

# **“For us this is Utopia coming true”**

**Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution and popular movements in a Caracas *barrio***

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*I came upon Bolívar, one long morning,  
in Madrid, at the entrance to the Fifth Regiment.  
Father, I said to him, are you, or are you not, or who are you?  
And, looking at the Mountain Barrack, he said:  
“I awake every hundred years when the people awake”.*

*Pablo Neruda- “A song for Bolívar”  
(Translated by Donald D. Walsh)*

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# Preface

*I*t is the 4th of February- called *el Dia del Dignidad*, the Day of Dignity. It is 14 years since the military rebellion against the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez, led by then lieutenant colonel Hugo Chávez and several other officers. They failed, and Chávez pronounced the famous words “we have not been able to reach our objectives- “*por ahora*”- “for now”. He was elected president six years later, in 1998.

*A big march have been announced at the state television and in the newspapers for several days, as it is also the beginning of Chávez’ electoral campaign, “la Segunda Batalla de Santa Inéz”, which is leading up to the presidential election the 3d of December 2006. The march is announced to start at 09.00 am in the far east of Caracas, close to Petare, which is said to be the largest shanty town in Latin America. From there it follows the highway Cota Mil, by the foot of the mountain chain Ávila which overlooks the north side of the city, to Avenida Bólvivar in the city centre. It is a 14 km long walk.*

*I arrive by metro with Andrés, my main informant, at 11.00 am. The march started long time ago, but more and more people are pouring into the area. The march sets out from a predominantly middle- to upper class area, and ergo mainly belonging to the opposition. Some brave inhabitants in favour of the government are waiving with red flags or T-shirts from their balconies, probably risking the neighbours’ evil eye the next time they meet in the entrance door. The whole area is filled with people dressed in red, waiving with Venezuelan flags, pictures of Chávez and posters with slogans in favour of the revolution and against the United States.*

*The metro is free for everyone, and the government party, The Fifth Republic Movement (MVR), has arranged for buses to bring people in from the interior of the country and from other parts of Caracas. People from MVR are standing on the back of trucks and cars loaded with water and oranges, handing it out for free. An anarchic crowd uses elbows and arms to get one of the free campaign T-shirts which are handed out. Buses,*

*cars and trucks decorated with slogans and posters are loaded with people, playing salsa music and political songs in favour of the process. Parents with small children stroll alongside with old grandmothers and young girls in skimpy clothes, people dance and drink beer. It is an atmosphere of party and national day in the air.*

*We meet a friend who buys us a beer and starts to walk (- after participating in several marches, I have learned that you are not really participating in you arrive sober to the final goal). I ask Andrés who all these people are, if they are all from the popular classes. He says no, loads of people from the middle class and upper class are also here, but it is predominantly from la clase popular- the popular class, -"but here we all get together to support the Process".*

*We meet lots of friends of him along the way, involved in different kinds of social and political work. We also meet a friend of him who just started his second term as representative in the National Assembly. They have known each other a long time, when they both worked with grass root resistance against the former governments. Military and police are lined up along the road to guarantee security. They seem very relaxed though, drinking juice and sometimes talking with the people who pass by. Andrés points out with great enthusiasm that this could never have happened some years ago. A few years ago the police and military would have cracked down on a march with a political expression like this with brutal violence.*

*Along the way I do some interviews with random people in the march. Here are some parts of the interviews:*

*Man 37 years, from a popular organization:*

*"You have to understand that what you see around you here is a matter of feelings, it is something which comes from here (he touches his heart). It is el pueblo who feel that they are included, living these changes together."*

*Woman in her 50ties:*

*"The people who you see marching here together were all excluded from the 4th Republic. We didn't have access to the universities; we couldn't even get into the biggest cinemas and*

*the theatres. In the barrios people died because they couldn't pay for surgeries."*

*Man, 45 years, from a popular organization:*

*"In 1992 [the military rebellion against Carlos Andrés Pérez] we never thought we would come to this in a pacific way, but the people was so tired and angry that we were ready to take to arms to change the regime we lived in then. We knew it had to change, for our future, for our children sake."*

*Woman in her 60ties:*

*"I feel that it is el pueblo walking together here, it is one people united, one government which is fighting against the [US-] intervention, fighting for our brothers who fell, for all the people in the world. Because the president is not mine, he is yours, he is everyone's. My message is that we have to get together to fight for a better world, to fight against poverty. Venezuelans are now internationalists"*

*After a long and hot walk for several hours we arrive the centre of Caracas and enter Avenida Bólvivar. The street is packed with people. It has eight car files and is around 1.5 kilometres long. A friend tells us that people are still leaving Petare, which means that the march is filling up approximately 16 kilometres of roads. It is said that this makes up for around one and a half million people. The opposition is also having a march today, but apparently so few people came that it was just embarrassing.*

*Far away, Chávez is talking from a stage in the end of Avenida Bólvivar. Loudspeakers are placed along the road so people can listen to what he is saying. But at this point people are starting to reach such a festive mood that they are just listening with one ear and applauses when Chávez' voice reaches a crescendo to underline a point. These marches often end as an giant street party, where sharing beer, rum and whiskey is the going currency to strike up a conversation with old friends, acquaintances or strangers, talking about the process, mocking the opposition and the US, making new contacts and exchanging telephone numbers for future political cooperation.*

*Around 19.00 pm it gets dark and Chávez ends his speech. We meet some friends from a grass root movement in Caracas. They have brought a doll of George W. Bush and a*

*poster which says “se buscha sangre de alto octano”- a word game which refers to George W. Bush (buscar= looking for-“buscha”) who is “looking for high octane blood”. One of the members from the group, a woman, is talking repetitively in the loud speaker “Help, help, I’m in need of oil”. In the end the doll of George W. Bush is burned to a lot of cheering. Eventually we leave the Avenida and head for a party in a barrio close to the city centre. “*

# Introduction

This thesis is the result of six months fieldwork in Caracas, Venezuela between August 2005 and February 2006. I came to Venezuela motivated by a curiosity about the Bolivarian Revolution, as the political process which is taking place in the country is called. Venezuela has frequently figured in the international media throughout the past years, and the opinions about the self-proclaimed revolutionary president Hugo Chávez and his Bolivarian Revolution are diverse and intense. I wanted to explore how the Bolivarian Revolution was experienced and conceptualized by people at the core of the revolution; namely *el pueblo*. My fieldwork was thus carried out in a *barrio* – shanty town neighbourhood- in Caracas amongst several grass root activist groups who are engaged in community work and political mobilization for the Bolivarian Revolution. The political march as portrayed in the Preface-section is chosen as an introduction because it provides the reader with an immediate image of contemporary Venezuela as a deeply politicised country where many people are experiencing profound transformations. This thesis aims to shed light on how these transformations are taking place on various arenas and mediated through a multitude of discourses, narratives, values and identities. I will discuss how the relationship between the local community and the state are re-configured through extensive state policies which encourage political participation and locally initiated development projects as a means to democratize the political system and accelerate poverty reduction. I will explore how these policies, combined with a radical political discourse which has moved *el pueblo* - the people- to the centre stage of government attention have re-shaped the traditionally deep-rooted social landscape of racial and class-based exclusion. Furthermore, I intend to discuss how the political turmoil which has erupted in Venezuela after the election of Chávez, including a coup in 2002, is conceptualized and experienced by the grass root activist groups I spent time with.

The Bolivarian Revolution, or the Bolivarian Process as it also is called, is named after the national hero Simón Bolívar; “a *military commander and a field commander, a political philosopher and a maker of constitution, a liberator of peoples and a founder*

*of republics*” (Lynch 1983: 3) who liberated Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia from the Spanish crown. The revolution is presented as an alternative to “savage neo-liberalism” (Gott 2000:6) with Chávez’ own words, and aims towards replacing the representative democracy with a *participative and protagonic democracy*<sup>1</sup>, where the citizens are provided with resources, mechanisms and institutions which allows them to have de facto political power and influence on both a local and national scale. The Bolivarian Revolution is also presented as a counter-imperialistic project, drawing on Bolivar’s dream of an independent, strong and united Latin America<sup>2</sup> which could resist the influence of United States at the continent. Preceding Chávez rise to presidency in 1998, the country had faced several years of social and political unrest caused by increasing social, political and economic marginalization of the 80% of the population which was considered as poor. Experiences of poverty, marginalization and political violence throughout the political époque prior to Chávez are attributed to the former elites’ corrupt neo-liberal governance but also to a meta-narrative about colonialization and US- imperialism. The Bolivarian Revolution headed by Chávez is hence not only experienced as the emancipation of *el pueblo* within the borders of Venezuela; it is also a struggle for *el pueblo’s* emancipation from imperial subordination. Thus in order to tease out the multilayered political universe which the Bolivarian Revolution constitute, I will adapt the terms “the Bolivarian State” and “the Bolivarian Revolution” as analytical components for the thesis. The terms are simultaneously an emic adaptation and an analytical approach, and will contribute to a clearer visualisation of the particular context in which the activities of the groups which are the focus for my study unfold. This is not to assume that it is possible to explain historical development and socioeconomic processes in “*terms of one particular and perhaps exceptional historical conjuncture*” (Nugent 1993:28), what Nugent calls *presentist* (ibid). It is rather an attempt to develop an analysis which highlights how the conceptualization of the present is entangled in a wider historical and political context. Thus, my aim is to develop an analysis which moves along several analytical lines, crosscutting temporalities and spatialities.

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<sup>1</sup> In Spanish: Democracia participativa y protagónica

<sup>2</sup> A symbolic quote which is often invoked is Simón Bolívar’s words in “Letter from Jamaica” in 1815: “More than anyone, I desire to see America fashioned into the greatest nation in the world, greatest not so much by virtue of her area and wealth as by her freedom and glory” (Bertrand 1951)

## Fieldwork location

My fieldwork was conducted in a *barrio* with approximately 300 000 inhabitants which in this thesis will be called La Dignidad<sup>3</sup>. The fictive name is chosen in order to protect my informants. Originally I had decided to study “the Bolivarian Circles”, political activist- and studying groups which have been formed in 2002 in support for the Bolivarian Revolution. However, I soon realized that activism in the *barrio* was characterized by an intense dynamic between different groups and different organizations. In order to grasp this dynamism, I decided to change my focus and carry out my fieldwork amongst different grass root activists groups in La Dignidad. Through this, I hoped to expand my understanding of how activism in the *barrio* unfolds, while at the same time coming to terms with the particularities of each of the different groups.

This move might have proved to be too ambitious for the time I had available if it hadn't been elections for the National Assembly in December 2005. One of the representants from the electoral district emerged from an extensive network of grass root activist groups in La Dignidad, and this gave me a unique opportunity to follow his electoral campaign during almost two intensive months. Through this, I developed a good oversight over the different individuals and groups in the community, their histories, activities, differences and interconnections. Under the Chávez- government, a number of social programs aimed towards alleviating poverty and improving living conditions have been introduced, and the formation of community organizations in the *barrios* has exploded. Through encouragement and with different degrees of technical and economical support from the government, there are now a vast number of different groups working with health, education, property entitlement and infrastructure improvements, to mention some activities. Many of these groups, or individuals from these groups, participated in the election campaign for the local candidate to the National Assembly. The candidate emerged from a grass root organization which in this thesis will be called La Fuerza Popular de la Dignidad<sup>4</sup>. It is a left winged radical grass root group which has been rooted in the community since the 80ies, sometimes subjected to state repression as a “subversive” movement. La Fuerza Popular de la Dignidad has in the wake of the election of Chávez emerged as a vibrant political force in the community and has a broad network also outside the La Dignidad.

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<sup>3</sup> In English: The Dignity.

<sup>4</sup> In English: The Popular Force of La Dignidad

However, although my fieldwork was carried out among groups working in the La Dignidad it was not geographically confined within its borders. My approach when in the field was to gradually try to understand what was important for my analysis and thus also be flexible about where the fieldwork led me and what I focused on in different contexts. It thus resembles what Vayda calls “progressive contextualization”: “*focusing on significant human action [...] and then explaining these interactions by placing them within progressively wider or denser context*” (Vayda 1983:265). This thesis will therefore also bring the reader to other *barrios* in Caracas, to public gatherings organized by the government, to quotes from Chávez’ TV-programs and to manifestations through the streets of Caracas. A central part of the experience of living the Bolivarian Revolution amongst these groups is embedded in spaces and places as sites for political and social transformation. I was thus required to take on a multisited and multi-dimensional approach to grasp these experiences, while at the same time looking at their activities carried out within the community. Through this I will tease out not only how the government’s policies have created new dynamics both in the local community and with the government and state at large, but also how these dynamics are related to a broader political, ideological and historical life-world.

### **The wider socio-political context**

Venezuela is a radicalized and politicised society, divided between those who in favour of and those opposing the government. In political discourse adapted by the government and its supporters alike, *el pueblo* and *los escuálidos* stand against each other. The word “*el pueblo*” has various meanings in Spanish and can be translated into “village”, “rural town”, “people” and “popular classes” (Nugent 1993:34). The symbolic meaning it is attributed within political discourse in Spanish is lost in its English translation and it will therefore be used as an emic phrase. It should be understood in its multilayered form, “*referring at once to geographical locale and social totality, to physical space and political movement within it*” (ibid). The word stresses a sense of unity and stands in an antagonistic relationship to the political and social elites. For example in the Venezuelan context, it is used in the sense that *el pueblo* were formerly excluded throughout the *époques* before Chávez’ rise to presidency. It thus refers to an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) of the supporters of President Chávez, while

simultaneously to an identification with *el pueblo* in other countries who are impoverished, repressed and marginalized.

The opposition and their supporters are called *los esqualidos*- the squalid ones<sup>5</sup>. The former political elites which now are in opposition have lost significant political power, and as the majority of the opposition parties withdrew from the 2005- elections they neither have representation in the National Assembly. However, the opposition still holds a significant share of economic and mediatic power, as it emerges from the sectors which had a strong hand on most of the country's assets and institutions. A coup attempt in 2002, a general strike/lock out in 2002-2003 and other attempts to undermine the Chávez government carried out by sectors of the opposition were however defeated due to enormous mass mobilization for the government by its supporters. Five out of five private TV-stations are also aligned with the opposition and the media was directly involved in the coup in 2002 by agitating for a regime change and manipulating information.<sup>6</sup> These circumstances create a particular tense political climate which will be drawn into the analysis as it is crucial component of the daily life of the groups I studied.

Throughout the last years, Venezuela has gradually risen to be the gravitation centre for the revival of the radical new left in Latin-America, but the Bolivarian Governments has also through its radical discourse and partially radical politics generated a lot of enemies and been subjected to harsh critiques. The relationship between Venezuela and the United States is, to put it mildly, tense, and the United States was a bit too quick to applaud the attempted coup against Chávez in 2002.

On the background of all the political turmoil during the past years, the possibility of further attempts to topple the government is a constant worry to the grass root groups which are described in this thesis. The Bolivarian Revolution is thus conceptualized as a

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<sup>5</sup> Synonyms to squalid: neglected and dirty, without any fine qualities, lacking in honesty, dignity and morals (Encarta Dictionary, Microsoft World). It is curiously enough also adopted by the opposition when talking or referring to themselves.

<sup>6</sup> See i.e. Hellinger 2004: International Civil Society, Press Freedoms, and Venezuela's Crisis. Delivered at the Conference "Cómo nos ven?", Caracas, Aug. 5, 2004. The coup in 2002 also resulted in a price awarding documentary film, "The Revolution Will not be Televised" by two Irish film makers who were inside the presidential palace before, during and after the coup. See [www.Chavezthefilm.com](http://www.Chavezthefilm.com). See also Australian journalist John Pilger: [http://www.vicuk.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=71&Itemid=30](http://www.vicuk.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=71&Itemid=30)

battle against both imperialism in a historical perspective and against domestic national elites, and radicalizes their determination to engage in the process the country is going through. A number of templates and personal and collective narratives which will be presented throughout the thesis, will seek to shed light on how they experience and narrate a transition from an oppressive political system to a political process which aims to restore political freedom and human dignity.

## **Analysing social movements**

The analysis will adapt some of its theoretical and analytical approaches from the Social Movements-studies which have dominated much scholarly literature about Latin-America during the two past decades. The transitions from authoritarian regimes to formal democracies in the late 80ties, processes of neo-liberal economic restructuring, new models of governance and the social consequences this have generated have caused “*impassioned experiences of resistance and collective struggle on many fronts*” (Escobar and Alvarez 1992:2) across the continent. Studies of these diverse forms of movements, which range from peasants’ movements, feminist movements, student movements, ecological movements, workers movements, just to mention a few, highlight their complex forms of inter-and intraorganisation, adaptive strategies, cultural and ideological diversions and different capabilities in accessing formal and informal sites of power and influence.

Social movements as a recognizable force in the Latin America emerged as a part of the struggle against authoritarian regimes during the 70ties and 80ties. Civil society in cooperation with the Catholic Church, human rights organizations and other groups played a crucial role in defeating these regimes, (Garavito, Barret and Chávez 2004:35) and one discovered that “*there was something more in politics than the State*”<sup>7</sup> (Weffort, cited in *ibid*:35). This gave way to what is called the “New Social Movements”, emphasising the shift from a Marxist class-based analyses on societal struggle towards a more complex, multidimensional approach which often transcends class-divisions, class identities, and national boundaries.

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<sup>7</sup> “El descubrimiento de que en la política había algo más que el Estado”. My translation from Spanish

Two fields of theoretical writing and case studies on social movements have been dominant (Radcliffe in Gwynne and Kay (eds) 1999:213). What is called *resources mobilization theory* (RTM) has focused on strategies for accessing resources on the basis of mobilizations rationales and participation, while *identity theory* (also called new social movement theory (NSM)) has largely focused on identity and culture within the diverse movements, following the post-structural turn in social theory (ibid: 214). However, throughout the 1990s, these two directions have to a certain extent merged, embracing both “*community, ideology, structural factors and strategy*” (Sheffner, 1995:604, cited in Radcliffe in Gwynne and Kay (eds.) 1999:204).

