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Article in *Latin American Perspectives* · January 2011

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Populism's Achilles' Heel

Popular Democracy beyond the Liberal State and the Market Economy in Venezuela

by
Sara C. Motta

Minimalist definitions of populism, which are dominant in "Western" analysis, conceptualize Chavismo as a form of illiberal populism. A methodological, theoretical, and empirical critique of the applicability of the term "populism" to contemporary Venezuelan politics, focused on the lived experiences of the popular classes in communal councils and urban land committees, reveals that its use masks an innovative and contradictory political process aimed at creating popular democratic subjects and a popular democracy beyond the liberal state and the market economy.

Keywords: Populism, Liberalism, Venezuela, Chavismo, Popular democracy

"Populism" is a term often used to describe, evaluate, and/or criticize the contemporary political process in Venezuela. As used by the majority of "Western" political scientists, it involves a variety of assumptions regarding the main actors that shape politics and the desirable institutional form of democracy. Accordingly, politics is conflated with policy making by political elites and bureaucrats, and the procedures of democratic institutions are premised upon representative democracy, in which the role of the people is to delegate power, via elections, to elected elites. A hierarchical relationship in which power is exercised by elites within the centralized state over subjects in society is assumed to be the only way of organizing government. As a consequence of these often implicit assumptions, democracy, liberalism, and the capitalist state and market become naturalized as opposed to historically specific ways of organizing economic and political power. Thus alternative ways of organizing power and institutionalizing government are excluded from analysis, as are nonliberal articulations of democracy.

The populism concept's applicability to the Venezuelan political process is cast into doubt by these elitist assumptions, which obscure popular articulations of democracy within and outside of the state. Additionally, the popular

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LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES, Issue 176, Vol. 38 No. 1, January 2011 28-46
DOI: 10.1177/0094582X10384208
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classes are often called irrational, short-sighted, marginal, or susceptible to manipulation (Bull, 2005: 19–39). As de la Torre (1997: 13) notes, “Modernizing elites have argued that populism’s rhetoric and style of mobilization pose dangers to democratic institutions. They have constructed popular subjects as the ‘Other’—the negation of the ‘modern and rational’ political subjects that they aim to forge.” The concept also posits a concept of modernity bound by the limitations of capitalist rationality, in which the market is assumed to be the form of the economy and the capitalist state the form of organization of power. This raises methodological, empirical, and normative problems because the “other” is denied and the politics of the “other” is silenced and/or ignored. It highlights the limitations of generic ahistorical concepts such as populism for explaining political processes, such as those of Venezuela, that seek to transcend the boundaries of the liberal state and the market economy via the articulation of a popular democracy.

This article interrogates the use of the concept “populism” in relation to the contemporary political process in Venezuela. It develops a critique of the concept’s applicability via methodological, conceptual, and empirical arguments and evidence. It seeks to show that the methodological assumptions embedded in the concept make it incapable of capturing a dynamic historical process in which the popular classes play a protagonist role. It does not deny that there are elements of Chavismo that mirror minimalist definitions of populism (see, for example, Hawkins’s [2006] research on the *circulos bolivarianos*) but argues that a focus on such characteristics masks the complexity of politics and power as they are being contested in the Venezuelan state and society.

THE CONCEPT OF POPULISM AS A TOOL OF POLITICAL ANALYSIS

Before criticizing the assumptions underlying the concept of populism and its use to analyze contemporary politics in Venezuela, it is important to understand its varied uses in relation to Latin America. Populism in its classic form is associated with a particular economic strategy, import-substitution industrialization, a particular set of institutional and political relationships (nonliberal relationships between charismatic political leader and mass followers, either within political parties or via clientelistic channels within state institutions, and between the governed and representatives of the state), a discourse focused on *el pueblo* (the people) versus the elite and the mass occupation of public space, and a particular social support base (the organized working class). This conceptualization has been given various normative evaluations. Some have focused on its role in creating a particular form of popular class inclusion and the granting of social rights in return for political acquiescence (Hagopian, 1998). Others have focused on its ability to construct a national developmentalist coalition able to support industrialization (Collier and Collier, 1991) and still others on the particular state/society relationships whereby the masses have been controlled and their potential destabilizing political mobilization circumvented (de la Torre, 1997).

However, during the transition from import-substitution industrialization to neoliberalism in the late 1980s/early 1990s in much of Latin America, it was

observed that the political and institutional elements of populism reappeared despite the transformation in development strategy. Political analysts therefore began to redefine "populism" as "neo-populism," shifting the focus away from a specific development strategy or social base and focusing instead on the concept's political and institutional characteristics. Neo-populism is associated with a personalist politics that lacks liberal institutionalization, a discourse of the people versus the elite, mass mobilization as opposed to party participation, and clientelist relationships between state and society and within the institutions of the state. The concept has been used to explain the surprising mixture of neoliberal reform and democracy despite the negative short- to medium-term impacts of the former on the socioeconomic conditions of the majority. Those with a positive evaluation of populism's relationship with democracy have argued that neo-populist presidents such as Peru's Fujimori and Argentina's Menem stabilized crisis situations, created macroeconomic stability, and maintained high levels of popular support ensuring second terms in office (Weyland, 1998; Remmer, 1998). In more pessimistic evaluations the neo-populist concept has been used to explain the reproduction of traditional politics and power relationships between political and economic elites and masses and between state and society despite a transformation in development strategy (Roberts, 1995; Crabtree, 2000). It has helped reconcile a rhetoric of the people and their power with a reality in which the majority were excluded from meaningful democratic participation. As many analysts have argued, we were witnessing the reproduction of old politics with new economics (Panizza, 2000).

