

The Social and Political Imaginary of the Venezuelan Revolution

Luis Ricardo Dávila

University of Essex
University of Los Andes
(Mérida-Venezuela)

My paper is to deal with a problem that defies rather than supports (fits) the logic of current populism in Venezuela. It is not my intention to deal with a theoretical analysis to explain the concept of populism. In this paper I will attempt to delineate the main elements through which a new political populist order is being constructed in Venezuela since 1999. I already put my first analytical stone: populist order. And this is very important to talk about populism in Venezuela and in general in Latin America because we can see in nowadays a kind of resurrection of this political and ideological discourse. What I want to do is to analyze the political and social discourse of the Venezuelan political process what I situate into the streams of populism.

I will make an effort to talk on Venezuela and not to talk about Chavez in itself. And I know that it is almost impossible. But in so doing, I will be able to show you the impossibility to get away from personalism in Venezuelan politics. I suspect that is the same for other Latin American countries. However, when I talk about Chavez it will be in his relationship with the Venezuelan process.

That is my first point I want to bring up: the weight of personalism in Venezuelan political and social process. And in general, the weight of personality in populist regimes. We see in this moment a revolution in a populist way where the cult to the personality is very important. In Venezuela is running on a one leader populism system. Nobody else than Chavez has a real leadership in society, even majors, governors, National Assembly members, army officials...all of them support their power on Chavez discourse, strategy, charisma, on Chavez mood.

Nonetheless, instead to tell the story of what is going on or what it could happen in Venezuela in the near future or how Chavez is, I would like to go deep in the constructions of the Bolivarian regime, which has Bolivar as the ideological support of Venezuelan populism. That's why I chose to work from *the concept of imaginary* and to

try to evaluate the scope of what has occurred in Venezuela in the last four years. Let's start explaining my sense of imaginary which differs from the commonsense English usage of a conception that is a conscious mental image. What I understand by imaginary is the symbolic construction through which a community (national, imperial, colonial, sexual, racial, etc) defines and represents itself. So, by imaginary I don't understand a mental image or even the widely accepted Lacanian sense in which the Imaginary (I mean the order of perception) is contrasted with the Symbolic (the order of discursive action) and the Real (I mean what is absolutely unrepresentable). Instead, for me imaginary is all the ways a society has of perceiving and conceiving of the world. I give the concept a social and political sense and I use it to understand the foundation and formation of a social and political system. The image that we have today about the Venezuelan political system is a larger process of construction of discourses, symbols and representations.

Chavez political discourse is a populist battle to recreate the image of the Venezuelan people, to include sectors of this people already excluded by previous populism of political parties. To think and analyze the Venezuelan experience seems to me essential for the following reason: Chavez discourse has been the extreme form in which popular interpellations in their most radicalized form --socialist populism, for instance-- could be transformed into the political discourse of the dominant fraction of the Army. That's what explains the alliance of the the Army and populist government. In the Venezuelan experience, socialism is not, consequently, the opposite pole of populism, as it has often tended to be presented for other experiences (Argentina and Brazil, for instance), but different faces of the same coin: a popular radical discourse, paradoxically neutralized for some sectors of the working class. We have seen along 2002 an alliance between working class and capitalist sectors against the Bolivarian regime.

What we are witnessing in Venezuela today is the development of a political discourse divided in its practices and diluted in its ideas. It is a discourse plenty of contradictions and confusions. That is why the discourse of power talk about the protagonic participative democracy, as its main feature, while its practices are totalitarian and autocratic: one man, one voice is the equation that can represent the current situation. Venezuelan regime seems to be for most of its critics both predemocratic and anti-democratic. While for his partisans is an anti-capitalist (watch out I said anti-capitalist and not socialist) and popular revolution.

I will argue that the current Venezuelan populist revolution has been very efficient at the symbolic level but not at the political level. And that is very important. Because as all of you know symbols are crucial in the elaboration of a new social imaginary. The social imaginary is constituted and expressed through ideologies and discourse but also through symbols, rituals and myths. That's why symbols are important forces of Chavez regime. For instance, the symbol of revolution, the symbol of socialism and anti-capitalism process, the symbol of justice and popular participation, the symbol that represents the political process as the revolution of excludes. All of them have been building the basis of a new political and social imaginary.

The manipulation of social imaginary is particularly important in those moments of social and political change; in those moments of redefinition of collective identities. That means manipulation of social feelings with the main purpose to recreate a new political system, a new society, a new man and this kind of allegories. Through manipulation the regime got not only the head of society but also the fears, the hearts, the needs and hopes of the people. And it is at this level where the Venezuelan society is redefining its new identities and objectives, where they define its enemies, organise its past, its present and future.