Yet so, social movements are not easily definable and various concepts and strategies for analysing them have been put forward. A definition put forward by Scott is that social movements are: “*a collective actor constituted by individuals who consider themselves to have common interests, and for at least some significant part of their social identity, a common identity* (Scott, 1990:6, cited in ibid: 204). Their activities must also be analysed in relation the wider context in which they operate- the political focus of the government, type of state and their specific social relations and networks.

The activist groups in La Dignidad identify themselves as a part of the *movimiento popular* (popular movement), which is the term most commonly used amongst them. Thus, it is natural to draw on social movements studies in order to analyse them. However, it would be imprecise to characterize those who carry out social and political work in la Dignidad as “A social movement”, as they are by nature so diverse, organized in very different forms and have different scopes in their everyday activities. The analytical focus in my thesis will escalate between various levels. While I sometimes refer to *el pueblo*, I will at other times refer to *popular movements* for other analytical purposes. Furthermore, more fine grained analyses of how social work is carried out in La Dignidad will required a detailed explanation of the particularities within each groups.

However, it is fruitful to draw on already gained understanding of social movements as a point of reference. First, because the groups which are the focus for this thesis to a large degree share a common identity, working within a common social-political project, namely the Bolivarian Revolution. Secondly it is empirically founded, as they

identify themselves as belonging to the “grass roots”, grounded in a social-political paradigm which is characteristic for social movements. Thirdly because they through their social work and political activism mobilize a network of different social and political groups and institutions and thus resemble the net-work characteristic which has been applied to social movements. And finally because it allows us to view the way social work evolves in the local community as part of a comprehensive process of societal transformation. As have been so forcefully put forwards by many scholars on social movements is that our understanding should not be limited to analysing them as subjects or groups attempting to be included in the political structure: what is at stake is a struggle from below to contest and redefine society and politics at large:

*In their anti-hegemonic impetus, social movements challenge and negotiate the meanings attributed to subaltern groups and at times attempt to generate alternative languages through which to speak about social differences, development and modernity. (Dagnino 1998:217)*

The social and political work the popular movements in La Dignidad engage in, is envisioned as more than “just work”, it also entails a vision of constructing another type of society, trying “*to convert man into a man within a collective: of solidarity, humanity, love and justice*”, as one man from La Dignidad explained. Involved in this is also a rejection of a reductionistic economic perspective on society and a quest for redefining the very meaning and content of concepts such as “citizenship”, “the state” and “society”. Thus, the popular movements in La Dignidad seek to pursue a “*redefinition not only of the political system but also of economic, social and cultural practices that might engender a democratic ordering for society as a whole*” (Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar 1998:2).

## **Popular movements and the state**

A key focus for my thesis is thus to explore the conceptualizations of the state and citizenship which arise from the interaction between the government and *el pueblo* on various arenas. Stiefel and Wolfe (1994) elaborate on a particular model of participation as a component of national policy, whereby “[...] *governments generally rejected the traditional instruments of representative democracy, but made popular participation an explicit and central feature of policy, expressed in new institutions, laws, mass parties*

*and public ideology*” (ibid:9) Thus, they suggest that an inquiry must be made into the “*real interactions of national mobilization ideologies and policies with popular strivings for a voice in control of resources and institutions at local level*” (ibid). The contemporary situation in Venezuela is a very interesting field to explore in this regard. Although the grass root activist groups and the government engage in a common discursive and ideological sphere on the surface, it also generates a lot of tension and friction. I will thus seek to investigate the dynamics and contestations which arise on various arenas in encounters between the state and *el pueblo*, and explore how the government’s policy and ideology is absorbed and interpreted amongst people “on the ground”. People’s identities as belonging to the grass root emerge from a narrative which has its root in decades of marginalization, poverty and struggle vis-à-vis the state. This historical-political perspective is decisive in order to comprehend both the ideology of the Bolivarian Government, the way the Bolivarian process unfolds amongst its supporters and what dynamics which arise in the interface of encounters between the government and *el pueblo*.

## **From Puntofijismo to Chavismo**

The following section will provide the reader with an account of political-historical trajectories in Venezuela. In the narratives and imaginaries deployed by the groups I studied, the period prior to Chávez is used as a contrasting point of reference to the current situation. *No volverán!*- “they will not come back!” is an expression often invoked in demonstration posters and songs, referring to the former political elites. It is crucial for the understanding of the rest of the thesis to have an insight in the historical background from where the polarization emerges from.

Venezuela had long been depicted as a country with a stable and potentially prosperous future (Hillmann 1994:2) lubricated by enormous oil wealth<sup>8</sup> at a continent otherwise plagued by violent military interventions and repressive regimes. Analysts had focused mainly on economic and political developments (ibid), without foreseeing the possibility for radical changes. A violently repressed popular revolt against neo-liberal reforms in 1989 exposed irreversibly the social and political divisions which in the years to come would only intensify, and cause the emergence of a government which

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<sup>8</sup> Oil was discovered in Venezuela in the early 1920s and it soon became the richest country at the continent. (Hillman 1994:14).

have in the recent years caused the greatest changes at the continents political map for decades. Thus, the historical developments in Venezuela are also an account of the emergence of radical leftist ideology on a backdrop of two decades of neo-liberal governance.

However, the discontent with the political system as a narrative in the contemporary popular mind goes back to 1959. This period is often referred to as the 4th Republic (*la Cuarta Republica*), or *el Puntofijismo*. The period between 1959, when the authoritarian regime of Marcos Pérez Jiménez was defeated, and up till the election of Chávez in 1998 was characterized by the galvanization of power by two parties, Democratic Action (AD) and the Christian Democrats (COPEI)<sup>9</sup>. Political analysts have characterized Venezuela as a partyarchy (*partidocracia*) (Lalander 2004, cited in Ellner in Ellner and Hellinger et. al 2003). Gott (2002) suggests that it was effectively a one-party state (Ibid:17), while others have characterized it as a *pactocracia* (Hellmann 1994).

*Puntofijismo* refers to an agreement signed by the AD and COPEI in 1959 which aim was to avoiding effective rivalry from both the Left and the Right of the political spectrum (Lalander 2004:7). It was particularly crucial to exclude Communist Party (PCV), who had played a crucial role in defeating Pérez Jiménez. By only including politically moderate parties in the construction of a new, democratic Venezuela, they could present themselves as attractive partners to the private sector as well to the US-government (Coronil 1997: 216). Since 1959, the parties had galvanized their control over social, political and economic life. The trade unions were practically a part of the party system, and party membership regulated possibilities for job opportunities and social mobility (Gott 2000:17). The corruption and conspicuous consumption amongst the Venezuelan elites was notorious and famous throughout the continent (ibid).

Venezuela was up until the end of the 1980ties able to maintain relative social stability, at least on the surface. In the end of the 70ties and the beginning of the 80ties, Venezuela had a large and prosperous middle class. This époque of decadency is often referred to as “*está barrato- dame dos*”- “it is cheap- give me two”, referring to

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<sup>9</sup> Except when former COPEI leader Rafael Caldera held presidency as an independent candidate between 1994 and 1998.

Venezuelans going to Miami on shopping in the weekends equipped with oil money and favourable exchange rates.

Venezuelan-American historicist Fernando Coronil has written a monumental analysis about Venezuela, where he argues that soaked in the riches of oil, the Venezuelans state and its politicians created a political mythology of modernity and development. Venezuela was seen as having two bodies, a political body made up of citizens and a natural body made up of its rich subsoil (Coronil 1997:4). The Magical State was produced by “*awe inspiring spectacles of its rule*”, casting spells over “*audience and performers alike*” (ibid: 5). This myth created a imaginary of prosperity which both the elites and the population reflected themselves in, and through which the political elites legitimized themselves.<sup>10</sup> It was gradually shattered throughout the 1980s. In 1983 the government had to devaluate the currency due to the plummeting of oil prices. The debt burden accumulated through the past years<sup>11</sup> reached extraordinary levels (Hillmann 1994:124). From that point on, government management was directed towards “damage control” and Washington-designed austerity measures was implemented to great social and political costs (ibid). The traditional package was brought to the table, including cuts in subsidies and tariffs, opening up for foreign investment, privatization of industry and a reduction of the public sector. Living standards declined, popular discontent grew and a political crisis evolved.

## **El Caracazo**

The imaginary of the prosperous Venezuelan state was ultimately crushed in 1989, unleashed by a new set of structural adjustments announced by Carlos Andrés Pérez. Pérez had been president throughout the prosperous end-70ties, and drew support on the promise to recreate this époque. During the campaign, he referred to IMF as “the bomb which only kills people”<sup>12</sup>, though on the backroom signalling to IMF that he would continue to comply with their conditions (Coronil 1997:375) He shortly after his

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<sup>10</sup> However, Coronil points out that his book explores production of myths and meanings from the highest centres of power. Although his book is an attempt to locate his analysis within complex relations, both national and international, and to also view it from the margins of power, he nevertheless is aware of the danger of excluding subordinated sectors from the analysis (Coronil 1998:15)

<sup>11</sup> The debt burden which prepared the ground for these adjustments was accumulated through different mechanisms. In oil rich countries such as Venezuela and Mexico it was borrowed on the basis of anticipated oil income, while other countries such as Brazil and Jamaica had to borrow due to oil deficiencies (Coronil 1997:312)

<sup>12</sup> “la bomba -solo- mata -gente”

inauguration shifted his position and introduced what he called “*El Gran Viraje*”- “The Great Turnaround”. It involved an intensification of IMF-designed austerity measures. Food shortage, inflation and declining purchasing power quickly incited rage in the *barrios* which surrounded Caracas, and elsewhere in the country. The explosion came the 27<sup>th</sup> of February 1989, in a riot called *el Caracazo*. It was directly unleashed by an elimination of subsidies on gasoline. The buses rose ticket fares, which the passengers could not afford anymore. The pressure had been built up for a long time, and it incited a three days riot which spread throughout the country. People started to loath shops which had hidden away groceries, expecting Pérez to soon remove price control. Only in Caracas, over 1000 shops were looted and burned (Coronil 1997: 375). From the point of view of the population, the elimination of gas subsidies was more than an economic measure; it was a betrayal which Perez had not foreseen the result of.

*“[T]his measure shattered the bond that united the body politic as the collective owner of the nation’s natural body: by violation what people considered as their birthright, it ruptured a moral bond of protection between the state and the people. (Ibid: 376)*

President Pérez declared state of emergency and suspended civil rights. *El Caracazo* was the largest and most violently repressed revolt against austerity measures which had ever taken place in Latin-American history (Coronil and Skurski 1991, cited in Coronil 1997).400 bodies were identified by COFAVIC (Committee of Relatives of the Innocent Victims) but it is possible that there were many more (ibid: 377)<sup>13</sup>. According to Heinz Sonntag, professor in sociology at CENDES<sup>14</sup> in Caracas, the repression was meant as “a warning” to the poor, so that they would not do it again (Gott 2000:46)

For most Venezuelans this was the point where they lost faith in their ruling elites and their political system. According to statements from many of my informants, it was also the point when certain popular sectors and organizations had a collective awakening: something has to be changed. According to the same informants, it was generally understood that it had to be done through a coup or popular rebellion. Hence, some

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<sup>13</sup> Unofficial statements (and popular opinion) suggest that the number was above one thousand but that they were never identified or counted in the aftermath of the riot.

<sup>14</sup> Centro de Estudios de Desarrollo (Centre for Developing Studies)

groups became radicalized and began to organizing themselves for resistance against the government.

The living standards continued to deteriorate in the aftermath of *el Caracazo*, and protests involving state-employees, students and workers alike took place throughout the country. There were also some significant sectors within the lower ranks of the military which saw their real wages and possibilities for upward mobility decline, as well as considering their superiors as politicized complicit in violent oppression of civilian protest by a corrupt state (Coronil 1997:378).

### **The attempted coup of '92**

A political movement growing out of the ranks of the military had gradually evolved over years, with now- president Chávez as the leader. *El Caracazo* had radicalized their determination to overthrow a regime gradually stripped of legitimacy, and military officers emerging from poor backgrounds were disgusted by their involvement in massacring “their own people” (Gott 2000). There had also been circulation rumours in the population for long that a coup was on its way (Hillmann 1994:130). The coup came the 4<sup>th</sup> of February 1992. Chávez, who was then leading a parachute battalion in Maracay, west of Caracas, and a group of other mid-level officers from the clandestine *Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario-200* intended a coup against Pérez. The group invoked “Bolivarian” principles of justice and solidarity, and accused the corrupt elites of using the military to repress social protest which they had themselves created by undermining financial sovereignty and widening the gap between the rich and poor (Coronil 1997: 379).

However, the coup failed. But as Chávez was led away to prison he directed himself to the country via TV and declared that he assumed full responsibility for the coup and that they had failed- for now. This “for now”- *por ahora*, was stuck in the popular mind and “*Viva Chávez*” could be heard as in conversations throughout the country (Hillman 1997: 133). The support and his subsequent popularity must be seen in the light of a population which was deeply frustrated over increasing social and economic marginalization during the past decade, and a worn out corrupt political system which was rotting from the inside. In November the same year another coup attempt took

place by high-level officers, but also this failed. However, it was clear that the militaries' deep internal fissures undermined the regime (Coronil 1997: 379).

*El Caracazo* and the subsequent events of the coup attempts in 1994 was a definite rupture with populist projects which had marked the relationship between the state and *el pueblo* since the discovery of the oil several decades ago. The shattering of the myth as one nation under the prosperous ceiling of oil stripped the state of its seductive weapon, and laid bare the divisions between have and have-nots, both socially and economically. The dominant discourse changed, and began to present people “*not so much as the virtuous foundation of democracy, but as an unruly and parasitical mass to be disciplined by the state and made productive by the market*” (ibid: 387) The popular sectors, on their hand, increasingly defined politicians as a corrupt elite which had appropriated the state and the nation's oil and abused the people (ibid). Venezuela experienced one of the world's largest increases in inequality during the 1990s (Naím, 2001a:31, cited in Ellner 2003:19). In 1996 the country faced the largest inflation rates in Latin-America (70 percent) and around 70 percent of the population lived in poverty. Of these, 30 percent faced critical poverty (Coronil 1997: 383).

### **The Fifth Republic emerges**

In 1994 Chávez was released from prison by then President Rafael Caldera who tried to gain support by being associated with Chávez. Caldera was elected president when Perez had been impeached in 1994, charged for extensive corruption. While in prison, Chávez developed political ideas based on the three South American heroes from the nineteenth century: the revolution hero Simón Bolívar, his friend and revolutionary teacher Simón Rodríguez and the revolutionary peasant leader Ezequiel Zamora. (Gott 2000:20). These three historical figures are called “the tree with three roots”<sup>15</sup> from where the political and philosophical foundation of the Bolivarian Revolution emerges.

Simultaneously, Chávez was building up a political network of civilians and the military. One of my informants report that they actually went in prison to visit him, discussing political philosophy and political cooperation. When Chávez was released, he formed the party *Movimiento Bolivariano- 200*. The name was later changed to *Movimiento Quinta Republica* (MVR). Backed by a party alliance called the *Polo*

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<sup>15</sup> “El árbol de las tres raíces” in Spanish

*Patriotico*, Chávez won with 56.2 %<sup>16</sup> of the votes in December 1998. At this point he drew support also from the upper-and middleclass and dominant economic and political sectors, but this support gradually vanished as Chávez made it clear that he was not interested in continuing a pact with the old establishment.

### **Key events after 1998**

It is also crucial to briefly go through some key events after the election of Chávez, in order to provide the reader with a sense of the turmoil which constitutes the life world of those I engaged with throughout the fieldwork. The past years have been characterized by a lot of turbulence and several occasions of civil, sometimes violent, obedience on behalf of the opposition. Furthermore, an attempted coup in 2002 and an oil strike/sabotage the same year both failed due to massive mobilization amongst the government-supporters. The coup attempt in April 2002 was particularly triggered by 49 laws, *Ley Habilitante* (Enabling Law) which were passed in the fall of 2001. These laws significantly changed regulations for private enterprises, profits shares from the oil industry, natural resources management and land tenure, to mention some aspects. It was at odds with the interests of the business sector, which convoked a strike in December the same year. In the months to come, an alliance between the former dominant parties, the trade union aligned to these (CTV), former oil executives, the Business Chamber (FEDECAMERAS), civil society organizations from the middle-and upper-class and the private media started to advocate for the necessity for a regime change (Ellner and Rosen 2002:1). Opposition leaders travelled frequently to Washington during these months, and released documents shows that US-intelligence was well aware of the coup and how it would happen (Gott 2005:224, Golinger 2005).

The 11<sup>th</sup> of April 2002 the opposition had convoked for a giant protest march which in the last minute was directed by the leaders towards the Miraflores palace, urging the crowds to force the president to resign. Later evidence suggests that this was planned well ahead, and that snipers were hidden in the buildings nearby the palace in order to shoot demonstrators, both from the opposition and Chávez' supporters who were gathered nearby. 20 high ranking military officers then appeared on television and declared a military rebellion against Chávez, stating that he was responsible for the blood bath outside the presidential palace. Later it turned out, by the testimony of CNN-

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<sup>16</sup> The remaining votes were divided between three candidates.

correspondent Otto Neustald, that this video of the officers had been filmed the day before, the 10<sup>th</sup> of April<sup>17</sup>. They thus knew already the day before that people would be killed.

Chávez was taken away the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup> <sup>18</sup> and the rest of the government and palace staff evacuated. The president of the Business Chamber, Pedro Carmona Estranga, was taken under oath as the president for a new “interim government”. The National Assembly, the Ombudsman, the head of the Central Bank, the National Electoral Council and the Supreme Court of Justice was dissolved and the laws passed by the Chávez-government reversed. The state channel, Channel 8, had been cut off hours before, and the private TV-channels announced that Chávez had resigned under the headline “Chávez resigned: democracy restored” (Gott 2005:230). The US-government immediately gave its support to the new regime.