At times explicitly but most often implicitly, popular-class agency within this conceptualization was disarmed, and elite manipulation of popular class vulnerabilities and necessities was placed at the heart of the power relationships and politics of Latin American states and societies (Castañeda, 2006; Krastev, 2006). Criticism of neo-populist regimes focused upon their nonliberal institutionalization, the active disarticulation of political parties and party systems, and the direct relationship between populist leaders and populaces. Relationships, it was assumed, were based on client/patron practices as opposed to citizen/representative practices. In many cases the conceptualization of regimes as neo-populist neoliberal, in which traditional power relationships between state and society were reproduced over time and inequalities of power accentuated, proved useful and nuanced in their analysis. However, the conceptualization of power and political agency of such analyses reproduced assumptions about the masses' lack of, or limited, political agency, rationality, and ability to determine their own futures.¹ While simplifying political analysis and allowing for comparative studies of the relationship between traditional politics and neoliberal reform, the potential forms of resistance and political agency of the popular classes were sidelined. As Laclau (2005: 63) argues,

We can already entertain a strong suspicion that the reasons for the dismissal of populism are not entirely unrelated to those invoked in . . . the "denigration of the masses." In both cases we see the same accusations of marginality, transitoriness, pure rhetoric, vagueness, manipulation. . . . In both cases the dismissal is linked to an identical prejudice—that is, the repudiation of the undifferentiated milieu which is the "crowd" or the "people" in the name of social structuration and institutionalization.

Indeed, such interpretations of Latin American politics in the 1990s reproduced classic elitist views of democracy in which state reform and the construction of rational, modern liberal and individual citizens were posited as the ideal solution to problems of the “old” politics. As de la Torre (1997: 20) argues, “[this] reinforces their [modern elite] self-designation as the moral guides of modern [ity].”

Further problems arise with the concept’s value as a tool for political analysis when we are confronted with a political process that fits neither the import-substitution industrialization populist nor the neoliberal neo-populist framework. It is when faced with processes that seek to go beyond liberal democracy and the market economy via popular political agency and creativity that the limitations of the concept of populism become evident.

CHAVISMO AS POPULISM

These populist attributes are inherently anti-democratic. To ignore this is to ignore the negative potential that was inherent in the movement from its start. . . . It is difficult and perhaps impossible to build democracy on a foundation of populism like that we see in Venezuela.

—Kirk Hawkins

Attempts to categorize the Venezuela political process as populist tend to conceive of populism in one of two main ways. The first and more common one is politically/ideologically minimalist, and the second, developed most coherently by Ellner (2003), characterizes Chavismo as closer to the classical redistributive, state-led populism of the 1930s and 1940s. The former tends to evaluate the populism of Chávez as negative and semiauthoritarian because of its lack of liberal institutionalization. It focuses on the need for political party building and promotion to ensure democratic state/society relationships and tends to be dismissive and fearful of mass mobilization and direct, participatory political practices (Hagopian, 2005). The latter views populism as a historically contingent set of practices within a political project that is under construction and therefore explicitly eschews the liberal institutional bias and fear of the masses that characterizes the dominant conceptualization. In this article the focus of critique will be the former because of its dominant conceptual and intellectual role in academic production and its political implications. This conceptualization stresses the “them and us” discourse and the personalist practices of Hugo Chávez. It focuses on the weakness of political parties and assumes that therefore traditional clientelist relationships between state and society and within state institutions are reproduced. Culturally, it assumes, the popular classes are carriers and practioners of illiberalism and authoritarianism (Derham, 2002). Hawkins (2003: 1137) eloquently illustrates this perspective:

Chavismo meets the minimal political definition of populism. . . . Chavismo relies on a charismatic mode of linkage between voters and politicians, a relationship

largely unmediated by any institutionalised party, and . . . [based] on a powerful, Manichaeian discourse of “the people versus the elite” that naturally encourages an “anything goes” attitude among Chávez’s supporters. . . . These populist qualities undermine the movement’s democratic potential.

Such evaluations focus on Chavismo’s political and institutional characteristics. They view its relationship with democracy as negative and contrast Chávez’s government with that of “responsible” left governments such as those of the Concertación in Chile and the Workers’ Party in Brazil. Castañeda (2006: 5) illustrates this perspective acutely with his discussion of the state of the contemporary Latin American left:

The leftist leaders who have arisen from a populist, nationalist past with few ideological underpinnings . . . have proved much less responsive to modernizing influences. For them, rhetoric is more important than substance and the fact of power is more important than its responsible exercise. The despair of poor constituencies is a tool rather than a challenge. . . . Economic performance, democratic values . . . are not imperatives but bothersome constraints that miss the real point.

In sum, minimalist definitions focus on the political and institutional elements of populism as opposed to a particular social support base or development strategy. Thus the focus of analysis revolves around Chávez’s leadership qualities and rhetoric. Accordingly, their evaluation of the relationship between populism/Chavismo and democracy is negative, viewing a political movement of this type as a threat to the consolidation of democracy by entering into the realm of authoritarianism.