In what follows, I will first set the problem of populism. In a second part I will try to show the context where it can be situated Chavez political and social discourse. Finally, in a third part, I will try to show the main features of Bolivarian imaginary.

I.- SETTING THE PROBLEM

In current political language the term populism designates a form of politics which emphasizes the virtues of the common people against the double-dealing to be expected of political oligarchies and their intellectual helpers. It can take a variety of forms: revolutionary intellectual populism, peasant populism, farmer's radicalism, populist autocracy, populist democracy, reactionary populism, and politicians' populism¹. On the one hand, populist leaders are those who wish to solve all political problems by appealing to the "will of the people", believing the people to have instincts and reactions that, if properly tapped, will alone be sufficient to provide legitimacy to power. They believe the people to have some special role in the process of political evolution.

Populist parties, on the other hand, often look for the roots of their doctrines in the spirit of a people thought to be deeply and inarticulately loyal to its main provisions and needs.

To start, let me outline some of the most adequate working definitions for understanding it. Latin American populism is mainly defined in two ways: as a specific political mobilization and as an ideological discourse. 1- The analysis of populism from the crucial concept of political mobilization implies the consideration of variables such as popular mobilization, reformist programme, the use of the neo-evolutionist tradition/modernity dichotomy, the emergence of urban conditions, and finally the abrupt way in which the masses entered the political arena in many Latin American countries. 2- From the ideological/discursive point of view populism invokes two things: first, an appeal to the obviously vague term “the people” and its discursive construction as the historical subject to oppose the “fragmented power-bloc”; second, an antagonism manifested through the massive rejection of the traditional system of norms, prestige criteria, and leadership roles, breaking with the previous dominant ideological system.

This is not the place to discuss the complex problems of the relationship between nationalism, populism and democracy, and the further connections in Latin America between these notions and that of socialism. However, as I shall later suggest, in analysing the Venezuelan case, populist leaders and parties very often equate the terms national and democratic with popular. New solutions, new forms of articulating social and political forces are sought but still with ambiguous perceptual clarity about the frontiers between politics and ideology. This articulation² does not result from the autonomous organizational power of popular sectors (either urban working class/peasantry or non-working class sectors). As a consequence there is an ambiguity in the tasks of the organization that is solved by loyalty to a charismatic leader or a new-fashioned “*caudillo*”. Even populist movements with a strong grass-roots organisational base are characterised by an immediate rapport between the populist leader and “his people”.

The ideological approach attempts to construct a more general definition in order to account for the various types of populism. For Laclau, who has an ideological theory on populism, the most essential characteristic of populism is its antagonistic articulation

¹ These are the seven different types of populism identified by Margaret Canovan. See, **Populism**, Junction Books, London, 1981.

² By “articulation” I define any practice which establishes a certain unity between dispersed elements.

of popular-democratic interpellations. He wrote: “Our thesis is that populism consists in the presentation of popular-democratic interpellations as a synthetic-antagonistic complex with respect to the dominant ideology”³. Despite the different content of different populism approaches, explanations of the meaning of populism seem to agree on its core element, namely: an appeal to the people and anti-elitism (for instance, Laclau’s popular interpellations against the power bloc, or Di Tella’s popular support “upholding an anti-*status quo* ideology”). Let’s turn now on my second point: The context of the Bolivarian revolution.

II.- OR HOW BOLIVARIAN REVOLUTION WAS INVENTED

At the end of Caldera’s regime in 1998, in Venezuela there was a situation whereby the old political parties and their discourse have lost the capacity to speak for society, to get some identification from the people. However, old and new leaders and organizations have made an effort to find new ways that will enable them to occupy the vacant */veikant/* political space. In the political arena this situation is shown by growing levels of electoral abstention (45 per cent) and also the attraction of independent individuals (Irene Sáez, Salas Romer or even Hugo Chavez) or organizations that confront the *status quo* (Movimiento V República, and Patria Para Todos). At a social level the popular discontent and repudiation of the political leadership is expressed with bouts of anarchy, urban violence, theft of private property, strikes and political terrorism.