However, the word began to spread by mouth around Caracas that Chávez had not resigned, but was taken hostage. In spite of heavy police repression, millions took to the streets during the 13<sup>th</sup> of April and surrounded the palace and Fuerte Tiuna. The presidential guards, who had remained loyal to Chávez, eventually took over the Presidential palace and the newly installed regime fled. Within the military, loyalty to the “interim government” vanished. In the morning of the 14<sup>th</sup> of April, Chávez was brought back to Miraflores. The coup claimed over 20 lives and hundreds wounded.

In December the same years, an oil strike, or rather a lockout, of the state oil company *Petroleos de Venezuela S.A (PDVSA)*, the corner stone of the economy, was convoked by the business sector. The goal was to bring the country down to a halt and force Chávez to resign. “Christmas without Chávez”, was the slogan of the opposition (Gott 2005:249). The strike crippled the countries economy and created a social state of emergency. The government had to buy oil from other countries to meet their export duties, the shops soon started to get empty and to fill up a tank of gasoline could require two days in a queue. The goal for the organizers of the strike was to create a situation like in el Caracazo in 1989, when food scarcity would bring people to turn their rage

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<sup>17</sup> The chronology of the coup can be followed in the award winning documentary “The Revolution will not be Televised”. (Bartley and O’ Briain 2003)

<sup>18</sup> He was taken away by the military who otherwise threatened to bomb the palace (Gott 2002:228)

against the government. Instead the opposite thing happened and people sided with the government. Eventually the government seized control over the oil production by the help of military and loyal retired workers from the oil-industry, and the situation gradually turned to the normal.

A recall-election over Chávez presidency was held in August 2004. The Bolivarian Constitution opens up for a referendum on the presidency half way in his/hers period if 20% of the electorate calls for it. Súmate (“Join in”), an oppositional civil society organization which receives support from US-congress-funded National Endowment for Democracy (NED), collected enough signatures and the National Electoral Council (CNE) then called for a re-call election held 15th of August 2004. The NO-side (not recalling Chávez’ presidency) won with 58.9% of the votes. International election observers like the Organization for American States (OAS) and the Carter-centre, headed by former US-president Jimmy Carter, stated that the election was free and fair, but the opposition continues to claim that it was a fraud.

## **Chapter outline**

As my intention is to explore how the Bolivarian Revolution unfolds and is experienced on different arenas and through various forms of mediation, the thesis will be divided into five chapters which explore different, but intimately interlinked fields. Chapter one will contain an outlay of how I located the site for my fieldwork and how the subsequent field experience evolved. I will also discuss how I experienced my role as an ethnographer, and how the particular circumstance for my project influenced my way of relating to the field. In chapter two, I will discuss how social and economic segregation and exclusion in Venezuela has given way to deep seated racial and class based prejudices, and how this arises to the surface in the contemporary political polarization. I will take the reader on a journey through Caracas in to La Dignidad, where I will discuss how *el pueblo* and the *barrio* are central components in the conceptualization of the Bolivarian Revolution. I will also give an analysis of how people mediate their relationship to Hugo Chávez and seek to investigate why he has gained such popularity amongst *el pueblo*. Chapter three is an in-depth analysis of how social and political work is carried out in La Dignidad, and an exploration of how the community actively engage in improving their living condition in cooperation with the

state. I will pay particular attention to how the work is shaped by the ideology and community values found amongst the popular movements, but also within the ideology which the Bolivarian Revolution entails. Chapter four is an exploration of how the popular movements engage in a struggle for more influence and power with the state and the government, and the ambiguity with regards to the common project of developing the Bolivarian Revolution this generates. Chapter five is an analysis of how the coup in 2002 and the conflict with the elite opposition are conceptualized within a historical narrative which sees the Bolivarian Revolution as a struggle against imperial aggression but also shaped by personal experiences with violence and aggression. The thesis will end with a short epilogue.

# Chapter one

## The field, practical information and methodological approaches

In the beginning of my stay in Venezuela I lived at the student campus of Instituto Venezolano para Investigaciones Cientificas (IVIC), a well renowned research institute outside Caracas. I had been invited to be a visiting student at the Institute for Science Studies under the supervision of anthropologist and head of department Dra. Hebe Vessuri. This contact with IVIC proved to be a very valuable, as I didn't know anyone in Venezuela and didn't yet have an appropriate location for my fieldwork. Venturing into a *barrio* on my own was out of the question, and I also needed to find someone who was willing to take on the extra responsibility it was to have me there.

The first weeks I lived at the university campus of IVIC and searched for an “entrance” into a *barrio*. The staff at IVIC helped me with names and introduction to relevant literature, but eventually it was a friend who also lived at university campus who put me in contact with the wife of a friend of his. She has participated in political mobilization in La Dignidad during the recall referendum in august 2004 and introduced me to some friends of her there who were more than willing to include me in their work and “take care of me”. Once contact was established with them, it was easy to get in contact with other people and organizations in the area. The breakthrough came when I started to participate in the electoral campaign for the local candidates for the National Assembly, as elaborated above. For one and a half months, I participated on a daily basis in their campaign. This proved to be a unique opportunity to uncover these dynamics I was looking for, as the campaign mobilized a large number of the different social and political organizations in the community. During this intense period I participated in political rallies, planning meetings, different events and generally just spent time in the tent from where the campaign was coordinated. Through this I got to know a large number of central figures in the community, and on relatively short time it deepened both my general oversight over the dynamics between the different organizations and

the different groups in the community. It also gave me a broad network of contacts and acquaintances which I stayed in contact with later. However, I did not only partake in the activities within the community, but also went to other places in Caracas. I also extended my fieldwork in order to stay in Caracas during the 5<sup>th</sup> World Social Forum which took place in Caracas in the end of February. Some of the people from la Dignidad were involved in arranging some events at the Forum. This led me to an even wider contact with different people and groups involved in political activities from different neighbourhoods not only in Caracas but also Venezuela and Latin-America in general.

### **Logistic and practical arrangements**

After I moved from IVIC, I shared a flat with some Venezuelans in the centre of Caracas. I considered for a long time to move to La Dignidad, but concluded that although it could have involved me more in their everyday life, it would have put enormous limits on my possibility to move around. The area is very unsafe, and being a young, foreign girl I clearly drew a lot of attention. I also felt that although my informants invited me to move in close to their home, the need for continuous assistance for such a long time would be too much to ask them for. I also often had activities in the city centre, like interviews, public meetings or everyday practicalities, and I felt that moving to La Dignidad would have resulted in too much logistic difficulties and emotional stress.

The journey from my home to La Dignidad took everything from 15 minutes to one and an half hour, depending on traffic jams and if I took bus or taxi. During the electoral campaign I went there almost every day and I could go there without prior notice, as the campaign tent was located close to the entrance of the *barrio* and hence it was safe to arrive there on my own. For other meetings or activities, I mostly had to call someone who could assist me and follow me. As these additional activities mostly were attendance at meetings in my informants' groups, I normally could just call the people in question, and they would meet me in the entrance of the *barrio*. Later, when I felt a bit safer and knew where and when it was dangerous or not, I could take a bus into the area which left me outside their house.

## **My role as an ethnographer**

I had one main concern when I came to Venezuela: would people be reluctant to talk and trust me due to the sensitive political situation? It turned out that most people were more than happy to involve me. Many took pride in what they did and appreciated that a foreigner wanted to get to know their work. Most people understood what the intentions with my stay were<sup>19</sup> and I was often presented as the girl from Norway “who came to get to know us and the process”. By now, they are also very used to researcher and journalists coming to Venezuela to study the political and social processes, and many have been in La Dignidad.

My presence at meetings and events was soon taken for granted, and also warmly welcomed. I was told on various opportunities that they wanted me to be a channel for communicating what was really going on in Venezuela, as they know that it is crucial for them to have international sympathy. The national opposition media and foreign media, especially in the United States, are trying to discredit the political process, and grass root organizations and community groups have been labelled as “hordes” (*las hordas Chavistas*) and government militias. However, I don’t feel that my ascribed role as an “international messenger” in made them hide conflicts or problems from me. I was also told that they wanted me to make up my own mind and write both the negative and positive sides, as it would also be a help for their own political work that the negative aspects were pointed at. Gradually I also expanded my understanding of issues and dynamics in the community, and I could thus ask more direct, and perhaps more uncomfortable questions. I neither then felt that things were let out deliberately because I was a “researcher”.

My status as a young, foreign girl also influenced my role as an ethnographer. It definitively helped me with practicalities in the sense that people felt they had to protect me, and thus followed me around when I needed it and located a safe taxi for me or drove me home after dark. In relationship to the suspicions of my real intentions which will be further discussed below, I think being a young girl also made me less of a threat. However, sometimes I felt that particularly due to the combined factor of being a girl

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<sup>19</sup> Although many often initially confused anthropology with archaeology, and they didn’t really understand why I was hanging out at political meetings

and my age (25) some people didn't take me really seriously as a researcher, but nevertheless they answered my questions.

I also became friends with several of my informants, and the line between when I was "at work" and when I was just "hanging around" and "hanging out" with friends often became very blurry. Drinking beer, going to concerts or just doing nothing might not be explicitly listed as an anthropological method, but it was through this form of interactions I really felt that I got to know the field "from the inside". Numerous hours of participating and listening to conversation or up- heated discussions about politics and life in Venezuela gave me an insight and understanding of their lives and activities which no formal interviews would have revealed. I also got a valuable insight in their network and other political groups from other parts of the city, as we often when out "socializing" met "political allies" and members from a vast number of other groups or organizations in Caracas. I am however very conscious of the difference between what I know as a "friend" and what I know as an "researcher", and I am well aware of my ethical responsibility which comes along with the privilege of being that trusted and included in their lives and work.

### **Documenting the fieldwork**

Venezuelans are generally very talkative, or what they would characterize as a part of their *idiosincracia*- the Venezuelan way of being- verbal and open to strangers. It was never any problem to get a conversation going, and "everyone" had an opinion about what was going on in the country or in the community. Sometimes I used a recorder when I did un-structured interviews with someone, but mostly I carried around a notebook and wrote down the conversations as soon as I could afterwards. I limited the use of recorders for two reasons: firstly for the enormous amount of time it takes to make transcripts, and also because, as many anthropologists point out, the presence of a recorder inevitably creates a buffer between the ethnographer and the person interviewed. When I used a recorder the conversation was often more formal and "speech-like" than when I was just casually talking with people. If something sensitive came up in the conversation, I asked if I could write it down later for the thesis, so that no one felt that I was going behind their backs. I also took notes from speeches I witnessed at political meetings, or TV-programs which I found relevant for the thesis. If

it was not possible to write down conversations or descriptions of happenings there and then, I did it later at night or as soon as I could.

## **Representation, the complexity of objectivity and trust**

Within anthropology the issues of the ethnographers positionality vis-à-vis the people she or he studies, has been debated for years. While the discipline's legacy comes from a western science positivist stance, one gradually realized that not only is it an illusion to treat societies and human beings as if it was an objective truth "out there", one also realized that anthropology itself was created from a specific point of view associated with "the West".

*The history of Western philosophy, thought and science, has been characterized by a "refusal of engagement" with the other, or worse, by an "indifference" to the other- to alterity, to difference, to polyvocality, all of which are levelled out or pummelled into a form compatible with a discourse that promotes the Western Project. (Sheper-Hughes 1992:23-24)*

The question thus became how anthropology was able to bridge that gap between "us" and "the others" and how it was mediated through textualization and representations. As the global system of domination is embedded in the very discourse of difference, anthropology seeks to overcome this, which is essentially a political crisis, by a form of text through which a number of perspectives and points of view are presented (Moore 1994:117). However, the very "I" who carry out the fieldwork and the "I" who forms the text cannot escape the discourse and history through which he or she is formed. Moreover, Moore argues that the issue is also embedded in the very process of doing fieldwork itself; it is ultimately a question of the contradiction between anthropology's credo of "going native" and the fear of loosing the ethnographers self (ibid). After the discipline's soul searching about its colonial renegade, many anthropologists also felt that it was their duty and virtue to engage in the life world of the people they study and to be a medium of communication for subaltern voices, lives and perspectives in the world. As Ted Lewellen writes, what is called "action anthropology" has emerged as a result of anthropologist' confrontation with modern interpretations of power (1983:131) and he maintains that

*“Oppression” is a nice word to bandy about at cocktail parties when trying to one-up a fellow liberal; it becomes a very ugly world when brought down to the level of real people suffering hunger, real privation, and perhaps real torture and death.”*  
(*ibid*)

Although direct oppression was never a part of my fieldwork as such, it was located in a context which inevitably put me in contact with the global matrix of economic, political and military power and people’s experiences of material deprivation, violence, oppression and fear. An event which is closely described in chapter five also made me fear for my own safety in this context, and inevitably made it quite clear that “imperialism” and “oppression” undoubtedly looks different from the ground than behind a writing desk or in western journals and newspaper. It also strengthened my confidence in anthropology’s duty when studying experiences which are associated with oppression, pain and suffering to exposure the contexts of power in which it is entangled.

However, the issues of maintaining a level of analytical distance were of great importance for me. As I have myself been involved in the so-called “anti-globalization movements”, (or rather anti-neoliberal globalization movements) their ideology, argumentation and political perspectives were quite familiar, and we shared many of the same cultural, political and symbolic references. Thus, the issue of “going native” was never experienced as a large threshold. Nancy Sheper-Hughes poses a very complex question in her book *“Death without Weeping. The violence of everyday life in Brazil”*: *“Can one be anthropologist and compañera at the same time?”* (1992:23) I was indeed called *“la compañera”*, and I was worried that my inclusion and our common references could lead me into uncritically projecting my own feelings and interpretations into their life world. However, my own fear of being accused of doing political activism instead of academic work forced me to constantly scrutinize my engagements throughout the fieldwork and my own interpretation and emotional involvement in these. I also think that it was a great advantage to some point, as the resemblance between mine and their political world views also made them less “the other” and perhaps made me more capable of intuitively understanding what the interpretation and motivation behind their work and visions were.

It is also important to make the following point: there are some fields which are more difficult to get access to than others, and I think this fieldwork was made possibly by my openness about my personal attitude towards about the processes the country was going through. In case of the contrary, I think that this particular fieldwork would have been impossible, or at least a lot harder. I was dependent upon their trust in order to get access to information; their meetings, roles in the community and history. Moreover, I later suspected that in the beginning my intentions had been “tested”, especially by those who had a history of more “delicate” activities, like armed resistance in the past or during the coup in 2002. To what degree this was the case, I never fully understood. Infiltrators are a real threat for them, and they have to be careful with whom they trust. At one occasion I heard that a man whispered in the ear of one of my main informants whom had just asked him a delicate question on my behalf: “*are you sure she is not from the CIA?*” However, this is not a result of paranoia but also a real threat. Community leaders are targets for the opposition and several of my informants went in hiding and evacuated their families during the coup in 2002 as the militias of the illegally installed government of Pedro Carmona were hunting down central political leaders and broke into their houses.

## **Language**

I spoke Spanish before I came to Venezuela, and thus didn't have a need for using an interpretator. I spoke it quite well, as I had formerly lived in Spain, studied Spanish at the University of Bergen, travelled in various countries in Latin-America and studied in Chile. This level of command of the Spanish language was undoubtedly an enormous advantage. Venezuelan is one of the most distinct versions of Spanish in the region, and has a myriad of idioms, local slang and figurative expressions. It thus takes some time before you get a “gut feeling” for the local version, something which was utterly important for me as I was interested in political discourse, rhetoric and personal narratives.

## Chapter two

# Inhabiting space and social polarization

**T**hroughout this thesis I will gradually reveal how the Bolivarian Revolution is re-configuring the social, political and personal scenery of those living it. This is a complex process, played out at various fields by various actors and through various kinds of mediation and practices. Through the government's discourses and practices, new political and social space has been opened up, which people absorb, adapt and transform through their activities and social interactions, drawing on a pool of identities, experiences and narratives. New conceptions about citizenship and the state are developed and put to use through direct action. Furthermore, the political situation of conflict and polarization re-configures and shapes social and political identities. I will start this gradual un-packing by taking the reader on a journey through Caracas and into La Dignidad, where my fieldwork was conducted. My goal is to provide the reader with a glimpse of some of the layers and forms of social and political division which are found in Caracas. I will show how they are mediated through templates of class and race prejudices but also in powerful forms of "othering". In this chapter I will also explore in depth the conceptualization of life in a *barrio* and how the *barrio* and *el pueblo* which inhabits it has become a site of transformation where their roles and identities as citizens within the Bolivarian Revolution are being redefined. I will also discuss how the relationship between *el pueblo* and Chávez is being conceptualized and mediated. This journey will serve as an introduction to the subsequent empirical discussion.

### Moving through Caracas

The prosperous parts of Caracas are mainly located in the east and south-east. The magical line is roughly drawn when you have meddled your way through the long

pedestrian street Sabana Grande which is packed with street vendors.<sup>20</sup> You have then reached the middleclass neighbourhood and business centre Chacaito. If you go further east, you will come to Chacao, Country Club, Altamira and Las Mercedes<sup>21</sup>. Far away, behind high fences and private security patrols, you reach Prado del Este, where the really prosperous live. The broad streets in the business centre and prosperous neighbourhoods are quite free of street vendors; there are embassies, car shops, expensive bars and restaurants, fancy dressed people and enormous shopping malls. The largest shopping mall in South America, *Sambil*, is found here, in Chacao.