POPULISM AS A LIMIT TO POLITICAL UNDERSTANDING

The conceptualization of Chavismo as populist has serious limitations with regard to capturing the dynamics of state/society relationships and the impact on the distribution of power as they are being developed in Venezuela. It focuses on certain elements of Chavismo while ignoring other, more substantive political processes and transformations. Noticeable in such accounts is their lack of engagement, knowledge, or evidence from the popular classes involved in Chavismo. Therefore much of this article draws on material gathered from my participation in organized communities in La Vega (a parish of Caracas) during a period of three months between April and August 2006.²

The following sections deconstruct the concept of populism as a way of understanding Chavismo. First, a critique of the flaws of the minimalist definition of populism is developed. Then a critique of the ahistorical assumptions regarding the ideal form of democracy embedded in the concept is offered. This is followed by an exploration of attempts by the Venezuelan popular classes to reinvent democracy with a focus on the formation of *consejos comunales* (communal councils), and *comités de tierra urbana* (urban land committees). A final section evaluates these processes, arguing that by conceptualizing Chavismo as populist political analysts are complicit in the silencing of the multitude and their delegitimization as political subjects. This silencing limits

our understanding and ability to learn from attempts at self-government that seek to develop new forms of popular, participatory, and egalitarian democracy.

Minimalist definitions tend to focus primarily on the particular discourse of Chavismo: the people versus the elites. As Hawkins (2003: 292) argues, "For Chávez, history is a struggle by 'the people' against the forces of oppression and imperialism, a struggle in which 'the people' will eventually triumph." However, this definition of populism seems more a definition of the logic of politics than a criterion for distinguishing a subbranch of political discourse. The division of the field into two opposing camps is a condition of political action as opposed to something unique to populism. If the logic of populism is the same as the ontology of politics, then this element of the minimalist conceptualization tells us nothing about the particularity of populism (Laclau, 2005: 18–19; Beasley-Murray, 2006: 362–367). The creation of a symbolic and/or ideological notion of "the people" tells us nothing about the content of that notion. Only concrete political analysis (not only of the concept's articulation as a bundle of ideas but also of its institutional/political articulation) can determine whether its articulation is distinguishably "populist." As Canovan (2004: 247) argues, "'People' has many different political senses. . . . The blurred boundaries of the people reflect conflicts and dilemmas that continue to bedevil democratic politics." Thus the discourse-based conceptualization of Chavismo as populist seems to offer few if any avenues for understanding what is particular and specific about Venezuela's political process.

The second element of the minimalist definition of Chavismo as populist focuses on the charismatic nature of the linkage between Chávez and his mass of supporters. Without denying the symbolic centrality of Chávez to Chavismo, it is important to delve into the nature of his relationship with "the people." Chávez's discourse and symbolic occupation of public space differ from that of populist and neo-populist leaders such as Perón, Vargas, Menem, and Fujimori. His political discourse and practice use educated as opposed to ordinary language and take the form of a dialogue in which his listeners are not the passive recipients of his wisdom and solutions but subjects invited to become involved in discussion.

What we witness in his political discourse is an attempt to challenge the traditional exclusionary dynamics of public politics in which elites provide solutions and "lead" the passive masses. Instead we have a symbolic use of public space and political discourse that seeks to create a relationship of equals in which the masses become subjects capable of articulating and participating in the development of solutions to the inequalities of Venezuelan society. As Chávez (quoted in Hawkins, 2003: 1154) has put it,

What we do believe in is the strength of the people, believe in the rebellious man of Albert Camus, that solidarity that brings the people to unity. . . . And I believe that there is a change in the people-as-object, in the people as subject of its own history, transforming itself as it discovers its potential strength. And when that "poverty people," which is the consciousness of strength, becomes a protagonist, not even the army would dare oppose it.

However, calling upon the power of the people raises important questions, whether as part of a critique of the populist characteristics of Chavismo or as a

defense of the democratic characteristics of the movement in relation to the role of the sovereign people in the organization of power and authority. Important questions are left unasked if we limit our understanding of Chavismo to populism. By unraveling the assumptions underlying the concept of populism we will be able to take seriously the ways in which “the people” are popularizing and democratizing power and authority. A critique of populism’s assumptions opens the theoretical door to popular politics, thereby illuminating the complex dynamics at work within Chavismo. In illuminating the lived experiences of struggle of such popular democratic subjects, the limitations and dangers of populism as a tool for political analysis become evident.

LIBERALISM’S LIMITS

Liberal democracy is challenged . . . by Hugo Chávez’s revolutionary Venezuela. . . . Unbridled majoritarianism might ride roughshod over constitutionalism and the rule of law. . . . [He is] freedom’s enemy from within both democratic discourse and the institutional framework of democracy.

—Ivan Krastev

How can a blind multitude, which often does not know what it wants, . . . undertake so vast and difficult an enterprise as a system of legislation?

