the government considered *Aporrea's* critiques exaggerated and inopportune,<sup>51</sup> but the website followed a policy of publishing nearly all articles sent to it by those on the Left. Similarly, Foreign Minister Nicolás Maduro harshly criticised the *Centro Internacional Miranda* (Miranda International Centre, CIM), a think tank that received funding from the Higher Education Ministry, due to its diversity and critical opinions. The CIM was founded by Marta Harnecker, who defends the moderate position on the state, but it includes leftist intellectual activists such as Denis and Javier Biardeau who claim that corruption has fully penetrated the public sector.

<sup>48</sup> 'Entrevista a Alberto Müller Rojas', [www.aporrea.org/ideologia/n146379.html](http://www.aporrea.org/ideologia/n146379.html); Harnecker, *Rebuilding the Left*, paras. 137–9.

<sup>49</sup> Ellner, *Rethinking Venezuelan Politics*, p. 141.

<sup>50</sup> Daniel Hellinger, 'Virtual Participation and Political Virtue: Chavistas on the Internet in Venezuela', paper presented at the 28th Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, June 2009.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Jorge Giordani, minister of economy and finance, Caracas, 23 Jan. 2010; interview with Irán Aguilera, president of the state legislature of Anzoátegui, Barcelona, Venezuela, 25 Nov. 2009.

The complexity of developments in Venezuela, due to the rapid pace of change, places in doubt the simplistic, black-and-white vision of the radical position. By characterising Chavistas in power as a fifth column within the Chavista movement, the 'radicals' inadvertently or explicitly minimise the differences between them and the leaders of the opposition. A Chavista governor, for example, who grants contracts to members of the local economic elite for public work projects or who fails to project a revolutionary image but is not corrupt, can hardly be placed in the same camp as Chávez's adversaries. The discourse associated with the radical position on the state, which fails to make distinctions along these lines, has led numerous rank-and-file Chávez followers to abstain from voting in local elections rather than support a Chavista candidate who is not to their liking. Finally, by dismissing bureaucratic controls as self-serving, if not conducive to clientelism and corruption, the 'radicals' characterise state regulation of social programmes as excessive and unnecessary when in fact it has often proven to be timid and insufficient.<sup>52</sup>

In other historical contexts the Leninist and gradual strategies do not necessarily correlate with optimistic or pessimistic assessments of the ripeness of conditions for revolutionary change, or definitions of revolution as representing a protracted process as opposed to a sudden change. Those who claim that socialism can only be established through the seizure of power (Leninist position) may relegate revolution to the far-distant future.<sup>53</sup> In addition, those inspired by Gramsci may envisage revolution – as opposed to 'revolutionary process' – as an abrupt change produced by a single event.

In short, those Chavistas who defend the moderate position on the state favour working with patience to occupy spaces in the public sphere. Consequently, they reject the radical vision of a 'revolution within the revolution', which is predicated on an extremely optimistic evaluation of subjective conditions. The moderate position also supports Gramsci's emphasis on ideological struggle, which is an important component of social-based democracy. In addition to ideology, social-based democracy focuses on literacy, education, job training and empowerment in a variety of political and non-political contexts. These objectives presuppose a more sombre evaluation of current conditions in Venezuela than that put forward by the radical Chavistas.

<sup>52</sup> Ellner, 'A New Model with Rough Edges', pp. 12–13.

<sup>53</sup> This type of determinism was upheld, for instance, by leading members of the US Communist Party beginning in the 1930s, as discussed by Maurice Isserman in *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party during the Second World War* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), pp. 48–9.

### Conclusion

Much of the theoretical writing on the Chávez presidency that points to the lack of strong institutions and organisations (a central concern of this article) is influenced by conceptualisations of Latin American populism over the last half-century. Early writing on populism associated with Gino Germani depicted the relationship between the populist leader and his followers as that of a caudillo and the ignorant masses in the absence of viable intermediary structures.<sup>54</sup> Chávez's detractors use this conception to characterise Chávez as a demagogue whose rhetoric is devoid of ideological content and who is free of any institutional or organisational checks on his authority.<sup>55</sup>