But if you stand at Chacaito and turn your face towards the other side of town to the west and south-west, you will find a number of lower-middleclass neighbourhoods. But above all, you will find *barrios*. An informant once said that there were people who had lived their whole life at the prosperous east without ever having crossed the magical Chacaito-line. They had lived on the other side of town, in their fancy shopping malls, private schools and private clubs. “*For what should they cross to the other side of town?*” Another informant said, with an ironic voice, that there were *esqualidos* who had never been to “the other side” before they participated in the opposition march which took place as a pre-text for the coup in April 2002. The march started in the east and crossed over on its way to the presidential palace. The presidential palace, the congress, the tribunals and other central state institutions are all based in the fringes of the city centre to the west, on “the other” side. This part of the city centre is packed with street vendors, apparently impenetrable traffic jams and crowds of people. At night it turns very hazardous.

To move between these two parts of the city can be done easily on the highly efficient French-designed metro which cut through the city. It takes 15 minutes and a couple of metro stops. But in many ways it is a journey between two worlds. This is nothing special for Caracas. Neo-liberal policies have resulted in increasing urban social stratification throughout the continent (Clarke and Howard 1999:312 in Gwynne and Kay (Eds)). The social, economical and cultural gap in Caracas is thus a lot wider than

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<sup>20</sup> The economic restructuring through neo-liberal policies during the last decades has resulted in a massive increase in self-employment in the informal sector throughout the continent (Clarke and Howard in Gwynne and Kay (eds) 1999)

<sup>21</sup> Though behind these eastern middle-class and upper-class neighbourhoods, you will find Petare, said to be the largest *barrio* in South-America.

the geographical. How deep rooted this division is, was illustrated by one of my main informants. He is from La Dignidad, but has a job where he works closely with upper- and middleclass people. His is thus in a position where he can reflect between the two worlds.

“They never knew anything about the living conditions of the rest of the society. They didn’t have to use public transport, because they had their own cars. They didn’t have to use the public hospitals because they had insurance at private hospitals, they didn’t have to worry about the social security because they had money. They didn’t have to worry about the insecurity, because they had to own private security companies. They knew nothing about it, and they don’t know what is really taking place here, because they don’t understand the background for what is happening. Like Chávez once said, even if we put the opposition on a pedestal covered with diamonds, they would still hate us”.

Let us elaborate further on the last part of his statement, and try to tease out a more multilayered dissection of why this polarization has arisen. Latin-American social stratifications are marked by stark differentiations along categories such as race, class, gender, sexuality and other differentiations. *[S]eparately or in combination - [these] affect the formation of subjectivity and citizens* (Radcliffe in Gwynne and Kay (eds.): 2002:203). This has been linked to the influence from the Enlightenment period, whereby personhood was declared to be “universal”. Yet so, the way these ideas were absorbed in the Latin American context, constituted an implicit normative category of the ideal citizen: “*male, white (later mestizo) and urban bourgeois*” (ibid: 204) This has been interpreted as an need to differentiate between the “European political subject” in the state building project, and the subaltern classes which could not be assimilated into the bourgeois Latin-American state, and rather were subjected to domination. Hence, the imagery of the Latin-America poor draws on deep seated racial and class-based imagery which been enforces and explicitly arisen to the surface in the conflict which has erupted in Venezuela. It can be exemplified with how Chávez has been portrayed by the opposition and in their media outlets. He has regularly been called both a monkey and an Indian (*indio*) and mocked for coming from an humble economic background and using a “popular” language. The hatred which comes to the surface from many convinced *esqualidos* is hence generated by the fact that the elites feel that they have lost power to someone who is below their standards, both the president himself and his supporters. This is how one informant commented it:

“...the upper class wasn't used to people without teeth, people of the lower classes on TV, being leaders and talking with authority. They were used to only pretty people in the public, and all of a sudden these people appear on the screen also.”

But the imagery I encountered about *Chavistas* and their life space in the *barrios* went beyond mere racism and class-based prejudices. Thorne (1997) analyses how the imperial missionaries drew on the same templates about the citizens in the poverty stricken slums in Early Industrial Britain as the “heathen savages” they had encountered in Africa. In their context it largely focused on religion: the primitive heathens had to be civilised through the word of the Bible. This was applied to the poor in the slums of England, who were in a similar manner portrayed as “uncivilized” and in need of guidance. Behind the image of the “heathen savage”, there are multiple layers of inscribed personal attributes linked to poverty and marginalization, and also wide political implications. Broch-Due shows how the imaginary of pastoral tribes in colonial Kenya was moulded as to fit and justify the displacement and transformation of people in line with colonial interests (Broch-Due 2000). These imaginaries are what she also describes as *templates*: an image or imaginary which have been build up over time through narrating structures, building upon other experiences and point of references shared between the conveyer and the audience (Broch-Due 2000:36-37) However, templates are not static, given or one-dimensional, it emerges from other layers of meanings, mediations and relationships of power: “*which narrative gets picked up, which truth claims are conveyed, and which genre of evidence is evoked depend largely on its location in the wider economy*”(ibid). Thus, templates representing “the others” have been created in the Western imaginary since the days of colonialization and imperialism. In this context it is not my intent to compare the poor in the *barrios* of Caracas directly with the poor in need of guidance in England or in African colonies. Rather, it is to show how images about “the poor” historically draw on imagery of wildness and “a lack of civilization”. I will suggest that templates about the poor in Latin-America represent a multi-layered imagery which draws on Western representations of “poor” and “poverty” but has been moulded in the continents’ particular colonial history and political economy, which was indicated above as cast in terms of class and race. The imagery of the dominant classes’ perceptions of the poor portrays them and hence their life space as something uncivilised, unruly and chaotic. Allow me to broaden this argument:

Above all, the *barrios* are considered as very dangerous, even for those who do not come from the higher classes. At first it surprised me. After all, the city is dominated by *barrios*, and I thought that most people had a friend or a family member there. But to my great surprise, over and over again I was met with shock and awe when I said that I was spending time in La Dignidad. There were even taxi drivers who would not drive me further than to the entrance of the *barrio*, even in broad day light. Emphasizing that I wasn't going very far and that if he didn't drive me I would have to walk as I had done before, didn't calm them. I was told over and over again that it was extremely dangerous. I will not try to underestimate the criminal statistics in Caracas, which is one of the highest in the world. But the fear of the *barrios* which I repeatedly encountered, seemed to have another dimension than the purely rational calculation of possibilities of getting mugged, or at worst, killed.

It was an unruly, wild dangerousness I was portrayed, merging with an imagery of an area inhabited by uncivilized and dangerous people. An illustrative example is the opposition medias' description of Chávez' supporters as the *Chavista*-hordes (*las hordas Chavista*). An informant told me with great irony that when the opposition held demonstrations or marches, the media reported that it was the "civil society" which held peaceful demonstrations. When Chavistas held manifestations, the media reported that it was the *hordas chavistas* which flooded the streets. Furthermore, before I was settled in La Dignidad, I was told by middleclass acquaintances that I was not going to understand what they said to me in a *barrio*. They had no education, I was told. They could not speak proper Spanish. They used a poor and vulgar language. One person encouraged me to bring an intermediary, because they would not understand my questions when I tried to ask them "sociological" questions. I had to, at least, make easy, simple questions (like to a child, she could have added).

The people who offered me these "advices" are obviously far from representable for all middle class citizens. But one point should be made. These persons are all convinced *esqualidos*. In these simple statements the social and psychological gap which has caused such a polarization between *chavistas* and *esqualidos* can be encountered.

Coronil (2004:1) argues that the polarization in Venezuela can be represented by two caricatures. The oppositions' view can be synthesized by the phrase "before we were civilized" They hold that even though everything wasn't perfect before, the institutions and the system was respected and they felt represented by elegant politicians and their refined diction and rhetoric (ibid: 2). In a striking similarity to the templates emerging from colonial Africa above, also pointed out by Coronil, he cites general Gonzalo Barrios, who under *El Caracazo* in 1989 said that the state oppression and massive violence was necessary because they had to defend "civilisation" against "barbarism". Hence, from this perspective, the current Venezuela encompasses a "*savage creature of a systematic violation of institutionality, both in its formal and informal aspects*" (ibid: 4).<sup>22</sup>

The opposite point of view, however, can be synthesized by the phrase "Now we are revolutionaries". This perspective holds that even though the system does not always work in a normative regular institutionality, the government has put the state system to the service of the people- in opposite to the decadent, degenerated previous system. They now feel represented by their political leaders due to their popular appearance, language and rhetoric which resembles that of *el pueblo*. It is the current process which is basically a civilized process, because it allows for the evolvement of a real political system and a new social order, though mistakes are made under way (ibid: 6-7). Coronil thus illustrate what was discussed above: the colonial dichotomy between "civilization" and "barbarism" finds its way into the current political discourse in Venezuela, but he also reminds us of that it is employed by both sides. It is an interesting reminder, because it says something about the identity of Chavistas and how they portray "the others". As noted in the Introduction-part, the opposition is called *los esqualidos* -the squalid ones. This stands in contrast to *el pueblo*, whose noble qualities are invoked by the often used phrase *el pueblo humilde*- "the humble people." Through the suffering and hardships they have gone through, *el pueblo* has embodied a moral and human capital which is now evoked and put to use through the Bolivarian Revolution. Similarly, it is *el pueblo* which embodies "Venezuelan-ness" and is the vanguard for defending what is Venezuelan dignity, while *los esqualidos* have lost their own identity

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<sup>22</sup> "La V. Republica es vista, desde esta perspectiva, como el engendro salvaje de una violación sistemática de la institucionalidad, tanto en sus aspectos formales como informales." My translation from Spanish.

and patriotism in their quest for getting incorporated in the Western world [the United States]. *Los esqualidos* lack moral qualities; they are corrupt, violent and without human qualities of solidarity and justice. Looking at the facts of recent political history, there is undoubtedly reason to put a question mark with the democratic inclinations of parts of the opposition. Yet so, not distinguishing between the actual perpetrators and supporters of illegal and illegitimate actions and adversaries of the current government as such, the *Chavistas* creates a generalized template of *esqualidos* which is mirrored as the opponent to their novelty and moral compass. However, I do not intend to parallel the two as identical mirrors, as that would be to obscure the more deep rooted templates which the opposition draws on (which also has to do with power in a wider political economy). As we have seen, the historical background of racial and class-based prejudices creates a particular multilayered imagery through which templates drawing on poverty and savagery merge, and through which the *barrios* and the inhabitants are portrayed as inferior people without legitimate agency.

### **Political polarization -between whom?**

But it can be fruitful to explore if the conflicts is as clear cut class based as one can get the impression of. The government also has many middle-class supporters.<sup>23</sup> I encountered a number of middle class people who said that they and their social surroundings had gradually realized that the government's policies benefited them as well economically. Many also pointed out that they realized that it was vital for the safety and stability for the nation as a whole to lift the lower classes out of poverty. A middle class government supporter I met in a march said that his whole family, including his elderly mother and father who had a small business of computer technology "had started to live again". He, and other I encountered as well, argued that the former governments had squeezed the small businesses and middle class educational and employment opportunities. Interestingly, he also expressed great satisfaction in transcending class boundaries "downwards". What he meant was that a whole new social world of interaction and communication opened up when he and his fellows could engage in a political sphere which included also lower classes- which they hadn't had any reason to identify and interact with before. This demonstrates that although

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<sup>23</sup> They have formed their own organization: "Clase Media en Positivo"- The Positive Middleclass. It might be seen as an expression of not wanting to being associated with the Chávez-supporters from the *barrios*, and thus having a need for maintaining a class-separation.

most analysts point to the class based social polarization which has erupted in Venezuela, the Bolivarian Revolution also has created a new “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) which transcends class boundaries, and also diminishes social-psychological gaps. But the question of polarization must also be viewed in the perspective of who’s having interest in sustaining political polarization. The media is clearly the main factor behind creating this image of a country torn apart by social polarization, both nationally and internationally. An informant from a radical political organization in La Dignidad discussed it in this way:

“There is not a political division, because remember that the minority, the opposition, has control over the media. Like on Saturday when the majority marched (the 4<sup>th</sup> of February as described in the outset of the thesis), we were one, one and a half million people, and on the other side, their march didn’t even reach two, three thousand. But what is happening in this country is that the minority, which have always been a minority, which always have been the 10-15 percent of the privileged, have always controlled the resources. They controlled the oil, the media. And they are making a smoke screen through which they make Venezuela or the entire world to think that there is a political division. But that’s false! There is no political division; there is only a minority which are using the power they have over media. They are very few, but they are trying to sell it to the rest of the world. They are doing this in order to try to cling to what they have left of control, as if it was ever legitimate. It wasn’t legitimate, what is legitimate is that the people as a whole get better living conditions (...) It was just that poor people before, in the 4th republic, didn’t have media, nor the economic resources to tell the world that there was a real political division. Now, see how this situation has been turned upside down. Now there is no political division. It is the majority which controls the places (*espacios*) and the minority which sells the thing (*venden la vaina*).

Thus, from this informant’s perspective, the conflict in Venezuela is between a small group of the opposition, and the great majority represented by the government. In the population as such, the conflict is not an issue.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> At the time of the writing of this thesis, polls show that 57 % intends to vote for Chávez in the December elections (his approval rate reaches 78%), while the opposition candidates have 3% (Julio Borges, Primera Justicia), 3.2 % (Manuel Rosales, currently governor in the Zulia state) and 1.8 % (Teodoro Petkoff, independent). See: <http://www.prensalatina.com.mx/article.asp?ID=%7B912EE50C-215D-4303-9332-0119FE354658%7D>

## Entering La Dignidad

La Dignidad is a relatively small *barrio* in comparison with some of the other *barrios* in Caracas and is located somewhere on the southern side<sup>25</sup>. The community number approximately 300 000 people. An exact number has been impossible to identify, as a census hasn't been done since 2005 and a proper system for registering the population isn't in place. Throughout the past decades it has hosted many migrants from inland Venezuela, and the *barrio* has gradually expanded. La Dignidad now consists of 75 zones.<sup>26</sup>

Once settled in a *barrio*, one encounters that a *barrio* is far from economically and socially homogenous. La Dignidad is roughly divided into the high part, the middle part and the low part. Many of the *barrios* in Caracas are located in the hillsides, and the (relatively speaking) more well off neighbourhoods are situated in the lower and middle part. As the higher parts of the valley are more vulnerable to landslides (many people die because of this every year), this is most often the zone where the poorest inhabitants live in shacks of cartoon and corrugated iron. These zones are referred to as “*los cerros*”- the mountains. In the community one also finds some of the large block houses which dictator Pérez Jiménez built for the working class in different parts of Caracas. These blocks are covered with bullet holes as a reminder of *El Caracazo* in 1989. There are a number of broader streets cutting through the *barrio*, where the houses and services sometimes have relatively better standards. The more precariously build houses are located in the *cerros* and in the zones which often are referred to as *las escaleras* - the stairs. These are narrow paths and steep stairs cross-cutting the uncontrolled housing constructions which have emerged over time. These zones are more dangerous than the broader streets in the lower parts. Crime is generally a big problem in the *barrios*. Violence, killing and robberies carried out by gangs, but also rivalry between gangs, often combined with drug trafficking is pointed at as the biggest problems. An informant told me that in his neighbourhood rivaling gangs had practically exterminated each other during the past two years, and that thus problems of violence had been substantially reduced.

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<sup>25</sup> Due to anonymity I cannot be more specific

<sup>26</sup> Number obtained from interview with the leader of the Parrish Authorities

## El malandro and el pueblo

The popular word for someone living in a *barrio* is *malandro*. Its basic meaning is something like a bad guy/crook/ thief, but it is also an ascription of a *barrio*-identity, both self-ascribed and assigned by others. Though it still also refers to someone engaged in criminal activities within a given context, it is also describing a person who knows and can manage life in a *barrio*, or with another word, someone who is “street wise”, manages the social codes and manages the spaces. In this way, also I was teased for being a *malandra* as I got a grip on the *barrio* slang and got inside of the everyday life there. However, as I understood it, the sense of pride in its ascription has been transformed in the course of the very re-definition as a whole of the identity and the social positioning of *el pueblo* and the citizens of a *barrio*.

The Bolivarian Revolution somehow gravitates out from the *barrios*. In popular discourse, it is the inhabitants and their spaces in the *barrios* which has become a symbol for the transformation of the citizenry and the very defence of the Bolivarian Revolution. This point can be illustrated by a popular song which is performed by a group within the Bolivarian movement. It is frequently played at political events, also official ones. It is thus also a symbolism which is mediated by the *officialismo*.

An short explanation about the lyric: As mentioned in the outset of this section, a great part of the *barrios* in Caracas are located in the precarious hillsides, and it has thus led to a linguistic phenomenon as well: the word “*bajaron*” is used in everyday speech, political agitation or songs, which literally means “they came down”. This song refers to when the inhabitants from the *barrios* travelled from their hillsides “down” into the city centre to reinstall Chávez during the brief coup in 2002:

“...and they came down, with their flag and their consciousness  
...they came down to defend their will against the fascists and the  
traitors  
...they came down  
...they came down, the soldier and the people- one being  
...they came down armed with the Constitution, the came down for  
you, for me, for those who were despised  
...they came down, they gathered and they stayed  
...it’s a proof of love, a noble and fighting people, for Venezuela and its  
honour

...they go into the fight with compassion, to save Hugo Chávez Frías with novelty, the commander of the nation  
...uhh, ahh, Chávez is not leaving”<sup>27</sup>

What is invoked here is the identity of *el pueblo* as a powerful mass-movement with capacities to defend and stand up for their rights when they act together. A narrative about the brave resistance and hardships of *el pueblo* has been build up throughout years. Each collective mobilization they have taken part of: *el Caracazo*, the victory of Chávez, the coup, the oil sabotage, other incidents of clashes with the opposition, the mobilization for the recall-referendum, is building up and strengthening this imagery and identity. Many also said that the opposition and the United States had failed with their plans to topple the government because they didn't know anything about the people in the *barrios* and their life there and they had underestimated the unity and strength *el pueblo* could draw on. One man in La Dignidad told me this:

“They don't understand what solidarity which is generated in a *barrio*. We help each other with food, with gas...*los esqualidos* might be born in Venezuela, but they don't understand the way of being (*la idiosincracia*) of people in the *barrio*. We have lived in solidarity all the time. They make plans to stop the process, with the United States, but they don't understand what it is like.”