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau

The criticisms of the lack of a liberal institutionalized state and liberal party system are underscored by the dominant prejudices of political science. These prejudices are based upon an ahistoricized positing of an ideal democratic type independent of political struggles, political economy, and power relations. Liberal notions of the political are based upon a particular conceptualization of power. Politics occurs in those places and among those subjects that possess power to rule over others (Santos and Avritzer, 2005: xxxiv–1). The agents of progress and power are an intellectual and political vanguard (Canovan, 2004: 245). Accordingly, the key agents of structural change are political elites and nonelected bureaucrats. In its contemporary articulation, a disdain for mass mobilization and participatory political practices is justified on the grounds of the analytic, normative, and theoretical necessity of political party formation to mediate between civil society and the state (Hagopian, 2005). As Juan J. Linz vehemently argues (International Forum Publications, 1996: 6–7), “Today, in all countries of the world, there is no alternative to political parties in the establishment of democracy. No form of non-party representation that has been advocated has ever produced democratic government. . . . The real danger appears to come from previously non-politicized citizens with antisystem attitudes who suddenly decide to enter politics.”

There have been a number of successful critiques of liberal democratic notions of “the political.” Poststructuralist, Gramscian, and “open” and “autonomist” Marxist intellectuals have critiqued the exclusion of the structures of

the state and market from the legitimate field of political struggle (De Angelis, 2005; Bieler and Morton, 2003; Escobar, 2001). Assuming these two “structures” as the areas in which politics occurs unjustifiably limits the realm of political contestation. Forms of economic organization outside of capitalist market relations and forms of political organization outside of the state and liberal institutional frameworks become the invisible “other” embedded in the premises of the framework of analysis (Escobar, 2001: 16–17).

The particular assumptions regarding the organization of political power in a liberal democratic framework reduce participation to one of voting or membership in a political party. This posits delegation as the organizing principle of democracy, thereby creating a procedural framework in which elites become privileged political agents and the state becomes synonymous with politics. This leaves little room for anyone other than elected elites and bureaucrats to play an active role in politics and excludes society from a definition of the political (Santos and Avritzer, 2005: xxxiv–1). It institutionalizes an elitist system of representation based upon the fetishization of the bureaucracy as an insulated specialist elite acting on society’s behalf.

It is on the basis of these assumptions that the critique of the political process in Venezuela makes political agency that challenges liberal democracy and the market economy invisible, marginal, or dangerous—invisible because of its rethinking of the political and remaking of social relations outside of and in opposition to the market economy, marginal because of its rejection of political liberalism as a means of organizing power relations within the community, and dangerous because of its challenge to the dominant interests and norms that its practices represent.

OPENING UP THE BLACK BOX OF POPULAR POLITICS

Ordinary individual people do have the potential . . . to mobilize for common action. On occasion, such grass roots mobilizations generate formidable power, bringing down a regime; more rarely, they sometimes manage to make a fresh start and to lay the foundations of a lasting political community.

—Margaret Canovan

It is true that much of Venezuela’s current political process is not mediated via liberal political institutions of state or political society such as political parties or bureaucratic elites, but this does *not* mean, as Hawkins (2003: 1138–1139) argues, that

[this] charismatic mode of linkage . . . is an exceptional mode of linkage in which voters support candidates in exchange for a promise of radical change by a person of extraordinary, quasi-divine character and skills, not for a promise of any particular kind or quantity of goods. Demonstrations of the candidates’ character thus become more significant than the actual content of the promises they make.

If we look beyond and beneath this assumed manipulation, we find many attempts to re-create popular democratic institutions that overcome the elitism

and suppression of the “other” embedded in the practice and theory of liberal democracy.

Mistrust of liberal party systems and the liberal state is widespread among the Venezuelan popular classes and is not, as is proposed by many political analysts, a reflection of political ignorance but the result of political experience, struggle, and reflection. As María Teresa, coordinator of Mission Ribas³ in La Vega, put it, “We don’t want to be ‘políticos’ in the old sense but to re-create politics from our practices and experiences, in a way that will overcome corruption and the misuse of power. We don’t want political leaders or parties; we want to create our own popular power from below” (interview, La Vega, Caracas, August 20, 2006). For many the experience of the Punto Fijo (1958–1999) system⁴ was one of political, social, and economic exclusion in the context of a party system and a representative democratic state. It is because of this experience that mistrust of political parties and political liberalism is a rational and logical political response on the part of those interested in progressive change in Venezuela. The development of forms of direct democracy also stems from the popular classes’ experiences of struggle throughout the 1980s and 1990s for the right to health, housing, and sanitation, in which the role of local community organization and the influence of liberation theology were marked. As Elizabeth of Las Margaritas, La Vega, recounted (workshop, La Vega, Caracas, August 9, 2006):

Francisco Wuytack, the “Padre de la Vega,”⁵ was key in organizing the community in the late 1960s. He and other comrades began a series of bible readings and then social projects that motivated the community to organize autonomously and have faith in their capacity to lead and make decisions, to organize without leaders and without the manipulation of the “políticos.” We began to fight for water rights, for health, for education, and for recognition.

These experiences of exclusion and of political struggle have given a participatory dynamic to the current political process. The procedures and practices of that process place emphasis on direct as opposed to representative democracy and on territorial institutions in which new cultures, logics, and grammars are developing in both state and society.

Popular self-governance is perhaps paradigmatically captured in the development of the *consejos comunales* (communal councils). Their establishment in law in January 2005 was a response to the demands of sections of the governing coalitions for a new state institution based on the localization and regionalization of executive, legislative, juridical, and financial power and it exercises through a combination of deliberative, direct, and representative procedures. As the law (Ministerio de Comunicación e Información, 2006: Art. 2, 8) states:

Within the constitutional framework of a participatory democracy, the communal councils are instances of participation, articulation, and integration between the various community organizations, social groups, and citizens. They enable the organized “people” to directly exercise the management of public policy and projects oriented toward responding to the necessities and aspirations of communities involved in the construction of a society of equality and social justice.