THE RESURRECTION OF OLD POPULISM

On December the 6th 1998 conditions to establish an old populism (in the first *Accion Democratica* style) resurrected in Venezuela. On that day, the Venezuelan people voted for Hugo Chávez, who won the elections with 56.45% of the votes, compared to the 39.49% for the second place candidate (El Nacional, Caracas, 8 December, 1998, p. D-12). This election appears to have closed a cycle of Venezuelan history. The candidates of the traditional populism, AD and COPEI, including their alliances didn't even reach 4% of the popular vote (El Universal, Caracas, 8 December, 1998, p. 1-14). After more than 50 years of dominance, both parties have been displaced from power. This outcome makes several things very clear; it is worth highlighting

Comentario:

³ p. 173.

some of them: the immense desire for change expressed by Venezuelans; but for some people, specially some from the elites (mass media owners, for example) this victory opened the possibility to take revenge on the corrupt and excluding old political parties and leaders. The winning candidate defined immediately the constituent process as an instrument of change; and the losing political forces that had previously *been opposed to* had no other alternative than to join this constituent process in order to seek popular support.

The wide support given to Chávez, within his messianic conception ('I declare the Venezuelan people to be God's People,' El Universal, Caracas, 12 December, 1998, p. 1-12) and populist discourse ('I no longer belong to myself. I am only a straw in the wind', El Universal, Caracas, 13 December, 1998, p. 4-2) created the right conditions for the resurrection of the old populism. We shall look at the principal tendencies of the new political discourse.

I.- The political conception of Chávez is in the populist idea of rule as the leader who will bring about the re-foundation of the republic. With Chávez the main mechanisms of the old populism returned to the political stage. In his first couple of years at power, the people are still the focus of the promises that have always been made by every government, especially when it is newly inaugurated with a wide majority. 1- This President is not perceived as somebody who comes either to solve problems, or to renovate Venezuelan democracy. He comes to outline the popular feeling, to express the voice of the People in the same way that AD did between 1945 and 1948 ('I declare the people to be the only and the true owners of their sovereignty. I declare the Venezuelan people the true owners of their own history', El Universal, Caracas, 12 December, 1998, p. 1-12). We are now in the midst of a deep populist practice. It is not about leading the society and its mediating institutions as a whole, through which the people expresses themselves, but as a confusing absolute and primordial appeal to *the people*, with whom the leader has intimate rapport, and whose identity he seeks to rebuild. 'Venezuela won, history won, the people won', he said on the same day of his victory (El Nacional, Caracas, 7 December, 1998, p. D-16). On the other hand, the people identify themselves with that leader, people and leader are the same entity, which is why he has become their form and voice; 2- Reason will never be able to contend with the certainties of this populist leader. There are no conditions for public, technical or political debate –not even through the constituent process– the

privileged voice will always be that of the listener and privileged interpreter that Chávez considers himself to be.

This then is the internal structure of the government, with the leader possessing a privileged relationship with the people. The remaining actors (institutions, arguments, procedures, government criteria, pretensions of other political forces) are at a disadvantage with this resurrection of the popular sovereignty expressed through this one and only man who proclaims *urbi et orbe* 'I am a little of all of you' (El Universal, Caracas, 12 December, 1998, p.1-12).

II.- The objective of Chávez is to maintain himself in power for a long time. But this is a project without either a defined program or an ideology (different to Bolivarianism) used as support (as all of you know, in Venezuela everybody is Bolivarian. It is not very original to be Bolivarian in Venezuela). Including its social base, it is not organic, or conscious. Its vast support is a product of the resentment, indignation, and frustrations accumulated during the last 40 years of political populism, the anger resulting from corruption and waste and the degeneration of democracy. Brief, its ideological expression is extremely weak; it possesses three strategies: 1- An aggressive rhetoric against the old political elites and an exaltation of militarism; 2- A *bolivarianismo* based on a simplification of Bolívar's thoughts, the Bolívar of the well-turned phrase (El Universal, Caracas: 25 February, 1999); 3- The constituent process whose content, up to now, is an offer without well-defined boundaries. Even if he has always talked about to make the revolution, to be a revolutionary, everything is diffuse and dark in the Bolivarian revolutionary rhetoriccs.

The possibilities of this government are weak; in its first four years it has not gone further than impressive declarations, a few concrete actions; confrontation as a mechanism of political exclusion and a growing militarization of the government. With these instruments, the purpose is the re-foundation of the republic and once again the promess of the emancipation of the people. What can be seen at this moment is a government without an economic program, with an aggressive rhetoric that increases uncertainty and insecurity. But the period of good intentions and general promises is probably already concluding. And if to this is added a faulty exercise of power in its elementary tasks, the political atmosphere could get even worse, as we can observe it in nowadays. And one of the political reactions of a government in serious difficulties would be to clamp down on those who oppose it and intensify the concentration and control of power and the exploitation of its popularity against its opponents, which are

necessary in order to guarantee free democratic interplay.