The citizens in La Dignidad are very proud of belonging to the community, and its history as a combative neighbourhood gives it a status as a site for political activity. An informant told about this history like this.

“La Dignidad” has a long history of battle. More that 23 de Enero, but 23 de Enero is world famous, you know<sup>28</sup>. When they tried to start *guarimbas*<sup>29</sup> here, they didn't make it. They took Katia, they took 23 de Enero, they took Petare, but they never achieved to take La Dignidad.

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<sup>27</sup> *Y bajaron, con su bandera y su conciencia...bajaron a defender su voluntad...bajaron contra el facista y el traidor...bajaron...y bajaron soldado y pueblo un solo ser...bajaron armados de constitucion, bajaron...por tu, por mi, por los que depreciaron...y bajaron, y se encontraron y se quedaron, en una una prueba de amor, el pueblo noble y luchador, por Venezuela y por su honor, se van a combate con fervor, a rescatar con hidalgia, a Hugo Chávez Frias, el commandante de la nacion...uhh, ahh Chávez no se va”* (From the album *Lloviznando Cantos* by the group “Lloviznando Cantos”, lyrics by Barba Alvarez) My translation from Spanish.

<sup>28</sup> 23 de Enero is a historical combative neighbourhood in Caracas, wherefrom a lot of the resistance against dictator Pérez Jiménez was organized. It has been the “hotbed” for militancy ever since

<sup>29</sup> “Guarimba” refers to a wave of violence incited by opposition militants in February 2004. It started in middle class neighbourhood Altamira, where they blocked roads, burned tires and denied people to go out on the streets. They later tried to spread it across the city. It led to shooting and some wounded.

Perhaps we are fewer than in 23 de Enero, but we knew each other better and were better organized. Many of our friends fell (in battle), but we didn't run away. When someone fell, someone else stepped in his place.”

Hence, to live in a *barrio* is a life style and a way of interaction to which people feel a strong identification and pride. A middle aged woman from la Dignidad talked about the need for consolidating the social work in the community in order to improve their livelihood there. “*The reality in the barrio is very beautiful (bonito), even if the people say it is very dangerous (peligrosísimo). It is a lot of crime, which is not nice. But we are all in a family, we all know each other*”. She said that they wanted to live in the *barrio*, but they wanted to live there with dignity. Many expressed this internal solidarity, and it was my impression that the recent years events have led to a further consolidation. Many of the informants accounted that during the oil sabotage in 2002/2003, the shops ran out of food. The local community then gathered whatever food they had and arranged communal cooking.

### **El pueblo and Chávez**

Chávez comes from a humble background, being the child of two teachers in the small village Sabaneta in the inland Barinas state. Like many other men from poor background, the military was one of the few possibilities for upwards mobility and he enrolled at the age of 17. Besides his military career, he also holds a Master in Political Science. His skills in communication and pedagogy are striking and he gets to exercise this weekly through his television program at Sunday afternoons, *Aló Presidente*. The programs are normally an intensive lecture in history, politics, government expenditure and plans, foreign policy and ideological tutoring, interrupted by a popular folk song (sometimes performed by himself), a poem, an anecdote, a joke and readings from articles or books. The programs are either shot in the presidential palace or somewhere around the country where a local audience is invited and engaged in conversations with the president. The interaction between “people like themselves” and the president evoke a sense of two-way communication between him and the spectators. Hellinger<sup>30</sup> quotes anthropologist Hernández Oduber who has lived in *barrios* for years:

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<sup>30</sup> Forthcoming, Stockholm Review of Latin American Studies. Permission to quote obtained from the author

*Who among the majority supporting Chávez does not feel the right and possibility of attended by him personally- even knowing that it is impossible? If we compare the distance between the masses and the political leaders of yesterday with the closeness they feel to the president and their loyalty today, we can see the difference (Hernández Oduber 2002, cited in Hellinger 2006).*

Furthermore, Hellinger quotes a priest who has been living in Caracas barrio for years: “*what is important is not what he speaks but what speaks inside him. In him speaks the convivial relations of popular Venezuela, of convivial man [...]*” (Moreno 1997, cited in *ibid*). This can be eloquently illustrated by the words of one middle aged woman from La Dignidad. She told me about when he had visited the neighbourhood a couple of years ago:

“Before we never saw any presidents here, they just came for doing campaigns and we never saw them again. But now Chávez has been here in La Dignidad 3 times. He meets with the people, drinks a little coffee (*cafecito*), asks for water, no? He is just like any other person here. For him we are all the same. He doesn’t care if you are rich or poor, female or male, black or white. We are all equal for him. And he is one of us.”

The imagery he invokes around himself is similar to that of the identity of *el pueblo*. The language he uses- slang and figurative expressions are often those found in among the popular classes. Hellinger maintains that while the elite criticizes the familiarity in Chávez language and ascribes it to “populism”, the majority perceive this way of talking as the language of the defender of the excluded (*ibid*: 4). A woman addressed the integrative character between him and the people, saying that “*it takes long time to develop a president like Chávez. He is not the president who became elected in 1998; he has grown with us and the process*”. She thus indicated that he, like them, had learned and been refined throughout the course of the Bolivarian Process, and that it was a mutually constitutive process of interaction and advancement. However, parallel with this identification of him as “one of us”, there is also an imagery around him which gives association to a “guiding father”. An “urban myth” (which might be true for all I know) about him is that he sometimes dresses up as a street dwellers and walks around in disguise in the city to see how “his people” are doing. Another woman told me that

*“Chávez is like a mother, when he goes to bed he thinks about if his people have eaten today”.*

However, according to my own experiences, the relationship people hold with Chávez is far more nuanced than the perspectives held by conservative journalists and intellectuals who attribute his popularity to demagogic populism. Most people have a very conscious relationship of the danger of letting the political process hinge on the charismatic qualities of Chávez and the history of populism and *caudillismo* in Latin American politics are factors they are well aware of. *Caudillismo* is a political tradition which dates back to colonial times, when governing was centred in weak and inefficient councils by *mestizos*, descendants from the Spaniards. The governing councils were centred on charismatic “men on horseback”, - *caudillos*- who could attract followers. These personalised and fragile forms of power and control continued also after independence. This can to a large degree explain why “the state” as a legitimate institution of power per se is weak in Latin-America (Lewellen 1983:79, Hillman 1994:22) and rather has hinged on charismatic populists in various political shades. The tradition for *caudillismo* has deep historical roots in Venezuela, and up till 1959 law and order was imposed on regional scare by rivalling regional *caudillos* by regimes struggling for unification of the country hinging on strong centralized leadership on the national level (Hillmann 1994:59)

Chávez undoubtedly capitalizes on these historical sentiments, and as Hellinger notes, the use of the three icons of the Bolivarian revolution, Bolivar, Rodriguez and Zamorra, also evokes these imageries (Hellinger: 8). As Hillman maintains: *“the idea that a heroic “strongman on horseback” can create stability, establish order and through personal rule preside over national prosperity is a legacy that continues to prevail in Latin America. (ibid: 60)* It is however important to understand that his popularity goes beyond the imagery of “the strong man”. Through him; his “racial” appearance and firm advocacy for “a new world order” on the international arena, people feel that their identities, political perspectives and historical interpretations are represented. Let us consider the worlds of a woman from La Dignidad:

“Last week, the speech Chávez gave in the United Nation in New York<sup>31</sup>, I felt very, very proud of being a Venezuelan. Now we are not an underdeveloped country, now we are not a country of Indians for the big powers. [...] I felt proud of being Venezuelan, not in a bad way [negative nationalism], but for all countries in our situation [underdeveloped countries]. The speech was a bomb, and it is a war, no? But Chávez wants peace. We will achieve this.”

This is a very telling quote which eloquently conveys a wider number of aspects which people feel that Chávez is representing. Resistance towards historical racial injustice and a rejection of the colonial and imperial subordination are invoked, as well as the international context people feel that Venezuela is a part of, in relation to the Western subordination of the “Third World”. A middle-class supporter I met in a march once said almost the same: “*he [Chávez] is revindicating all the Venezuelans, all Latin-Americans, and all countries in the Third World, in Africa; everyone who have been beaten up (golpeado) by imperialism, by the United States, by all the countries in the North*”.

However, people take great effort in emphasizing that the Bolivarian Process is not Chávez’ process, although they recognize his charismatic and strong-hand figure. It is frequently said at meetings and in conversations that Chávez leads the process at the moment, and was the catalyst for creating a political force. But similarly a central issue for debate is that the process emerges from, and must be developed, through *el pueblo*. An informant commented it like this:

- And do you identify yourself as *chavista*?
- Look, this is very difficult, and there are people who don’t understand this. Chávez is the leader of the revolution. But I think that what is happening now is a current (*corriente*), and if it is a current, the people has to work when the leaders isn’t there [anymore]
- How?
- By working, first and foremost. And teach people that we cannot stay in the *chavismo*-current. But I want to say that I love my leader, Chávez. And in that sense, yes, I am a *Chavista*. But I think that in this current one has to strengthen the revolutionary process. Continue with the leader until 2021, yes, but to strengthen the current.

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<sup>31</sup> The United Nations 60<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in September 2005. For the whole speech, see: <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/articles.php?artno=1555>

What this woman says is very representative for the discussions which are recurrent at meetings and conversations. This is closely related to the quest for political and cultural autonomy vis-à-vis the state at large which will be discussed at length further on. Contesting the idea of a representative democracy, there is a conscious denial of being “represented” neither by the government nor by the state. This also includes the process of developing a revolution which will survive Chávez.

In this chapter I have tried to provide the reader with a portrait of the social and political polarization which is found in Venezuela, with a particularly focus on Caracas, rooted in the continents’ historical trajectories of racial and class-based hierarchy and dominance. Simultaneously, I have tried to tease out an a imagery of how life in a *barrio* and an identity as a part of *el pueblo* is conceptualized and transformed into an collective political identity which is mobilized within the contemporary political context. I have also tried to draw lines between historical political culture at the continent, and the relationship between Hugo Chávez and those who support his government, while simultaneously discussed the wider political context his support is rooted in. The following chapter will seek to explore in depth how the Bolivarian Revolution unfolds in every day life in La Dignidad.

## Chapter three

# Combating poverty and marginalization: Constructing community from below

This chapter will explore different, but interlinked fields of investigation through offering a comprehensive elaboration on how community work is organized and conceptualized in La Dignidad. Community work is carried out on various arenas and in different organizations. In 2003, Chávez launched a series of social “Missions”- *Misiones*<sup>32</sup>, which would be implemented and organized by community organizations in cooperation with the state. The *misiones* were perceived to be an “act of emergency” and in his discourse he stressed that the state had a “social debt” to the citizens after decades of neglect.<sup>33</sup> As the state bureaucracy was commonly perceived as corrupt and inefficient, the *misiones* were to be implemented outside the bureaucratic institutions and through a parallel budget<sup>34</sup>. In addition to the *misiones*, there have also been formed a number of other organizations, which will be further described below.

Within this framework I am particularly interested in exploring whether the “model of development”, reflected in the work of the *misiones* and the other organizations can be interpreted as a shift away from dominant political currents throughout the past decades which have sought to diminish the role of the state in providing a safety net for the citizens. This entails a comparison between “neo-liberal” views upon society which the

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<sup>32</sup> Chávez enjoys using a biblical language, and the word “*Misión*” in this context should be interpreted as something reminiscent of “a crusade against poverty”. The word evokes a sense of urgency and “holy cause” which fits well with the overall political discourse.

<sup>33</sup> , His words where: “the *misiones* are an extraordinary effort to cancel the social debt, which no government has ever attended. We are going to continue to expand and deepen (*profundizánodolas*) them, and above all create a new institutionality; the new social State of rights and justice.” *Las Misiones Bolivarianas*”. Ministry of Communication and Information. July 2005. My translation from Spanish

<sup>34</sup> The resources for financing the Missions are provided by the state oil company PDVSA, over which the government had seized control when the former top executives, who had mainly run the company as a private enterprise, was fired in 2003 after the oil sabotage.

Bolivarian Revolution explicitly seeks to replace with a “social State of justice”, as the discourse goes<sup>35</sup>. I will seek to tease out where the two visions of society diverge; through what practices, discourses and policies, but also where they intersect.

As I have sought to elucidate, the Bolivarian Revolution is more than a set of new policies. It also entails an endeavour for envisioning a new kind of society; build on other values than those they experience that the neo-liberal social order provided. I will suggest that it is important to pay attention to the vision, or imagery, which is the inspiration and driving force behind the work they perform on different arenas and in different settings. I will go on showing how every day work, however minute, mundane and intricate, as everyday life always is, can be read as a “thick” text, to paraphrase Clifford Geertz concept of “thick description”<sup>36</sup>. Indeed, I suggest that it can be analysed as social and political commentaries, which comprise a wide array of discourses and practices, both emerging from the local community and on a global scale. These commentaries emerging from the arena of everyday living entail a contestation of how “Development” is used in conventional political discourse and put to use through development schemes in the so-called Third World. Together they conjure a struggle for escaping poverty in a material sense, but it also entails a contestation of how “the poor” and “poverty” has been used as excluding label throughout history, enmeshed in a moral discourse which have attributed poverty to the “poor’s” own failures to escape their misery. Moreover, the Bolivarian Revolution entails a commentary of how exclusion, in the Venezuelan context where not only material inequality was cemented, but also racial and class based prejudices towards “the poor”, was experienced and is now powerfully contested.

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<sup>35</sup> To provide a further glimpse of the discourse the Bolivarian Revolution is enmeshed in, I offer another quotation from Chávez: “The *misiones* are fundamental components of the new social State of rights and justice. Those who were excluded are now included, together with everyone; studying, capacitating themselves, organizing themselves, working with a new culture, with a new consciousness. Because the *Misiones* are generating a new reality, including in the cultural aspect, the physiological aspect, the ideological aspect and the philosophical aspect, besides from the concrete reality and practices they are generating: in the social, in the economical, in the educational”. “Las Misiones Bolivarianas” Ministry of Communication and Information. July 2005. My translation from Spanish.

<sup>36</sup> Geertz argues that the aim of anthropology is to go beyond the universe of human discourse, and look at how it is manifested and interpreted in a social context. “Culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institution, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly –that is, thickly- described” (Geertz 1973:14)

It is a broad field I seek to investigate, and the scope of the thesis puts limits on how far I can venture into this very complex and complicated terrain. But it is my belief that if we are able, if only partially, to draw a link between these different aspects and perspectives, we can more fully understand the wider context, historical and political; the popular movements in la Dignidad inevitable are a part of.

The chapter will continue with an outlay of the political and historical background I find required for proceeding with this discussion. I will also provide an analysis of how templates like “poverty” and “development” are enmeshed in a wider discursive political economy. Subsequently, I will provide a throughout outlay of how social and political work is carried out and conceptualized in la Dignidad. I will then seek to draw the lines and identify linkages between the different analytical and theoretical aspects I seek to address.

### **Re-shaping Latin America economy**

The process of restructuring Latin-American society and economy within the neo-liberal paradigm emerged in the wake of the debt-crisis in the early 1980s.<sup>37</sup> The period from 1930 and up till then was characterized by a large degree of state involvement in the economy and the promotion of industrialisation and import-substitutions as an attempt to reduce dependency to the wider world economy. Even though multinational institutions and national elites had pushed for free-market politics prior to the debt-crisis, there was not enough political support for it nationally. However, the debt burden left governments with no choice but to succumb to the demands of its creditors, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. This also took place simultaneously with a global paradigmatic and ideological shift away from Keynesian politics which encouraged wide state involvement in economic management and social policies. The move then turned towards free-market politics, emerging from powerful struggles amongst social, economical and political forces across the world (Gwynne and Kay 2002:3) which sought to diminish regulations for economic management and promote a “globalized” world economy.

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<sup>37</sup> This crisis was unleashed in 1982 when Mexico declared that it was incapable of paying back their debts.

Throughout the 1980, economic reforms, including monetary and exchange control, privatization of public enterprises and government services, reduction of imports and opening up to the world market were vigorously implemented across the continent (Escobar 1995:57) This unleashed what is in Latin America called “the lost decade”; an economic and social crisis by many considered as the worst crisis at the continent throughout the century (ibid: 9). As the continent entered the 1990s, economic volatility was gradually stabilized through strict control with macro-economic indicators. The faith in neo-liberal polices was by then institutionalized and new rounds of further free-market policies followed.

As the crisis of the “lost decade” was overcome and democratically elected government was reinstalled across the continent after decades of shifting authoritarian rule, one hoped to see a start of a new era for the continent. Rather, as Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar (1998) maintains:

*“Unprecedented levels of violence, poverty, discrimination, and exclusion would seem to indicate that the “performance” and indeed the very design of Latin-Americas “new” democracies are far from satisfactory (Ibid: 1)*

Corruption and crumbling social and economic conditions across the region has generated a crisis of legitimacy for the democratic system at large. (Garavito, Barret and Chávez 2005:47) Thus, the revival of the new left in Latin America during the past years has been centred on the articulation of alternatives to neo-liberalism and a democratisation of politics and society at large.<sup>38</sup> There has also been an escalating opposition against the US-promoted Free Trade Agreement, ALCA<sup>39</sup>, and a focus on the importance of re-gaining control over national resources and other key assets. The Venezuelan governments’ measures to secure control over the oil industry, and lately, the Bolivian governments’ strategy to do the same in the gas-sector have been decisive steps in this direction. It has, however, been harshly criticized by international business

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<sup>38</sup> For a throughout analysis of the New Left across the continent, see Garavito, Barret and Chávez (eds) 2004.