The formation of a council is coordinated by a team of eight members of the Presidential Committee of Popular Participation. The first stage of the team’s

work is explaining to the community the purpose, objectives, and organization of a communal council. The second stage is authorizing the official establishment of a council in a particular community. If a community chooses to have a council, it is legally obliged to do so within the framework specified in the law. In urban areas a community is defined as 200–400 families; in rural areas the numbers are smaller and in indigenous communities smaller still. The citizens' assembly is the legislative organ of the council, in which decisions are made and projects discussed. All members of the community over the age of 15 are entitled to participate on an equal basis. The work committee is the executive organ, staffed by elected and unpaid *vocero/as*, and is responsible for the implementation of projects agreed upon in the citizens' assembly. Voceros are elected for a term of two years but may stand for reelection. A communal bank receives funds from the central and regional governments and any money earned from the cooperative economic projects approved and developed by the community.

The establishment of communal councils was an attempt to create a new set of state institutions that bypass the traditional state and distribute power in a democratic and participatory manner. Some view them as a way of strengthening a new popular state (Bonilla-Molina, Harnecker, and El Troudi, 2005), while others consider them as representing the dissolution of the state as an institution governing society and the development of self-government (Denis, 2006). Chávez, in a speech on the seventh anniversary of the revolutionary government in 2006, has recently expressed the hope that people will dedicate themselves to "the creation and consolidation of a system of local self-government" and argued that "these instances should be built as a subsystem of decision making and avoid becoming only adjuncts to the mayors, governors, or political parties."

Critics of the communal councils often point out that "old" political practices are reproduced and accentuated in them. However, a reading of political history should remind us that the transformation of traditional power relations does not happen overnight. Making laws and creating new institutions is not the same as changing the ingrained practices that permeate Venezuelan society. As Pedro Pablo Contreras of La Independencia, La Vega, expressed it (workshop, La Vega, Caracas, August 9, 2006):

We had forty, fifty years in which our community was full of individualism, consumerism, delinquency. These are not things that happened to us but were the ways in which our relationships with each other were made. It is not surprising that within me, within my comrades, much of the fight for change is from within, is about changing the way we think and act, is about the development of social responsibility, a new consciousness.

At the Fourth National Conference of Water Committees, held in Caracas August 4–6, 2006, delegates from the states of Apure and Sucre complained about the power of state bureaucrats, governors, and mayors. These regional political elites have created a legal framework that seeks to control the development of the communal councils and prevent them from becoming a parallel "popular" set of institutions capable of challenging their institutional and political power. This framework sets out specific provisions for the formation

of a council in which legal authorization must come not only from the Presidential Committee for Popular Participation but also from the mayor and the governor. Thus the councils have been used to undermine and sideline popular power, participation, and autonomy and reproduce traditional power relations.

At the same conference, however, there was a detailed and heated discussion of the relationship between the water committees and the councils that stressed the importance of articulating forms of local organization and political agency on a regional and national level. This, it was agreed, would take place through a process of critical reflection, dialogue, and mutual support and would strengthen the practical and ideological bases of the water committees and, in the process, the potential of popular power to restructure the state and alter power relations in the councils of states such as Apure and Sucre. As one of its conclusions the working group stated: "We must obtain the tools to be able to struggle against the bureaucracy and search for a way to get rid of leaders who want to control us, maintain their own power, and divide the community."

This process of collective reflection and deliberation is a novel form of constructing social knowledge, especially in light of the political history of these communities, which have traditionally been treated by the state as clients without rights, knowledge, or capacity for agency. It is based upon the reflection of communities about their common problems and the potential solutions to those problems in light of their histories of struggle. This process is not an insular one but one characterized by exchange of accumulated experience, critical reflection on that experience, and the development of new levels of collective knowledge. This social knowledge and the process of its construction are signs of the creation of a new political culture and practice based on participation and popular rationality. As Edenis Guilarte Obando, a popular educator from Petare and coordinator with HidroCapital, the Metropolitan Region's state water company, explains: "What we are doing is training, creating consciousness, which is a process that goes beyond repairing a road, obtaining a service, enabling access to water. It's a macro-process, a process of social change, a fight over ideas and practices" (interview, Caracas, August 7, 2006). Thus the long history of structural disenfranchisement and subjective compliance is challenged.

The politics of the establishment of communal councils is one institutional area in which the struggle between "old" and "new" politics, the development of new state/society relations, and the formation of a new popular democracy is occurring. There is no guarantee that more participatory forms of organizing power, authority, and government will follow. Indeed, the councils could undercut the establishment of areas of autonomous self-government by channeling and controlling the development of innovative forms of popular politics. It could be argued that the way in which the councils were created—from above, by presidential decree—is in contradiction with the idea of popular self-government and leaves little room for community experimentation and involvement in the design and development of new institutions (Andrés Antillano and Nora Machado, interviews, Caracas, July/August 2006). However, what the prior discussion illustrates is the lived experience of popular political agency and the

ideological, organizational, and political realities of the popular classes. Such democratic popular subjects are neither politically uneducated nor incapable of working to produce forms of democracy and development that transform traditional state/society relationships and transcend the limits of liberal democracy. Experiences such as these suggest that the equation of Chavismo with populism makes invisible the popular democratic subjects who are at the heart of contemporary Venezuelan politics.