Revisionist writing on populism beginning in the 1970s presented a more nuanced picture of the phenomenon, analysing its acceptance of weak organisations but also highlighting its transformational potential.<sup>56</sup> More recently, Kurt Weyland and Kenneth Roberts, writing on Chávez and other populists at the turn of the century, have also balanced negative and positive features. On the one hand, the modern-day populists give a voice to the marginalised workers of the informal economy who previously lacked interlocutors at any level. On the other, populist governments suffer from institutional and organisational backwardness, although Roberts recognises that Chávez does not go to the extreme of Fujimori in spurning well-structured organisations.<sup>57</sup> Kirk Hawkins, in a book on chavismo and populism, attributes the institutional and organisational underdevelopment of the Chavista and other populist movements to their Manichean world vision. According to this thesis **the populist leader is perceived as embodying the will of the majority against the forces of evil, a role that intermediary bodies undermine in that they create obstacles between the leader and the people.**<sup>58</sup>



<sup>54</sup> Gino Germani, *Política y sociedad en una época de transición: de la sociedad tradicional a la sociedad de masas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Paidós, 1962).

<sup>55</sup> Jorge G. Castañeda and Marco A. Morales, 'The Current State of the Utopia', in Castañeda and Morales (eds.), *Leftovers: Tales of the Latin American Left* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), p. 16; Nelly Arenas and Luis Gómez Calcaño, *Populismo autoritario: Venezuela, 1999–2005* (Caracas: Cendes, 2006), pp. 129–56.

<sup>56</sup> Daniel James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>57</sup> Kenneth M. Roberts, 'Populism, Political Conflict, and Grass Roots Organization in Latin America', *Comparative Politics*, 38: 2 (2007), p. 144; Kurt Weyland, *The Politics of Market Reform in Fragile Democracies: Argentina, Brazil, Peru, and Venezuela* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 247–9. See also Steve Ellner, 'The Contrasting Variants of the Populism of Hugo Chávez and Alberto Fujimori', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 35: 1 (2003), pp. 154–5.

<sup>58</sup> Kirk A. Hawkins, *Venezuela's Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 82–5, 168.

This article has also examined the lack of organisational and institutional consolidation, but rejects the simplified framework of those writing in the Germani tradition. Chávez's undisputed power holds back organisational development by discouraging the formulation of a diversity of positions within the movement and the development of mechanisms for resolving internal differences. Furthermore, popular mobilisations over a period of time unmatched in Venezuelan history, which represent an essential component of Venezuela's social-based democracy, have cemented the bond between Chávez and his followers while failing to facilitate the creation of viable and durable organisations. Similarly, the discourse on majority rule lashes out at 'bureaucrats' and 'technocrats' and thus helps delegitimise intermediary structures between the national executive and the rank and file.

The Chavista strategy for social programmes also contributes to weak organisations and institutions. The Chavistas have preferred flexibility, makeshift structures and bending the rules of the game over established institutions in order to avoid intimidating the unincorporated, who may be lacking a sense of efficacy. Furthermore, the Chavistas argue that the incorporation of marginalised sectors into the political, economic and cultural life of the nation is a precondition for the deepening of the process of change. However, members of these sectors generally lack the organisational experience and skills of the organised working class and of the middle class.

Venezuela's social-based democracy represents a model that is distinct from both really existing socialism and welfare-state politics. Unlike the Soviet Union in the 1930s and other communist nations, the Chavista government has directed its efforts at the preparation of hitherto excluded sectors for participation on a diversity of fronts. The sheer numbers of popular sector members who have enrolled in social programmes and taken part in political mobilisations over an extended period of time, along with the trade-offs in favour of the poor at the expense of more privileged groups, contrast with the social strategies of reformist governments. Furthermore, the zero-sum-game policies of the Chávez presidency have generated intense political and social polarisation that has few equivalents in the history of reformists in power who promote a welfare-state model.

Developments under Chávez's third presidential term, beginning in 2007, point to challenges and a shift in priorities and ideological underpinnings that detract from the primacy of the goals associated with social-based democracy. Scarcities of basic products beginning in 2007, which contributed to the Chavistas' first electoral defeat in a referendum held in December of that year, influenced the government to focus greater attention on increasing production as opposed to social programmes. Compensation for widespread expropriations, which were designed to achieve economic goals including combating scarcity and price speculation, represented a drain on national revenue during

a period of declining oil income.<sup>59</sup> Budgetary cuts for social programmes were first felt in 2009 when Chávez himself acknowledged a deterioration of the government's flagship Barrios Adentro programme. The reduction of social spending was also in evidence in the first half of 2010 when only 12,000 of the nation's 30,000 community councils renewed their legal status as required by the December 2009 law in order to qualify for additional funding.<sup>60</sup>