BOLIVAR, A HERO IN SEARCH OF THE REVOLUTION

Let me go briefly through the key analytical issues employed in this paper. The advent of old populist politics in Venezuela, with the inherent national-popular and anti-*status quo* political discourse, demanded strategies of mass mobilization where the common element was a direct “appeal to the people”. Although clearly this notion of the people is no stable ground on which to erect a new language and style of politics, it is the field of contention for legitimate popular-democratic representation. The rhetorical force of Chavez appeal to the people informs the widespread populist imaginary in the country. This appeal is essential both to its substantive political/ideological project from within which it is made, and to constitute the identity of the people. That is, the subject constituted by this appeal. In fact, we can measure the power of this people by the extent to which it exceeds the status of an object of dispute and emerges instead as the subject uniquely capable of articulating political (and national) unity against oligarchy and traditional social and political forces.

What is the force of the people as agent of national representation and unity? Chavez populist discourse owes its power (and perhaps its ambiguity), to its potential transformation into an antagonistic class agency of political as well as cultural change. Despite its generality, this argument has the theoretical advantage, in that it refuses to reduce the “popular” to a free floating signifier (I mean a “notoriously vague term”, used by some authors like Laclau) that can be filled with any content to achieve political ends. Rather, I would insist that the appeal to the people, as it appears in Chavez populist discourse, is grounded in the contradiction between the claims of different classes to transcend class. Populist discourse cannot be reduced to a particular “class expression”, but neither can it transcend class conflict.⁴

The question remains, however, of the constitution of the people as a fundamental agent or subject of populist discourse. How are individuals made into subjects? or, in other words, how the determinate is falsely presented as the determinant? Although this occurs through interpellation that forms the axis and organizing principle of all ideological discourse, we must also identify the complex network of symbolic and institutional organization that makes appeals to the people

⁴ **Politics and Ideology**, pp. 173-175

both successful and problematic. It is necessary, therefore, to link Chavez populist appeal to the people with other key analytical issues. There is a definite link between the goals and ideologies of the movement called Bolivarian revolution and their institutional and discursive structures. To substantiate this link, I shall argue that we cannot possibly restrict the analysis of populist movements to the ideological level. As some authors rightly points out: “we should pay as much attention to its institutional implications as to its structural and discursive content; a full analysis will operate at the three levels of structure, institutions, and discourse”⁵.

III.- THE MANIPULATION OF THE IMAGINARY

At this point of my argument: what discursive strategy allows the construction of the bolivarian imaginary? It has been showed how through ideas and images, Venezuelan society devote itself to an identity, perceive its divisions, legitimate its power and, which is most important, elaborate the model that shape its members. For instance, images such as the good revolutionary, the true democrat, the brave warrior, the Bolivarian leader, the social fighter and so on (all of those are expresions listened in the everyday debate), are representations that constitute social and political reality and are not reflected images of it. Chavez discourse has been trying to construct new representations, to invent new forms of popular interpellation. All of them come from the same symbolically charged discourses and metaphors. All of them try to impact on mentalities and collective behaviour. But it is very important to precise that even if the populist institutions --the power of state, and political party or movement-- have been constructing in the last four years representations, symbols and emblems that legitimate them, magnify them, results have not always been success. The evidence is the deep political and social crisis that Venezuela is living at this moment.

It is true that every ideology and society adopts an image of itself --a certain horizon-- but the result of this adoption could be however blurred and imprecise. Chavez discourse and political strategy have been unable to unify the whole experience of its revolution. What we have now in Venezuela --four years later this glorious experience-- is a divided society, an empoverished people, worst economic conditions, an ineficient government and a growing opposition that passed from 5000 persons

⁵ **What Populism Was, What Neo-Populism Is**, paper presented at the “Workshop on Old and New Populism in Latin America”, Institute of Latin American Studies, London, 24 November, 1995, p. 1.

demonstrating on the streets of Caracas (in January 2001 in protest for an educational bill) to millions of Venezuelans protesting on the streets of all around the country.