The *comités de tierra urbana* (urban land committees), established in February 2002 by presidential decree (1666)⁶ and numbering 6,000 nationwide, constitute one of the most powerful and autonomous organizations of the popular sectors. The original decree stated the need, in light of the illegal status of the majority of shantytown dwellers, for the formation of urban land committees based on local community assemblies that would organize the struggle for the legalization of individual property rights. However as Irma, employed at the Oficina Técnica Nacional para la Regularización de la Tenencia de Tierra Urbana (National Technical Office for the Legalization of Urban Land Ownership—OTN) and a member of the urban land committee of Primero de Mayo, La Vega, commented (interview, Caracas, August 21 and 22, 2006), “This process began as a decree. It is we who have made it real, have given it its meaning and content, through our struggles, our mistakes, and our successes.” Thus, while initiated by the central government, it has created a context for the development of forms of power and popular subjectivity that go beyond the decree’s original intent.

As Irma went on to explain, the first committees were established in the La Vega neighborhoods of La Independencia and 19 de Abril. An urban land committee normally represents a neighborhood with a population of between 1,000 and 5,000. The procedure for the election of members of the committees is debated and agreed upon in community assemblies rather than stipulated in the decree. Apart from the communal councils, these are the only community bodies that are elected by and accountable to and representative of their neighborhoods. Thus, their very constitution is structured by combining representative with direct democracy. The way in which the first committees obtained legal property rights was through the completion of a census and a series of community meetings. This process, as Irma describes it,

not only helped us to legalize our right to our homes but helped to create a relationship between communities. I had never been to Los Mangos, Las Casitas. I didn’t know my neighbors, the socioeconomic situation in which they lived, their housing conditions. This was a way in which we began to become conscious as a community, not only gaining title to land but building relationships.

The committees’ immediate objectives were reached relatively quickly. By January 2003 over 1,000 titles had been granted. Members of the committees of La Vega began to go and talk to other communities in the Metropolitan Region, giving them guidance on the setting up their own committees and sharing their experiences. In this way a broad regional network based upon local communities began to develop.

The urban land committees also began to meet regularly to discuss problems in the community related to housing and the environment. They found

that their successes in achieving legal recognition of their property rights did not solve the problem of decent housing, given the lack of water, lack of electricity, unpaved roads, and community problems such as delinquency. Their understanding of their objectives, through a process of reflection and discussion based on their concrete experiences, began to expand. They realized that in order to improve their situation they needed to understand the history of their communities and their struggles over water, electricity, etc. Thus in La Vega they began to create local community histories of the various neighborhoods, collecting material from the neighborhoods' founders and compiling it in book and/or video form. These histories were then used as tools for stimulating reflection and debate. Through these experiences, Irma said, "We put down roots with our communities. We were searching together for a path, an identity. We began to debate the questions of land, of democracy, of community and to work in assembly in order to improve our communities—to democratize land, the city."

One result of these experiences was a publication known as *el librito azul* (the little blue book) or *Democratización de la ciudad y transformación urbana* (CTU, 2003). In this the work of the urban land committees was expanded from a narrow notion of legalization of property rights toward a notion of "city democratization," in which access to decent living conditions, democratic participation in the organization of community relations, a dignified life, and decent infrastructure was seen as integral to the question of housing and the environment. The proposal of the publication originated in the Metropolitan Regional Assembly but was presented and discussed in a national assembly of more than 800 delegates. It was adapted and accepted and subsequently passed to the then-minister of the environment and housing, Julio Monte, who was favorable to the expansion and development of the committees as autonomous community organizations. From this discussion and publication emerged the Centros de Participación para la Transformación del Hábitat (Centers of Participation for the Transformation of the Environment), seen as physical spaces for uniting the community around an integral approach to land and the environment and deepening and developing the objective of "democratizing the city."⁷

However, the ministers who have followed Monte have been less favorable to the expansion of the project. During 2005 the notion of the *campamiento pionero* (pioneer community) was developed as a means of overcoming the individualization that is prevalent in the shantytowns and forging autonomous communities based on self-government and a collective identity and practice that are sustainable over time. The proposal centers on collective property rights, collective credit, and the building of communities in and outside of the shantytowns. This involves the construction not only of housing but also of communities that are self-governing politically and economically. This idea has come up against a lot of institutional resistance and so far has not received funding. The growing autonomy of the committees is seen as a threat to the objectives and power of those in charge of the Ministry, a parallel political process that is becoming uncontrollable.

This clearly illustrates the struggle between old and new politics and the potential debilitating impact of the state on the development of popular forms

of democracy. Ironically, Irma commented, "the urban land committees have become stronger, unlike many other community organizations, precisely because they have had to fight against as well as with the institutions of the state. In our struggle for recognition we are forging a distinctive project and identity. We have realized the importance of autonomy from the state." Indeed, this distinctive identity and project, commonly referred to as the beginnings of a *poblador* (shantytown) movement, has informed the response to the Ministry's intransigence and conservatism. All 13 pioneer communities now meet regularly in Caracas to discuss their projects and problems. Some communities are actively engaged in occupation of the land where they wish to construct their pioneer communities in order to force the government to grant funds; others are involved in negotiations with the minister of the environment and housing. The communities of La Vega and Petare, for example, are pursuing the latter strategy but are ready to pursue the former if necessary. They have established links with architects and economists from the Universidad Bolivariana in Caracas and with communities that have cooperatives and own land collectively in Argentina, Uruguay, Colombia, and Nicaragua. This construction and strengthening of transnational and national networks are attempts to consolidate their autonomy and the sustainability of their projects. This is a political struggle for self-government that is occurring in both the state and society. While the result of a central state initiative, it has unleashed a popular political process that some sectors of the state bureaucracy oppose but may be unable to control.