A modification of official discourse accompanied this change of focus. During his third presidency, Chávez declared himself a Marxist and for the first time insisted on the leading revolutionary role of the working class. As a result, the discourse began to focus more on centres of production and less on the territorial unit and specifically the community, to which the cooperatives, community councils and mission programmes are linked. Thus, for instance, the Chavistas increasingly viewed worker input in the decision-making processes of state-owned companies – and particularly the heavy industry of the Guayana region, in accordance with the Socialist Plan of Guayana launched in 2009 – as the embodiment of participatory democracy. Although after 2009 social objectives and programmes and the incorporation of previously unrepresented sectors continued to play a major role in the Chavista discourse and budgetary allocations, these aims have begun to lose the primacy they enjoyed in previous years, when they were the cornerstone of social-based democracy.

In short, throughout the Chávez presidency, participation in social movements and programmes and party activity has affected the lives of a large number of underprivileged Venezuelans, but the results have been mixed. This article has highlighted the accomplishments of Chavista social programmes in the form of empowerment (a subjective condition), educational gains, learning experiences and incorporation, all of which further the goals of social-based democracy. Only by taking into account these advances on a massive scale is it possible to explain the unprecedented electoral successes of the Chavistas over such an extended period of time. On the negative side, the high failure rate of cooperatives and community councils, due to the organisational inexperience of their members and the state's institutional deficiencies, has dampened the enthusiasm of some Chavista supporters, often leading to disillusionment and passivity. The impact of these diverse experiences on Venezuela's excluded and semi-excluded population will shape the nation's politics and social relations long into the future.



<sup>59</sup> Steve Ellner, 'Chávez Pushes the Limits: Radicalisation and Discontent in Venezuela', *NACLA: Report on the Americas*, 43: 4 (2010), p. 11.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Leandro Rodríguez, adviser to the National Assembly's Commission of Citizen Participation, Decentralisation and Regional Development, Caracas, 29 July 2010.

*Spanish and Portuguese abstracts*

*Spanish abstract.* Bajo el gobierno de Chávez, la incorporación y participación de los sectores populares, que es la esencia de la *social-based democracy* (la democracia que prioriza lo social), ha sido cuantitativa y cualitativamente diferente a las estrategias de los gobiernos socialistas o estados de bienestar social del pasado. La social-based democracy de Venezuela se centra en la educación, las habilidades en el trabajo, la ideología, la transformación de valores y el empoderamiento, logros que los dirigentes chavistas consideran como imperativos para un desarrollo socialista. Sin embargo, los programas sociales chavistas se han ido erosionando por debilidades institucionales, altos costos en comparación con sus logros, y politización. Los puntos de vista opuestos que se encuentran entre chavistas sobre el papel del estado tienen que ver con que si las iniciativas desde arriba a favor de la democracia social representan una estrategia viable para transformaciones de largo aliento. El cambio de prioridades del gobierno venezolano desde 2007 lo ha ido distanciando de la primacía de los programas sociales.

*Spanish keywords:* Chávez, programas sociales, instituciones, consejos comunales, empoderamiento

*Portuguese abstract.* Sob o governo Chávez, a incorporaco e participaco de setores populares, o que é a essncia da *social-based democracy* (a democracia que prioriza a dimenso social) tem sido diferente das estratgias dos governos socialistas e dos estados de bem-estar social do passado em termos quantitativos e qualitativos. A social-based democracy venezuelana concentra-se em educao, capacitao profissional, ideologia, transformao de valores e empodeiramento, realizaoes que os lderes chavistas consideram imperativas para o desenvolvimento socialista. Entretanto, programas chavistas tem sido debilitados por fraquezas institucionais, e podem ter um custo-benefcio duvidoso e so politizados. Vises conflitantes entre chavistas acerca do papel do estado esto relacionadas à questo de iniciativas partidadas 'de cima' para favorecer a democracia social, se essas podem representar uma estratgia vivel para alcanar mudanas profundas. A alterao de prioridades do governo venezuelano aps 2007 diminuiu a primazia dos programas sociais.

*Portuguese keywords:* Chávez, programas sociais, instituioes, conselhos comunitrios, empodeiramento