<sup>39</sup> Area de Libre Comercio de las Americas/Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) in English

sectors and conservatives.<sup>40</sup> The policies directed towards the incorporation of Latin-America into the wider world economy have however produced even larger income disparity between the continent and the world's economic centres, and has lead to a massive capital flight. US-banks and multinational corporations enjoyed 1 trillion USD in profits, interest payments and royalties from Latin-America from 1990 to 2002<sup>41</sup>. This is due to the massive privatisation of banks, former state companies and natural resources following the demands of the IMF and the World Bank. Whereas the difference between the income between the five core economies in the world and the six poorest countries in Latin America had a ratio 1:12 in 1978, the asymmetry had grown to 1:30 in 1995 (Gwynne and Kay 2002: 5) The United Nations Development Program estimates that there are now 222 million people classified as poor at the continent.<sup>42</sup>

### **Combating poverty through participation**

The effects of neo-liberal reforms have created a negative cycle through which poverty is produced and perpetuated. Factors such as large-scale unemployment-and underemployment and privatization of services such as health, education and pensions lead to a situation where many find it impossible to make the ends meet, and poverty is re-produced to the next generation. Within the field of research on poverty, there is a widespread consensus about the crucial role attributed to the state in dealing with the problems of poverty and create better conditions for economic and social inclusion (Dean, Cimadamore and Siqueira 2002:16). Yet so, the political and fiscal possibilities seems quite limited, and particularly in the South, where vested interests, both national and international, has an interests in sustaining the politics which inevitably produce poverty (Wilson 2001, cited in *ibid*: 17). Simultaneously, neo-liberal restructuring has also entailed a radical shift in envisioning the role of the state. Instead of viewing the state as an instrument for the creation of a safety net for the citizens, the focus is directed towards “good governance”, ensuring transparency and efficiency, and strict control with macro-economic indicators.

In Latin America, as in other “Third World” countries, combating poverty and promoting “development” has been increasingly left in the hands of NGOs and

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<sup>40</sup> See i.e. “Why Resource Nationalism is Bad for You”. The Economist May 6, 2006. [http://economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=E1\\_GRRNGGS](http://economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=E1_GRRNGGS)

<sup>41</sup> [www.venezuelaanalysis.com/articles.php?artno=1699](http://www.venezuelaanalysis.com/articles.php?artno=1699)

<sup>42</sup> <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/13053775/site/newsweek/>

voluntary work. Additionally; gradually acknowledging throughout the past decades the correlation between structural adjustments and widespread poverty, the IMF and the World Bank have during the past years developed poverty reduction schemes jointly with the debtor country in order to facilitate decentralization and more efficient spending of the social budgets through poverty reduction schemes, since 1999 called Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP). This forms part of the World Banks response to meet the UNDPs Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The goal is to half extreme poverty and hunger by 2015 (McNeish 2005) The programs stress participations and political decentralization as a means for drawing the population into decision-making processes, but they have been increasingly criticised for being inadequate both with regards to combating poverty and providing a real process of democratisation (see i.e. Cooke and Kothari (eds.) 2001, McNeish 2001, 2006).

The participative approach in the PRSPs has its roots in the 1980s, when it became increasingly evident that top-down development approaches, where the “poor” themselves was let out of the discussion regarding how poverty could be combated, was inefficient and inadequate (Cooke and Kothari 2001:5) The World Bank started advocating for “adjustment with a human face” (Stiefel and Wolfe 1994, cited in McNeish 2001:36). Development schemes incorporated participatory approaches which stressed the lack of “human” and “social” dimensions in conventional planning methods (Francis 2001:72). Simultaneously, they continued stressing the importance of a “slim” state which put emphasis on the family and communities role in ensuring the provision of welfare services which responsibility was formerly ascribed to the state. (McNeish 2001:38)

“The new development agenda” (Molyneux 2002:171), emphasised participation which promoted processes of empowerment and democratization. Concepts such as “participation”, “empowerment”, “bottom-up planning” and “indigenous knowledge” began entering the development discourse, (Henkel and Stirrat 2001:168) shifting the focus from instrumental approaches to “sensitive” joint projects between the donors and the local community. “Peoples knowledge” became a buzzword, attempting to raise questions about the relationship between expert knowledge and locally based knowledge (Mohan 2001:158) and through this “level the playing field” between external experts and the local population in the development and implementation of

projects. But rather, as critical scholars maintain, “[it] serves to conceal the complex nature of information production in the “participatory” planning, especially the role of outsiders” (Mosse 2001:23).

Participative approaches to development programs are often enmeshed in a discourse where the necessity to “empower the poor” is highlighted. This concept is however contested amongst critical scholars. Cleaver (2001) argues that the problem with the concept “empowerment” is its technical use, which leaves it unclear whom, and for what purposes people shall be empowered, and what this implies. “Empowerment” within a radical discourse is associated with both individual and class-action which seeks to alter structures of subordination inherent in the society at large (ibid: 7). The transformatory potential in the concept is negated, or undermined, when employed within an inherent de-politicised discourse which approaches poverty and societal exclusion as an isolated problem, cut loose from structural mechanisms which generate more poverty and exclusion. Henkel and Stirrat have suggested that “empowerment” might in fact be very similar to what Foucault calls “subjection” (Foucault 1980):

*“They are being empowered to be elements in the great projects of the “modern”: as citizens of the institution of the modern state; as consumers in the increasingly global market; as responsible patients in the health system, as ration farmers increasing GNP, as participants in the labour market and so on. (Henkel and Stirrat 2001:182)*

Social differences are recognized through general categorizations such as “women”, “farmers”, “leaders” and “the poor” (ibid:47) but through conveying a “sensitive” surface, the linkages between social structures and individuals becomes obscured. Poverty becomes “problem solving”, and not a question about societal change (Cleaver 2001.53).

*By uncompromisingly reduction poverty to a technical problem, and by promising technical solutions to the sufferings of powerless and oppressed people, the hegemonic problematic of “development” is the principal means through which the question of poverty is de-politicised in the world today. (Ferguson 1994: 256)*

Several scholars have analysed the development discourse from a Foucaultian standpoint, which interprets the discourse of participation as part of a wider power-regime (See i.e. Gardener and Lewis 1996, Kothari 2001). Arturo Escobar traces the emergence of “development” as a technical-political concept which emerged in the wake of the 2nd World War. Through drawing on insights emerging from Foucault on how power and discourse shapes our perception of social reality, he argues that “development” gradually became a hegemonic framework for separating between “underdeveloped Third World” countries and “developed First World” countries. Mass-poverty on a global scale was discovered in Asia, Africa and Latin-America, and that the solution was economic growth and development as defined by the western word became “*self-evident, necessary and universal truths*” (Escobar 1995:24) Underdeveloped countries thus became an area of intervention which is identified, scrutinized, classified and ultimately, developed and modernized “[*The concept of development*] has created an extremely efficient apparatus for producing knowledge about, and the exercise of power over, the Third World” (Escobar 1995:9). Other post-colonial scholars have made forceful arguments about how the development regime is a part of Western projections of their values and knowledge upon the “Third World” drawing on Said who in his monumental work *Orientalism* (1979) argues that the Orient has been constructed through the Western gaze and that this enables a range of other processes of domination (Mohan 2001: 155, see also Coronil 1997). As a prolongation of this, Halimi has stated that “*seldom has the development of the whole of humanity been conceived in terms so closely identical and so largely inspired by the America model*” (quoted in Asad 2003:15)

### **The problem with “Poor” and “Poverty”**

To label citizens as “poor” has throughout history been an effective mechanism in dividing between those who deserve the greater society benevolent help, and those who are left out to endure their own misery. “Poverty” has also been synonymously with muted worldviews and the negation of personal agency. The concept “a culture of poverty” was presented by American scientist Oscar Lewis in the 1960ties and had subsequently great impact on discourse and policies directed towards the “poor” in the US. After research on Puerto Rico and Mexico, he wrote that poverty was a “*way of life [...] passed down from generation to generation characterized by a lack of organization, apathy and hostility*” (ibid pp 17-18). I was a way to cope with the

experience of not having possibilities to escape the situation and access the quality of life enjoyed by the rest of the population. Lewis emphasised that it was a difference between poverty as such and a culture of poverty. The solution, in his opinion, was organization and political awakening, arguing that a culture of poverty was not to be found in socialist countries such as Cuba and that “*any movement...which organizes and gives hope to the poor and effectively promotes solidarity and a sense of identification with larger groups, destroys the psychological and social core of the culture of poverty*“ (cited in Katz:19). Lewis recognized that his work could be misinterpreted for political purposes, and it was indeed picked up and used by the conservatives in America as a means for justifying their attitudes and policies directed towards “the poor”. The concept was used to reify the notion about the “deserving” and “un-deserving poor”, separating between those who deserved the societies help and those who had to be held responsible for their own fate. This provided an excuse for keeping spending on poverty relief in balance, and was also a powerful incentive to work within an expanding capitalist economy, both in the United States and in Europe.

Katz (1990) traces the emergence of the concept of the “deserving” and “un-deserving poor” back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century in England when division between the poor and the pauper determined who were eligible for financial support. The *poor* were poor because of misfortune, whereas the *pauper* was a “[...] *consequence of willful error, of shameful indolence, of vicious habits*” (Reverend Charles Burroughs (1834) quoted in Katz 1990:13) However, the distinction was blurred over time, and “*before the middle of the nineteenth century, the unworthy poor has become a fixture in “the popular mind*” (ibid:14) This also converged with the transition to capitalism and industrialization, under which the moral and social condemnation of the poor functioned as an justification for low wages and restricted social welfare benefits. Simultaneously, a “separate class of the “poor” was identified (Williams 1973:104 cited in Escobar 1995:23) which was subjected to an apparatus of knowledge and intervention through which their life could be optimized through modern scientific conditions (ibid: 23), and conditioning, one could add. However, as Broch-Due (1995) shows, there are different “poverty gazes” according to where “the poor” are, and for what purposes they are labelled as poor. This is particularly the case about feminized poverty: “[*the*] *feminized figure of poverty is that she is Janus-faced- an image split into two sides, one for the “west” and one for the “rest*” (ibid: 2). Whereas the imagery of the poor woman in the

Third World, with belly-swollen children on the arm without a man on her side are destined bring on sympathy and donor aid from the Western world, the single mother in the Western world is portrayed as a promiscuous “welfare mother”, exploiting the welfare system (ibid). Thus, imageries about “the poor are” multifaceted, but always simplified, or what Broch-Due calls “thin” images (ibid).

Critical scholars have sought to dissect the inherent objectification of “the poor” as a conceptualization and stereotypification which negate the individual agency of “the poor” to act upon their own situation. Arjun Appadurai has theorized over the concept *"The capacity to aspire"*, which he describes as in capability inherent in the (poor) peoples own culture and life world, an aspiration directed towards the future "[...] whose fortification may accelerate the building of other capacities by the poor themselves." Appadurai has been criticized for presenting a reification of the Lewis’ “culture of poverty” by the applying the concept “culture”, a concept with ambiguous connotations and associations in this context. These are critique I find valuable, as it is my opinion that theoretization about “poverty” and “the poor” should avoid connotations which could invoke an imagery of the poor as a (passive) homogenous group. The “genealogy of poverty” as we briefly address shows us that derogatory templates about “poverty” and “the poor” are so historically permeated in discourse and politics, that it requires radical re-thinking and re-conceptualization to avoid them. However, Appadurai also addresses that redistribution lies at the core of the problem of poverty, and emphasizes the importance of strengthening the voice of “the poor” [...] *to express their views and get results skewed to their own welfare in the political debates that surround wealth and welfare in all societies*” (Appadurai 2004: 63). He is also drawing on the theories of Nobel price winner Amartya Sen, who has advocated for placing values like freedom, dignity and moral well being in the politics of welfare and wellbeing, instead of reducing it to mere economical parameters (Sen 1994, 1999, cited in Appadurai 2004) as well as scholars such as Taylor (1992) who have advocated for a “politics of recognition”, and Nancy Fraser. The latter argues that societal change which addresses both re-distribution and recognition is paramount for achieving social justice (Fraser in Fraser and Honneth 2003:9). She acknowledged that claims for recognition have gradually been moved to the centre stage, both amongst activists and intellectuals (ibid: 8). However, she sees the challenge to overcome this division as both theoretical and practical. The theoretical challenge lies in the construction of a conception of

justice which accommodates both claims to social equity and claims for recognition following an increased focus on identity politics. “*Practically, the task is to devise a programmatic political orientation that can integrate the best of the politics of redistribution with the best of the politics of recognition*” (ibid: 9).Fraser (2001).

As the *misiones* form part of policies which aims towards radical redistribution as advocated by the government, Fraser provides us a good framework to use a point of departure when I now turn towards elaborating how social and political work is carried out in la Dignidad. It is my intention to provide the reader with a comprehensive insight on how the work is carried out within the community, and in order to ensure the fluency of the text, I will go through the empirical description before I seek to discuss it more analytically towards the end of the text. I will then bring together the theoretical and analytical discussions we have ventured through above with the empirical material.

## **The Missions**

There are a range of different *misiones* and organizations which have been developed throughout the past years. I will here limit myself to shortly describe those I came in the closest contact with throughout the fieldwork:

*Misión Barrio Adentro* (“*Misión* into the Shantytown”) is based on an exchange deal between Cuba and Venezuela, whereby Venezuelan oil is exchanged with approx. 20 000 Cuban doctors which work in the *barrios* and in the long- neglected rural areas. Free medicine and airborne patients for complicated surgeries to Cuba is also a part of the program, as well as dental care and eye surgeries. It has been established free medical education programs directed towards poor students which will in the long run replace the Cuban doctors, as the Venezuelan doctors, which traditionally came from the upper class, does not want to work in the *barrios*. Each health station is organized around a health committee (*Comité de Salud*) which is composed by voluntary people from the neighbourhood. Some of them are untrained and some are doing, or have completed a health workers education. They work as health assistants at the clinic and carry out censuses in the community, mapping families’ needs for vaccinations, additional nutrition needs and special needs due do incapacities i.e. *Barrio Adentro* is build up around an integrated (*intergral*) health philosophy adopted from Cuba, which is directed towards “social health” (*salud social*). It is thus central that health services

should be composed of social, cultural and human attention and not only treating illnesses. The doctors also do home visits. *Misión Barrio Adentro 2* and *3* are ongoing plans to build up new public hospitals and rehabilitation centres across the country.

*Las Casa de Alimentación* (Alimentation House) are food stations where a group of local citizens cooks and hands out three meals a day to the most impoverished in the community.

*Comités de Tierra Urbana* (CTU) - (The Urban Land Committees) are locally elected neighbourhood groups which based on a census made in the community works for property entitlements for the inhabitants in the zone. The work was initiated through a presidential decree issued in February 2002. The state gives people the property rights if it is state land, or negotiates and buys the land if it is privately held. It is coordinated through the National Technical Office for Regularization of Land Tenure (Oficina Técnica Nacional para la Regularización de la Tenencia de la Tierra) which issues property entitlement to the owners of the properties. The CTU also work with infrastructure issues such as water, sewage, electricity, paving of roads and garbage collecting.

*Comité de Participación de Transformación de Habitat* (CPTH) (Participant Comitee for the Transformation of Habitat) is an association of different CTU which cooperates, covering a wider area of the community. They are also working with housing substitution for those in the community which live in particular precarious conditions. Land slides in the steep, eroded hillsides of the *barríos* claims several lives every year.

The educational *misiones* are called *Robinson*, *Ribas* and *Sucre*. *Robinson 1* is an alphabetization program based on Cuban-develop pedagogies called “*Yo sí puedo*” (Yes, I can). As a proof of the success of the program UNESCO granted Venezuela status as freed from illiteracy in October 2005. Almost 9% of Venezuelans above 10 years completed the program during a year<sup>43</sup>. *Robinson 2* is primary school for adults, while *Ribas* is secondary school. In order to facilitate studies for people who work during daytime, the schools consists of evening classes. People also get a small

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<sup>43</sup> “Las Misiones Bolivarianas”. Published by the Ministry of Communication and Information, June 2005.

scholarship to attend them. *Misión Sucre* is free university education, which is open both for adults and ordinary graduate youths. The education will be further discussed below.

Apart from these *misiones*, there are also a range of other programs introduced. *Misión Mercal* is supermarkets which the state subsidises with about 40 %. An estimate of 40-47% of the population shops here. *Misión Vuelvan Caras* is a work training program through which the participants also receive cheap credits and loans for starting cooperatives or small businesses. After I left Venezuela, two new ones have been created, *Misión Negra Hipolita* and *Misión Madres de Barrio*. The former aims towards rehabilitation, work training and community integrations of street dwellers and drug abusers. The latter is a *misión* specifically directed towards poor (single) women in order to improve their situation and get them integrated into the labour market. Since these were launched after I left, I do not have any direct experience with them.

These *misiones* and programs were widely implemented in La Dignidad. I managed to obtain some number from the Parrish authorities and by tracking down the people responsible for it in the community. Though these numbers might not be absolutely precise, they might give an indication of the scope in a population of approx. 300 000 inhabitants: there were 21 modules of *Barrio Adentro*, 21 *Casas de Alimentación*, 182 *Comites de Tierra de Urbana*, 91 classes for *Misión Robinson*<sup>44</sup> and 25 classes for *Misión Ribas*<sup>45</sup>. Unfortunately I was unable to obtain numbers for the other *misiones*. But these figures indicate a quite high number given that they have only been at work since 2003.

### **“Here we organize us like this”**

The quote is from a friend in la Dignidad. In the beginning, when I was still quite unfamiliar with the community, I asked him if there was any “formal organizations” there. He said that it was the whole community working together from different neighbourhood groups, *misiones* and popular movements: “*here we organize us like this*”. Obviously, “the whole community” isn’t working, but as I gradually realized throughout the months I spent there, it was indeed a whole lot of people.