The methodology that informs the development of a pioneer community is not based on the idea of a leadership with a political line that it wants to sell to communities. Rather, it is based on the precepts of populist educators such as Paulo Freire,⁸ in which the acquisition of collective knowledge is guided by the needs of communities in their struggle for emancipation. This means that the organization of a pioneer community is based upon reflection on the problems that people face, their experience in the urban land committees and other community organizations, the solutions they have developed, and the proposal of future solutions. There is no hierarchy of knowledge or decision making. Decisions are made by the collective, and while certain members may represent the community at different meetings, their positions are rotatory rather than fixed. This method of organization rethinks traditional understandings of democracy and political agency. As Nora Machada, an organizer of urban land committees in La Vega and OTN employee, said (interview, Caracas, July 2006),

If we want to talk about projects coming from below, then we can't take the role of leaders who come in and tell communities what, how, and why they should do things. We have to create the conditions in which communities develop in equality and together their understanding of their situation, their analysis, and their solutions. It is only in this way that we will break the old way of doing things.

This process represents something new in terms of the understanding and experience of politics for communities with a history of disenfranchisement or co-opted and controlled participation. It represents a break with dominant understandings of the process of politicization, the role of ideology, and the

role of leaders, either a party vanguard or a state bureaucracy, in (popular) politics. It poses a challenge to Venezuelan political traditions and structures. It also poses a challenge to analysts attempting to understand a popular politics that does not fall into the populist, the liberal democratic, or the traditional socialist category.

Their conflictive relationship with the state illustrates the obstacles that new forms of popular self-government face. The more articulated and autonomous popular organizations, such as the urban land committees, are often viewed as a threat to or in competition with the state by ministers and local politicians. There are obvious tensions over the form and nature of popular democracy within the state and between popular movements and the state. Should the centralized state dissolve? Should local democracy and self-government work in tandem with a centralized state? Should popular power be extended to major decisions? Such tensions express themselves in the often conflictive relationship between the urban land committees and local politicians and the state and in the struggles within the communities that make up the committees. These tensions are certain to intensify as the struggle over the direction of Chavismo begins, given Chávez's electoral success in the presidential election of December 2006, his defeat in the December 2007 referendum for constitutional reform, and the electoral results in the regional elections of November 2008, which represented the further polarization of the political spectrum but an overall institutional victory for the forces of Chavismo (Petras, 2007; 2008).

Their form of organizing power and authority breaks with traditions of Venezuelan politics, both left and right, in which leaderships, political lines, and political hierarchy have been dominant. Notions of liberal democracy that posit the bureaucrat and the political elite as the agents of politics and policy are challenged; notions of representative democracy that posit political parties as the only form of organizing political power and representation are transcended. Ordinary people become the key agents of politics and authority, delegation is secondary to participation, and the idea that the centralized state is the only way of organizing power is questioned.

The limits of and the possibilities for popular democracy are reflected in the experience of the urban land committees. The possibility that the pioneer communities will become isolated, conservative, and politically impotent is recognized by participants. The continued exclusion of communities that are irrelevant to the macro-structures of power is also a possibility. However, as Nora stated,

Unless we begin to rebuild from below, to articulate our needs, desires, and energy into a poblador movement, none of these structures will ever be remade; our communities will always be dictated to, passive recipients of knowledge, resources, whatever. When we are conscious, organized, when we see our power and potential, through this process we begin to construct new structures, new relationships, a new distribution of power, a new democracy.

Their practice is therefore not only an attempt to ameliorate their social conditions within dominant structures of power but an effort to rethink and remake the forms in which power is exercised.

In sum, the urban land committees represent elements of the formation of the popular democratic subjects who are basic to new forms of popular democracy. If we focus on Chávez's discourse, his personalist practice, and the lack of an institutional liberal party system and state, then many of the most dynamic and experimental forms of political engagement, agency, and institutionalization remain hidden from view. This is problematic for our understanding of the dynamics of the current political situation and reproduces a historical discourse that renders invisible the political agency and politics of the Venezuelan popular classes.

CONCLUSION

This article has developed a critique of the concept of populism as a tool for analysis of the contemporary political process in Venezuela.

Methodologically, it has critiqued the elitist assumptions underlying the concept as regards the privileged agents and site of politics and sought to illustrate the flaws inherent in an analysis of politics and power that excludes or devalues the political agency of the popular classes. Thus it has focused on the practices, struggles, and discourses of popular democratic subjects as opposed to the personality, rhetoric, and strategies of political elites and/or Chávez. This focus on the "everyday" is intended not to romanticize the local, the particular, or the popular but to illustrate how new cultures, logics, and practices of democracy are being created "from below." It seeks to shift our attention toward the dynamic, historic, and constructive nature of structures of power, showing how they are reproduced, challenged, and transcended in the social relations and political struggles that constitute communities such as those of La Vega. Epistemologically, it places the rationality of the masses at the center of our theoretical endeavors, thereby validating the potential of popular democratic subjects to alter the distribution of power and nature of politics.