It seems to me that the space of representation that try to impose the Bolivarian regime is dislocated. It hasn't crystallised on the minds of the majority of Venezuelans. The main social support of this populist adventure is: the poor people of the big cities, some peasants and some people form the informal economy. While institutionally speaking it is the Army its main support. Perhaps you know that Chavez popularity fell down from 80% in 2000 to 28% in nowadays. On the other hand, this impossibility to impose collective representations does that symbols and discourses that bear them cannot be transformed into an imaginary. Shall I remember for you that the imaginary is a horizon, a kind of field of intelligibility, where the conditions of possibility for the emergence of any discourse is created. If the Bolivarian politics hasn't been able to create this imaginary in democratic conditions, the challenge is how to preserve democracy and to scare away the totalitarian and dictatorial temptation. A system is hegemonic not so much to the extent that it is able to impose a uniform conception of the world on the rest of society, but to the extent that it can articulate different visions of the world in such a way that their potential antagonism is neutralised. And this is not the case for the Bolivarian revolution. Demands of different sectors of society are not fully absorbed by government.

LOGIC OF THE BOLIVARIAN IMAGINARY

To start with my last point, let's rise this question: How, under which logic, collective representations have been attempted to be created in Venezuela by the discourse of power?

Let's say that the main features of the Bolivarian imaginary are: First, being a military-civic imaginary. And the order of the terms is very important. We are not witnessing a civic-military regime, but the opposite. Almost all the Ministries are military or come from the Army. At the level of the state apparatus the civil supports are very few and tend to disappear. The state is trying to control civil society institutions: like trade unions, universities, mass media and even the Church. Everything and everyone has to support the revolution, because it is a part of the Venezuelan fate. Those who don't support the revolution are anti-patriots, terrorists, fascists and so on.

Second, government is supported in a radical discourse, but radical in the language rather than in actions. There is a permanent insultif capacity from Hugo

Chavez discourse. He called tumor (cancer) for society to the Catholic Church. He called thieves (capos) to the leaders of the main Venezuelan trade union CTV. He referred the entrepreneurial sectors as a corrupt oligarchy, and so on and so forth. But all this language is characterised by its appeal to the people above class divisions which is meaningful of the mental confusion of the leader and its movement. His socialism fails both by excess and by default: by default, since a populist socialist discourse can refer both to the people and to classes; and by excess, since not all reference to the people automatically transforms a discourse into a populist one. But in any case, it is certainly true that reference to the people occupies a central place in Chavez populism but not reference to social class. This is where I find the basic source of ambiguity surrounding his discourse. I mean, the people as the pole of a contradiction which is not that of class, and of positing this contradiction as the opposition of the masses to the state. In any case, his radical language is the main vehicle of political confrontation.

Third, the political order is not supported on a popular-democratic ideology but rather it is supported in a popular-totalitarian discursive position. Government has not major capacity to negotiate conflicts with opposition, but to impose its goals. Government don't recognize the existence of the other, because he thinks that his strategy is what the people wants. So, in this sense democracy in the Bolivarian perception is not articulated with liberalism. It is rather articulated with State totalitarianism. Political confrontation is seen as a battle, as a relationship friend-enemy where one of the forces has to be destroyed, defeated.

Fourth, mesianism is the main feature of Chavez discourse. He comes down to the realm of politics to emancipate the people, to figure out all the problems of Venezuelan society. Because the Bolivarian people awake every 100 years. He likes to remember publically Neruda's poem that say like this. He is doing the "revolucion bonita", he is constructing a beautiful Venezuela. Even if no one can see that, it does not matter, he is doing it. This mesianism is expressed by a religious turn in his discourse which is very interesting. He often talks on Jesus Christ quoting him but also saying that he (Jesus) is his commander-in-chief, and Chavez is ready to follow him. This religious turn is meaningful because through it Chavez tries to displace the Church which is not very friend of the revolution. In general, in his discursive style he adopts a position like a preacherman.

Well, summing up, I tried to determine the theoretical status of the current Venezuelan politics and the specific contradiction of which the appeal to the people

constitute a pole. It remains to be said that populism is not always revolutionary. Chavez populism is historically linked to a crisis of what it was the dominant ideological discourse which is in turn part of a more general social and political crisis. So, shall I say that I don't believe that in Venezuela all problems were created by the Bolivarian regime, but it enhanced them because his little ability to absorb the democratic ideology of the masses and integrate it into its discourse. In Chavez view, which explains the specific military mind and strategy, democracy and liberalism are opposed to each other. First, because liberalism tends to be anti-personalist, and Chavez is the opposite. Second, because imperialist penetration and the incorporation of the country to the globalizing process bring --in Chavez view-- to the dissolution of forms of popular organisation. While neoliberal policies are about privatization, Chavez populism is about statetization. Consequently, his government has to bring back Venezuelan economy to precapitalist relations of production, which means to bring the country back to the 19th century. And he is able to play the role of Caudillo, the big revolutionary caudillo. This involves a violent and repressive policy against the opposition to the regime which Venezuelans are witnessing now.

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