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<sup>44</sup> 1522 students have gone through the alphabetization program

<sup>45</sup> 3015 student are or have been students matriculated

There have been a range of organizations in la Dignidad for years, also before the arrival of Chávez. Some have been tied up to the local Parrish church, others have been so called *organizaciones vecinales* (neighbourhood organization), working to improve infrastructure i.e., while others have been more radical left-winged political organizations. There are two main fractions of the latter in La Dignidad, composed of two different political groups which have operated in the community for a long time. I spent time with one of the fractions, which emerges from the previously mentioned La Fuerza Popular de La Dignidad<sup>46</sup>. They have been loosely formed in the community since 1984, but as a partly underground movement. Their Marxist ideology and contacts with other “subversive groups” posed a risk of arrestment and mistreatment. However, they also carried out community work and promoted alternative media in the community. In the aftermath of *El Caracazo* in 1989, they took the initiative to form a coordination group for different grass root activist groups and resistance organizations in Caracas. They have thus been active in political activity for more than two decades, but it was not until 2000 that they officially formed themselves as a group. From being a clandestine activist group, they now play a central role in local politics. The elections for the Parrish Council<sup>47</sup>, called *La Junta Parroquial* are based on political lists, but election practices allow a non-party to “borrow” the title of a registered political party and thus get independently elected. In this way, La Fuerza Popular de La Dignidad got one of their members elected to the Parrish Council in the local elections in 2005 under the list of the Communist Party (PCV).

They also constitute the organization which promoted the local candidate for the National Assembly, which election campaign a large part of my field experience is based. In 2005 they almost got “their man” in as the councillor, but lost with a few

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<sup>46</sup> I was not in direct contact with the other fraction. The view held forward by those I spent time with said that the other fractions was disposed towards clientelism and corruption, and was not properly ideologically focused. However, the other fraction was also left-winged and supportive of the government, and in times of emergency, the two fractions would cooperate.

<sup>47</sup> The administrative structures in Caracas are divided up in the following way:

Greater Caracas, which is the federal authority, is currently headed by Juan Barreto. The mayor for Municipality Libertador, which La Dignidad belongs to, is currently headed by Freddy Bernal<sup>47</sup>. Both are from the Chávez party MVR. Below the Mayor’s office there are councillors covering an area of several Parrishes, while the Parrish authority consist of five politically elected members. Previously both the councillor and the members of the Parrish authorities were directly appointed by the mayor, but according to the new Constitution of 2000, they are now elected by popular vote every 4 years. The last election was in September 2005.

votes. This experience is thus to a certain extent ad odds with some analysis of social movements highlighting their inability to transcend the local and engage in realpolitik (Escobar 1998:13, referring to i.e Cardoso 1994, 1988; Silva 1994, Cohelo 1992). However, this transcendence has been possible only by the fact that the Venezuelan government and society has changed as a whole. It would have been unthinkable for them to access formal political positions in the 4<sup>th</sup> Republic, due to their partly clandestine existence and the impenetrable control over political institutions by AD and COPEI. However, they became partly disintegrated in the wake of the elections for the National Assembly, something which was primarily due to ideological conflicts and clashing individual ambitions. This will be discussed further in the subsequent chapter.

During the election campaign, la Fuerza Popular de la Dignidad was backed by a wide range of *misiones* and other groups in the community. If I asked people why they backed them, I was told that it was because they had proved a real compromise (*compromiso*) with local social work and because they had a real commitment to consolidating the revolutionary process. In the course of the political events during the last years, the political active community has become increasingly integrated, and this thus creates a pool of activist which can be mobilized on different occasions. There are often assemblies and meetings convoked on various issues, in addition to the daily work carried out by each group and individual. Government institutions such as the energy state company Hidrocapital has created an own division with professionals who help the community in developing and implementing projects. There are also a range of other state- and government institutions which the community cooperate with.<sup>48</sup>

Simultaneously, the community is in a process of developing their own knowledge base for strengthening their social and political work, based on both formal educational skills

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<sup>48</sup> It would be natural to discuss clientelism in this regard, as it is considered as a common feature of Latin-American politics. However, it was beyond the scope of my fieldwork to go in depth about this. As a simple definition of clientelism, I mean a system whereby political loyalty is exchanged with the return jobs or other favours. During the Punto-Fijo-era, clientelism was institutionalized throughout the system, and it is seen as one of the main vices (*vicios*) from this era which now must be attacked. However, one woman told me about how she tried to get help to from one of the representatives in the National Assembly in order to carry out a project. Although acknowledging that this was quite “clientelistic”, she said that “*one cannot be fanatic, one have to be realistic. If she helps me, I will bring people “to the corner” to vote for her.*” Except for this example I feel however that my empirical material is too thin to give a consistent opinion about how clientelism is encountered, neither in la Dignidad nor on a broader scale, so this must be left for future investigation.

and the community's joint informal knowledge capital, as this female informant in her mid-30ties explained:

- How do you carry out the work?

- look, in the barrio you find everything. For examples un-licensed architects, lawyers, with or without license..... There are a lot of people with a lot of dedication, who have a lot of preparations, but they don't have a formal education, and you find a lot of people with formal education (*titulo*).

So, there is a balance. We in CTU and CPTH are having cooperation with both forms, we have cooperation with the original knowledge (*saberes originarios*) which come from us as a people, and with the knowledge achieved at the university. And within this, one form of knowledge doesn't range over the other, and the original knowledge of the people is not looked down upon. And the people, in their humbleness, don't disqualify the knowledge that one can have obtained at the university.

(....)

- So there haven't been any problems?

- No. Before yes, before it was like if someone had knowledge which we needed, they didn't find it convenient to...how does one say it....to put themselves to the service of others. They found it more convenient to use it for themselves.

Not now, with the change which is taking place. Well, there is of course always someone who thinks like that, still. Like architects which doesn't believe in the problems which come from the grass root just because they come from the grass root. Because it is not only the grass root which proposes it, they also plan it [how to solve it]. And there are architects which are used to things being planned within the [state] institutions, where they can do it from there and stick to their money, and that is sad. But as the people become prepared in organization, the people will demand what is theirs, and do what is theirs to do.

People are very insistent on that projects must be locally incited. As one woman said: "*before the government just came and decided like this (hits her hand in the table) but not anymore. Now we decide how things shall be*". It was emphasised that people themselves knew best the local needs "*like where a baseball field should be place or a wider road is needed so the cars can pass*", as one woman put it. The more experienced people and groups move around and interact with other sectors in order to incite organization different places. This is what one woman who had been active for years told me:

- is it a problem to make people participate?

- remember that there a sector which are already used to people participating, and sectors where people don't participate much.

Remember that this is normal. Each sector has their own characteristics. And when we as a CTU goes to a sector, we only go and listen, and let them take it in their own rhythm. One has to make assemblies where people participate, and don't feel that someone are representing them.

This woman also said that in the beginning when the *misiones* and the CTUs were starting, it was hard to get people to participate. They didn't really think that the government would live up to their promises. A woman told me that she wasn't really convinced before the day Chávez himself handed over to her the property rights of her house. Then, she told me "*I understood that Venezuela really had changed*". She, a grandmother in her 60ties, is now actively working in both CTU and CPTH, and trying to set up a bus cooperative with government credits (her son will drive "her" bus, though). "*As people see that it is really changing, they also want to participate*", another woman from the same CTU said. I asked her who they were, all those people participating:

"The most special with this process is that people, like my mother aged 70, which never before in her life had gone out [to do work in the community]...with this process she got motivated, and in some form or another, in her own manner, is doing social work. They take to the streets, work, contributes...this is one of the achievements with this process... [Participation] doesn't have a fixed form, the most important thing is that people participates, according to the time they have available and their compromises. People participate from their homes, people participate in the assemblies and people participate both in their houses and in their assemblies. Not only on the assemblies as such, but from the assemblies there always emerges things to do, and people get engaged."

As we can read out from these statements, there is an ongoing dynamism on various arenas. Scholars studying development programs tend to highlight that decision-making power and influence in the community is not equally distributed, and that local inequalities are constituted by different construction such as race, gender, class and age. (Gardener and Lewis 1996: 79) As I observed, people who are active are very heterogeneous, both in terms of age, education, organizational experience and other factors. There is generally an overweight of women which will be further discussed towards the end of the chapter.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to give a comprehensive analysis about how decision making power is distributed in La Dignidad, but I want to provide some general observations. My tentative suggestion is that the political and social work as it has evolved throughout the past years, have facilitated the emergence of a new central segment in the community, namely those who already were active in social and political work throughout the 4<sup>th</sup> Republic, and who thus can draw on a pool of organizational experience and networks. It is however difficult to identify “decision power” as such, as the works of the *misiones* and other groups are so differently constituted, leaning on different institutional and financial resources. As we can read out of the quotations provided above, there has been a proliferation of organizational activity and participation, and projects are thus incited on various arenas and with different focuses. Popular assemblies which strive for reaching a consensus facilitate arenas where those involved (or who wants to be involved) can gather.

But the scope of each activist and groups activity is not confined to its specific work, the overall goal with social work is “to build community” (*construir comunidad*) and to strengthen the revolution. The meaning of engaging in social work does thus transcend the actual work you perform and is a part of the overall goal of building community. This was explained by a woman in her 30ties which work in both CTU and CPTH in La Dignidad.

- The problem is that what we are working with in relationship to the houses, doesn't have any meaning if we don't construct community at the same time, in a sense of belonging and sharing.
- And how is community constructed?
- It isn't difficult here, because the majority of us have lived in La Dignidad for a long time. It is like a part of the family, it is a feeling of belonging, we all want to stay in La Dignidad, even those who live in the shacks (*ranchos*). If you love where you live, it is easier to improve things, to live in community (*comunidad*) and solidarity.

To build community is thus to engage in the environment you live in and construct a feeling of belonging. When local initiatives for various cooperatives were discussed, a central point was that a private enterprise did the job in an impersonal way with the motive of making money. They did not engage in the environment they worked in, while a cooperative would build up an engagement with the community in an all-

encompassing manner. This is a part of my field notes after a visit to the local coordination centre for the CTUs and CPTH:

I went to the Technical Land Office (Oficina Técnica de Tierra) in La Dignidad today, where all the activities from CTU and CPTH are coordinated from. I spoke with one of the leaders there. He said that after Chávez came to power there had been an explosion of activity. People were supposed to work together, instead of all individualism and egoism which characterizes capitalism and the time we live in. He said that for long time we had all know that the world had been drifting without a goal in the wrong directions (both talking about the environment, individualism, poverty i.e. in general) but one hadn't know what to do, where to go. But now one had a goal.

### **Transforming man and women, transforming society**

As the headline indicates, the transformation of society into a society of peace, justice and dignity, starts with the persons themselves. To “form” (*formar*) and “educate” (*educar*) yourself is also a process of transforming your surroundings and a prerequisite for an overall change of society. The vices (*vicios*) inherited from the 4th Republic in terms of individualism, selfishness and egoism is often a reference, and is something which has to be defeated through formation and education. These negative values are a product of the neo-liberal society, in which the “big fish eats the small fish” as one informant puts it. Everyone's war against everyone has undermined solidarity and humanism, and greed is rewarded. An informant explained it like this:

“For me, the most important thing we have to defeat in neo-liberalism is at the ideological level. It is what has made man into an individualist, an egoist, as if it was all about getting rich in money and belongings, while the others didn't have anything. We changed radically, and try to convert man into a man within a collective: of solidarity, humanity, love and justice. I think this is our achievement, and I think the guidance has come through the pedagogy and academics of the president, Hugo Chávez. For us it has been an enlightening, and we are heading forward...we are feeling satisfied, because it is not only what one calls populism, no, no...it is not populism, this progress has been revolutionary and at the same time Christian...I think that socialism is based in Christianity and self-criticism...”

In the end of my stay, I was told by a friend that I had got rid of some of my individualism. According to him, I had learned to share with those around me, while in the beginning I had kept to myself whatever I had, being it a pack of cigarettes or a

bottle of water. I also realized that I gradually internalized these norms, and I would instead of buying a meal which was more expensive and only served for one person, I would rather buy a heap of bananas which could be shared amongst more people. However, this ethos of unselfishness is also based on reciprocity. When someone started to take advantage of my relatively good economy, I was told by a friend to give a clear message of limits to one-way generosity, and he commented that the person who had taken advantage of me had not reached a proper level of “formation”.

Discourses of community solidarity and human dignification also frame directly the way the projects developed in the community are formed. The Social Economy (*economia social*) which the government tries to promote is an integrated form of economic development which includes social and human aspects in its planning and implementation. For example at one occasion I read a proposal for a new project for garbage collecting. It was a cooperative which would replace the private company which has the contract now. The project did not only set out to collect garbage as such, it would also start projects of garbage management which were more environmental friendly, and hold courses for neighbours and school-classes about environmental issues connected to garbage management in the community. Moreover, they had taken into consideration the homeless and drug-abusers which made their living out of picking and reselling garbage or collecting bottles. The plan was thus to somehow employ them, and through this dignify (*dignificar*) them. He emphasised again that the cooperatives were social-political work and that they thus also had to include these people, regardless of their money went to drugs or to maintaining their families.

However, at one meeting I attended, I asked the quite naive question (with purpose) if all the cooperatives functions as social cooperatives, working for the best for everyone, instead of enriching individuals. They responded me with a hearty laugh, as said that it doesn't always work like that, and as an example they mentioned cooperative which are contracted by the Municipality and then sub-contracted to other cooperatives which they pay very badly. However, the purpose with creating cooperatives which does jobs in the local community is to prevent these mechanisms. When those who run the cooperatives are a part of a wider network in the community, it promotes responsible and solidaric behaviour.

## **The educational missions**

Perhaps the most important site for generating ideologically conscious community workers in the long run are the educational *misiones*; *Robinson*, *Ribas* and *Sucre*. I already indicated what they are in the outset of this chapter, and will here elaborate further on how they work. It is important to emphasise that all the educational *misiones* should be seen as an integrated system, and the students are strongly encouraged to complete all levels. In the *Misión Ribas*- class I attended in La Dignidad, almost all of them had signed up for university studies.

One night I was invited to attend one of the last classes of *Misión Ribas* for the semester. They had been studying for two years, and were now graduating. Everyone has brought some food which we shared while evaluating the semester. The class was held in the evening in a school building which is an elementary school during the day and there were around 25 students present, age ranged from 18 to 70. All of them were former drop-outs from school. We were sitting at chairs at a circle at the floor. Since it was one of the last classes, everyone was supposed to say something nice to one of the other students. Everyone praised each other for their strength and courage, for their compromise with going to school at night while working or having other duties during the day. They talked about how they had grown together as a class, how people had developed and blossomed as persons, how they had all fought it through together. The oldest one was a shy lady in her 70ties who also had severe health problems. She was held up as an example of that it is never too late to learn, to get an education. Many talked about how they had never thought that they could ever get an education, that they had dropped out of school because of poverty or other compromises and that a whole new world of possibilities had opened up with the Bolivarian Process. A mother in her 50ties started to cry when talking to her son. She told him that she was so proud of him, of what they had achieved together through these two years, and that they now were ready to achieve their goals of going to university together. A married couple in their late 30ties also held emotional speeches to each other about how they had fought for this together.

The ideological content of the education was made clear by the pedagogical leader who was in charge for the *misión* in the area. She told about a girl in another class who had

tried to get into a private school. She wasn't accepted because she had her graduation paper from *Misión Ribas*. The pedagogical leader then went on to say that

“...if we are in this school with this vision, we cannot go to a private school, a capitalist institution where money is more important than the human being. We want another type of education; in the Bolivarian School we have another type of vision. Our vision must be to form ourselves, to develop ourselves, to educate ourselves. President Chávez says it every day: read, find books, and seek information. (.....) how can we continue our process of liberation if we don't continue to read, to investigate, to analyse, to evaluate ourselves? We have to learn to be able to do this. In the other school system you are being evaluated and get grades. But it doesn't see the human being which can develop and express itself.”

In line with this perspective, they used a special evaluation system: C for “consolidated” (*consolidado*), A for “advancing” (*avanzando*) and EP for “in progress” (*En progreso*) C was the best. It was not specifically directed towards our scholarly performances, but on criteria like initiative, honesty, responsibility, interpersonal relations and intercultural relations which got evaluated. The idea behind this was explained to me by one of the teachers:

“The *misiones* have a different focus. The ordinary school system is based on competition, on being the best, fighting against the others, to push the others aside. But *Misión Ribas* is based on learning to value (*valorar*), learning about solidarity. It is the formation of the citizen. We learn about our identity, which we for a long time lost. We are leaning to respect each other.

Yet so, people would not be graduated if they hadn't also reached a level of scholarly achievements. Everyone who accomplishes *Misión Ribas* is guaranteed to continue in *Misión Sucre*, either on daytime or night time. Both the Robinson and Sucre-programs are based on tutoring videos developed by Cuban teachers and pedagogics which are used in all the subjects. An example I saw was a video from the literature class about analysing Cervante's Don Quixote. The famous passage where he rides against the wind mills was dramatized by actors, and afterwards analytical questions were asked about the symbolism, metaphors and further literature analysis. The idea is that the videos are followed by discussions, essays and further tutoring by the teachers. I also saw a video from the mathematics class. According to my evaluation the level of both videos were in accordance to what I would consider as a normal standard for secondary school.

The teacher who was quoted above meant that the educational program should have been expanded by an additional year in order to further improve the scope and depth of the education. The program now takes two years with three hours education five days a week, in addition to home work. The first classes are graduating this year nationwide, and she said it would be carefully evaluated and the program possibly extended. It thus might be suggested that in terms of reaching a level of knowledge as found in within the regular school system, the educational programs have yet to be improved, although it is far beyond the scope of my fieldwork to give a consistent evaluation of it.