Conceptually, the critique has focused on the limitations of the concept of populism when faced with a political process that seeks to transcend the limits of liberal democracy and the market economy via the articulation of a popular democracy. The concept of populism assumes liberal democracy as the ideal of democratic organization and the market economy as the ideal of economic organization. Embedded in these assumptions is the exclusion of the "other" and of the manifest historical and current attempts to create political institutions and forms of economic organization of other kinds. These assumptions are problematic because they mask the most innovative forms of democratic experimentation and development. They are complicit in the creation of a discourse that reproduces the historical exclusion of the popular classes as legitimate political actors and seeks to justify the role of elites as enlightened agents capable of constructing a rational modernity. This may ultimately lead to the legitimation of new forms of international interventionism in the politics of Latin American states. It raises normative and political questions in relation to the actual, as opposed to rhetorical, limits to people's sovereignty and their ability to determine their political and economic futures. Illustrative of the potential political consequences of this perspective is Castañeda's (2006: 7) argument that

there is a much bolder course, a more statesmanlike approach that would foster a “right left.” This strategy would involve actively and substantively supporting the right left when it is in power: . . . The international community should also clarify what it expects from the “wrong left” [e.g., Chavismo] given that it exists. . . . Europe and the United States have enormous leverage in many of these countries. They should use it.

Empirically, the critique’s focus on the popular democratic subjects at the heart of Chavismo has sought to show the complexity of the politics involved in the struggle to construct egalitarian and popular forms of democracy. In the communal councils and the urban land committees we witness the struggle between old and new politics and the tension between popular demands and practices and state efforts to channel and limit such experiments in democratic development. These movements call into question liberalism’s claims to neutrality and its fetishization of elites as the privileged agents of politics and the state as the privileged site of politics. As Hui (2006: 40) argues, “At the heart of . . . repoliticization is the destruction, in theory and practice, of the ‘natural’ neutral state. De-naturalization must be used to combat depoliticization.” At the same time, they are suspicious of vanguardism, universal models, and political lines. Rather, they embrace an understanding of the political that is constitutive, in which communities’ reflection upon their struggles and experiences forms the basis of their construction of political identities, practices, and projects. This democratic practice also involves a turning on their heads of dominant forms of interaction, belief, and practice. As Edenis argues (interview, Caracas, August 18, 2006), “Social change is happening through the creation of spaces of popular education, of collective knowledge production, that forge the qualitative, the scientific, and the methodological tools of the people, spaces that were historically denied to us.”

This exploration of the popular democratic subjects at the heart of Venezuela’s contemporary political process has revealed the shortcomings of political analyses that seek to delegitimize and disqualify Chavismo as populist. Claims that Chavismo reproduces only traditional forms of politics and relationships between state and society and between elites and masses are challenged by the lived experiences of these popular democratic subjects, which constitute a rich and complex political reality that merits analysis in its own terms.

NOTES

1. The work of Weyland (1998) and Remmer (1998) departs from this in that it assumes that the popularity of neo-populism is the result of the rational choices of the electorate. Nevertheless, it conceptualizes political agency in individualistic liberal terms and assumes that authorization is via elections in which power is delegated to a bureaucratic elite—thus ahistoricizing particular forms of organizing governance and excluding from analysis “other” conceptualizations and experiences of governance, sovereignty, political agency, and organization of power.

2. My empirical engagement is based upon work in politically active barrios. This potentially limits the generalization of its findings about the particularities of these political communities to other, less politicized communities. However, the contradictions between “old” and “new” politics in even the most politicized of neighborhoods suggest that the framework of analysis is applicable more generally to Venezuelan contemporary popular politics and state/society relationships.

3. One of the social programs of the Chávez administration, aimed at providing secondary-level education to those otherwise denied it.

4. This was the political pact between the political elites of Acción Democrática (Democratic Action—AD) and the Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (Independent Committee for Electoral Political Organization—COPEI), which maintained a “formal” power-sharing democracy and was the basis of a distributional coalition funded by oil rents. It ensured the exclusion of political and social forces outside of the orbit of either political force.

5. The former priest, who was expelled for subversive activities in 1972, had arrived in Venezuela in 1966 to start a worker-priest mission, which was banned by the pope. While living in La Vega, he helped to organize communities and took part in a famous strike at the local cement factory (for further details on Wuytack’s experiences in Venezuela and La Vega, see Ruiz, 2006).

6. The Venezuelan constitution (Art. 182) also contains reference to housing and the environment: “Each person has the right to safe, comfortable and hygienic housing with basic essential services, which include an environment that humanizes family relations and relations with neighbors and the broader community. The progressive satisfaction of this right is a shared obligation between citizen and state.”

7. At a recent national meeting of urban land committees structured in terms of Freire’s principles, an expanded set of proposals was developed: the reform of Decree 1666, the creation of a comprehensive school for youth and community work, the creation of more community media (radio and newspaper), direct support for indigenous communities, the creation of a land bank, and the strengthening of community assemblies to offset the attempts of party-aligned sectors to control and co-opt grassroots power.

8. For further details on popular pedagogy, commonly referred to as “pedagogy of the oppressed,” see Freire (2000).

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