The educational system and evaluation system are undoubtedly strong impetuses for ideological tutoring, and they might not provide the entire student mass with an educational level which would meet the standard within the regular educational system. But I will suggest that they should be evaluated in a context. Firstly, it is launched as an act of emergency, to quickly educate the lot of the population which have not been able to complete education previously. Furthermore, the educational credo is to provide education which is closely linked to the social aspects in the community where people live, as a means in the process to escape the poverty trap locally. For example I spoke with some graduating students from *Misión Ribas*, whose graduate projects were group projects which ranged from developing a cultural program for children in the neighbourhood to implementing a water pump system in the building where they lived. I will thus suggest that the education must thus be seen in a holistic perspective as a part of the wider project to transform society, and the ethos that education is a means of empowerment through which everyone has something to contribute with.

It is however worth noting that the ideological content of the educational *misiones* are subjected to discussion. In the class I attended the ideological consensus seemed to be quite consolidated. But I heard complaints at other occasions where one talked about other teachers which did not even allow people to talk about politics in class. People meant that this was outrageous, because the education was politics. I also heard complaints about people who just participated in order to receive the monthly scholarship of 160 000 *Bolivares* (a bit more than 500 NOK)<sup>49</sup>. If people did not attend

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<sup>49</sup> The minimum salary is at the moment 465 000 bolivares or 220 USD. It has been raised significantly during the past years

class, they could be expelled, but people emphasised that no one could get expelled for not being ideologically aligned. The problem was rather some of the teachers, which had not achieved a sufficient level of formation themselves.

**“It’s easy to control an ignorant population. But we aren’t ignorant anymore“**

The quote above is from a woman from one of the other *barrios* in Caracas who works with community projects from the municipality-office. She referred to the 4<sup>th</sup> Republic, and talked about how people had become passive by the lack of education and possibilities to develop knowledge and strength together. This was now changing, and protests where also often directed towards government associated institutions which was not considered living up to their duties. I asked one of the women in CTU and CPTH if she though people would get tired of carrying social work if the state and the government didn’t become more efficient:

- People won’t get tired of social work. They will continue to do social work. As a matter of fact, we have never had resources; there are people who have done social work here for 40 years. But people can get tired of the institutions, the institutions which don’t do their duty and the institutions which have another rhythm than us. And people will make demands towards the institutions, demand that they work with us, for the best of the community.
- But you don’t fear that people are going to get tired of the [Bolivarian] process as such?
- No, I don’t fear that.

I often asked people if they felt that the government or other state institutions directly intervened too much in how they worked on the ground. But few people though so and rather felt that they could work rather autonomously. A woman who worked in *La Casa de Alimentación* said that a problem was the list over people who was entitled to receive free food was worked out by people from a state institution. The problem was that those who carried out the census were not from the community. She thus knew that some of those who received food didn’t really need it, while there where others who needed it more who were not the list. However, they just divided the food between more people, and she had never had a problem with not having enough food even if it was more people then those it was estimated for. However, she had a plan to propose on the next popular assembly in the community that they would carry out a new census by local people to replace the one incomplete one, and she didn’t think it would be a problem.

The official political discourse stresses strongly peoples' right to participation and sovereignty (*el pueblo soberano*) and it is used as a discursive strategy to put forward and articulate claim towards the state. The Bolivarian Constitution is seen as a social contract which establishes rights and duties between the state and the people, and has a heavily symbolic meaning. Chávez sometimes calls it the "Popul Voh, the book of the people", referring to the holy book of the Maya Indians. People have a very active relationship to it, and many carry it around in their pocket. It was approved in a Popular Referendum in 1999, and across the country various societal sectors, also discussion groups established in the *barrios*, participated in developing the draft. The content of the constitution is frequently actively invoked in legitimating claims towards the state, and is a part of everyday discourse. For example, I spoke with a man who planned to develop a garbage collecting collective which would replace the existing private firm. The firm had a contract with the municipality authority, but had done a poor job. I asked him if he thought that the municipality would be supportive in this project. "Claro", he said. "Ofcourse, it is written in the Constitution".<sup>50</sup> People are also very conscious of their status as electoral base towards the government, and that this gives them potency in their claims and demands. Demonstrations are often staged outside the palace, also by government supporters. This was previously a quite risky activity, I was told, as these kinds of demonstrations were cracked down on with a violent hand by the police. One of the women from a CTU arrived at a meeting one afternoon, very satisfied. The CPTHs in Caracas had blocked a road in the city centre demanding the money they had been promised long time ago. They had gathered 1600 people involved in the work of the CPTH or the beneficiaries. The people from the Ministry had then come out on the street to speak with them about the problem. Her attitude is further demonstrated here. This is some time later, after some of the money had arrived:

Field notes. February 2006

I participated at a meeting for the CPTH tonight. It was held in the office for the organization which they are building at the moment. They were promised 121 millions *bolivares* from the Ministry of Housing and Habitat six months ago, but so far they had only received 29 millions (about 10 000 NOK). This was in order to pay for office, computers, office inventory etc. The office is rented for 300 000

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<sup>50</sup> Article 184, which he refers to, is cited in Appendix 2.

*bolivares* (1000 NOK) a month from one of the members of the CPTH. They are contracting the construction work to the cooperative of one of the members of CPTH. They are worried; they don't know what they will do when the money is finished. The plan is to buy a copying machine which can be used as a source of income, making business out of it while they worked. They will take terms working at the office (as volunteers). [The woman referred to above] says that they are going to fight with the Ministry for the rest of the money: "They don't want to do this in an election year. We are going to make it hot around their ears (*formar un peo*)."

This indicates that people feel that they have a strategically negotiation space to push the government. The CPTH and CTUs are very well-developed organizations, and as they are also central in mobilizing for elections in the communities. They also have a wide network both within and outside the community. Even though many people would live and die for the revolution anyway, the government also know that among others, their popularity depends on "delivering the goods". The social work which CPTH and CTUs carry out, and their ability to mobilize around elections, is thus crucial for the governments support.

I often asked if people didn't feel that they received too little economic benefits from engaging in social work. The response was mainly based on two different arguments. The first argument was that the community was in the process of building up an organization which could manage to handle money and resources. If this organization was not in place, corruption and other problems would be the result. One informant working in CTU and CPTH formulated it like this:

- And do you always get a lot of help from the state?
- No, we don't get a lot of help from the state, or that depends on the meaning, right? There are institutions which hold courses for examples, and that is a help. But everything can't be courses, just like everything can't be resources in the sky. But if someone in the community needs finances for construction work, for infrastructure...yes, [but] this is very slow, as a matter of fact, it is really slow. One knows of the good intentions of the President, to get the resources down to the people, but it gets stuck on the way. But financial resources are not vital for social work. For infrastructure work, yes. For some sectors [of social work], yes. And this is slow. But it is a part of this process, that the resources which are handed out, are only handed out to the organized community. Because if the resources are handed out without the people having enough knowledge (*conocimiento*), it could rather divide and fracture

the grass root, right? I go for organization first, as a base. And afterwards, the finances.

Another response was that people should learn that they had to engage in their own life-situation and not expect the state to do everything for them. A relationship with the state where the citizens were passive receivers of state benefits was often referred to as one of the bad vices (*vicios*) from the 4<sup>th</sup> republic. However, it was clear that they hadn't received much. A woman said it like this in a rather ironic voice: *"they took from us a lot, and then it seemed like a lot what they gave us. People were happy for everything they got, even if it was a box of pencils"*. Another woman told me this: *"I have worked with getting potable water to the community for 25 years, but it was not until now they [the state] started to cooperate with us."*

However, now that the state had made mechanisms and resources available, people should seize the opportunity to engage in the process, and not necessarily expect direct personal economical benefits from it personally. A man I spoke with from La Dignidad was engaged in a CPTH in Caracas, and received a compensation for his travelling expenses. His task was to evaluate the houses together with the beneficiary family, and he thus travelled a lot. The compensation he received was however not enough to cover all his expenses. When I asked if he didn't think he should receive more, he meant that if the state gave him and the other a house to several million *bolivares*, he couldn't expect to receive additional money.

The problem of getting access to resources to carry out collective projects was often pointed at as a problem, but to receive individual payments for social work was not a topic frequently invoked. Some work was compensated, however. The women working at the *Casa de Alimentación* and a kindergarten in la Dignidad I visited received payments for their expenses and work, though not much. The women in *La Casa de Alimentación* received 180 000 *bolivares* (ca. 600 NOK) monthly. The state had paid for equipping the kitchen, which fed around 150 people daily, and the women and their families also ate there. The groceries were delivered weekly from *Misión Mercal*. They had however struggled from quite a while, and staged a demonstration with other *Casas de Alimentación* in Caracas outside the Presidential palace in order to receive payment. Hence, even though some work was compensated by the state, it was never cast in terms

of being employed by the state. The overall project of “building community” thus transcends that of measuring work in terms of money. To value social work in monetary terms would be to undermine the whole value system building community comprise and to thus attract people who where in it for their own benefit and not for the overall goal with it.

### **Women’s role in social work**

There is a great awareness of women’s increasing participation, also at an official level. In the new National Assembly elected in 2005, the female share is at 30%. Venezuela is, as throughout Latin-America, a society of *machismo*, and domestic and sexual violence is a major problem. Yet so, people strongly indicated that the overall societal transformations which is taking place also implicates that the status of women has been gradually altered. The increased activity in the public sphere, which is traditionally associated with men, has opened up a sites of activities where women are now more and more active and visible, as was clearly indicated by this informant, a woman in her 30ties from La Dignidad:

- How is the role of women?
- Actually, the women have been more fighters than the men in this process. You won’t find an organization where there aren’t women.
- Why?
- Look, it must be because before it was a lot harder. And a lot harder because the women where seen as the weaker sex. Back then, construction work was seen as something which women couldn’t do. But now, there are female lawyers, women who does construction work [in the community]...they do everything, and women have gained respect. There are no organizations where the women aren’t in the first row of participation. Before you didn’t see them, they where seen as house wives, cooking, cleaning...that was what was convenient in the past. Now the women continue to cook and clean, just as the men. But they [the women] also have functions in the society as well, outside the house. Just as the men. One has understood that just as women has to do their duties in the house; the man must also do it. Because the women also is doing work in the streets, outside the house.

The same views were expressed by two other women in La Dignidad, one running a kindergarten, and the other working in CTU and CPTH:

- Well, now you see women everywhere, before you never saw them. They were locked in. [Metaphorical speaking- they both shakes their head as in indignation] But now we are starting to learn that women and

men are equal, you see female professional, female engineers. It is a part of the process that they start to participate.

- But is that a process which would have happened also without Chavez?"

- It is a part of the Bolivarian Process. He talks about equality, justice for everyone, men and women. And the people are waking up, achieving consciousness. Now there are rights for everyone, now the people are waking up and women are everywhere as well. They now know what their rights are, even small girls know what rights they have and they can tell you what rights they have."

The Bolivarian Constitution, which is referred to by this informant, invoking "the rights", puts particular emphasises on the rights of children and women, and is essentially a very progressive law in equity matters<sup>51</sup>. The National Assembly is also currently discussing the possibility of legalizing abortion, at least to a certain extent, but has been met with fierce resistance from the Catholic Church and other conservatives. Government discourse in general stresses women's role in the development of the country, and a special bank has been created, Banco de Mujer, stimulating women into entering the labour market through small scale enterprises. Many conveyed that better access to resource by the state facilitated entrepreneurial activity also for women, as is expressed by this woman who runs a *Casa de Alimentación* in her house, together with several other women:

- It seems for me that wherever I go, it is the women who go in the forefront. Is that right?"

- [She laughs] here in La Dignidad the women have always been fighters. But before [this government] we didn't have any help from any institutions or the state. Now we have help and we can do more. Now they have to listen to us. It is easier to impulse and start things. This has opened many doors for us. We deserve this. Now it is much easier for us to rise up.

At large, better access to social services will clearly benefit women, particularly in the long run. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to give a coherent analysis of the division between men and women in the community work, though it is my tentative suggestion as I experienced it, that the increase awareness of focus on women's right and women's capacities outside the domestic sphere has facilitated a greater awareness on gender issues. There is however a need for paying attention to whether or not women's social

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<sup>51</sup> For link to English version, see appendix 2.

mobility are being improved in the long run, and if they are increasingly participating in the “hard politics” and not being confined to the working on the ground.

## Poverty and recognition

On the background of the discussion we have ventured through, what visions about development and society do the work the popular movements in La Dignidad engage in through the *misiones* and other organizations entail? Do the *misiones* give room for the community to themselves define what their needs and aspirations are? Is it possible to argue that it lead to empowerment; a more radical empowerment than the empowerment offered by the discourse of “popular participation”? What conceptualizations about citizenship and the role of the state do they produce? How can the *misiones* be interpreted as a part of the wider political and social vision the Bolivarian Revolution convey?

I want to start by seeking to tease out a linkage between the conceptualization about citizenship and recognition which the social work implies. Recognition of ones wants and values are a fundamental part of a human being’s sense of dignity (Knudsen 2005: 24). To be denied recognition is also to be denied your agency and aspirations; it undermines your ability to be a visible acting subject. Recognition can also come as a negative recognition, being recognized with inherent negative qualities. However, the type of recognition I will seek to tease out in this context, rests in a positive recognition, as being included in the society as valuable citizens. One student in *Misión Ribas* told me that “*we learn about humanism, to contribute...we now go from being inhabitants to citizen*”. Thus, in the context of this thesis, the struggle for recognition comes in the shape of being included and recognized as valuable citizens, to be counted as a part of the society. This is what one woman told me about the CTU:

“Before we weren’t owners of our own houses and properties. But through the CTUs we became owners and were recognized as inhabitants of the barrio, owners of the ground and the property. Besides, we where recognized as citizens. Especially in La Dignidad, which I know and grew up in, many of the sectors didn’t show up on maps. It was registered as un-inhabited land, a pure mountain. That is, we weren’t registered as citizens. So with this decree the population which live at the margins of the society, and which are still the majority of the society, are also recognized [as citizens].”

There is a very spatial aspect with this quote which would be interesting to discuss, but that is unfortunately outside the limits of this discussion. What concerns me here is how “the poor” (which often are addressed as *el pueblo humilde* - the humble people, rather than “the poor”, according to context) are re-configured into a group which are included in the “nation-building”. As we remember from the historical review in the introduction chapter, the dominant discourse throughout the 1990s began to portray the people “*not so much as the virtuous foundation of democracy, but as an unruly and parasitical mass to be disciplined by the state and made productive by the market*”(Coronil 1997: 387). The hostility towards “the poor” which is implicit here stands out as a stark contrast to the imagery of “the poor” within the present discourse, which conceptualizes them as a strong and sovereign (*soberano*) part of society which are vital for the future of the country and who are entitled to crave a compensation for the historically accumulated social debt which left them in poverty.

However, as we have reviewed in the outset of the chapter, there are a number of templates which produce classifications of the “poor”. What templates about the “worthy” and “un-worthy poor” are communicated within the present discourse? Let me try to give an indication through an empirical example:

I was sitting at an *areperia* in downtown Caracas with some informants<sup>52</sup> and friends one night, where the traditional filled corn breads, *arepa*, is served, accompanied with a fresh fruit juice or a beer. As we sat there, a young boy around 16 years old reaches a hand towards us through the low open-air wall next to our table. He is begging for some money, and I give him some coins. The others around the table says that I shouldn’t give him anything because it will only encourage him to more begging, and there are now plenty of places where he can escape his street life. I meant that it wouldn’t make any difference if he went hungry tonight, and that we didn’t know enough about him to judge if he had had the possibilities to take advantage of one of the *misiones* or other programs. They still meant that in order to develop “the new society” (*la nueva sociedad*), people had to learn that they had to participate and take advantages of those possibilities offered and that people shouldn’t give money to beggars and thus encourage more begging. I then said that we all knew that poverty was so deep rooted in

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<sup>52</sup> They are university-educated people from a Marxist political organization

Venezuela that although much have been done, it would not be eradicated quickly and that their ideological and political conviction did not give them a moral *carte blanche* to judge people. They should instead ask themselves why this boy was on the street and how he could be helped. This led them to waiving the boy in to us, and he sat down by our table. He told that his father was dead and his mother very poor, so he was sometimes living at the street. He had completed secondary school though, and had now been thinking about enrolling in the army, where free education and other benefits are offered. The episode ended with one of the people in our group giving the boy his telephone number, so he could help him getting in contact with a recruiting officer he knew.

What can we read out from this passage? I will suggest that the political discourse which stresses that “now everyone has the opportunity to escape poverty” can produce a reification of the templates “worthy” and “un-worthy” poor, which can be better captured by the division between “the non-participating” and “participating poor”. The worthy, dignified poor are those who engage in the political nation-building project; who are escaping poverty and marginalization through seizing opportunities offered by the state. This view was somehow indicated by another informant:

- Are there people who still feel excluded?
- I think that they are excluded those who are not participating. But then again, these are terms, right? You can call them excluded those people who does not have access to services, yes? Or those who do not have running water in their houses, or sewage system, I could call them excluded. But even though calling them excluded, the organization reaches them as well. But excluded like in the 4<sup>th</sup> Republic, no. I think that those who do not participating are excluding themselves. Now there is a call for participation. If they don't do it, it is because they don't want to.

There is a double edge in this statement which says something about exclusion within the wider society and also exclusion in the immediate surrounding. She indicates that contrasted with the layers of exclusion vis-à-vis society at large which was encountered previously, the situation has changed. But as can also be read out from this statement, there is an inherent normative incitement towards participating, a normativity which is shaped by the political discourse it is located in. It would be a very interesting discussion to pursue further, but it goes beyond the limits of this discussion. However, it

reminds us of the different template-productions which arise within different political discourses, and also shows how templates within one discourse can re-emerge as reifications within another social setting.

But who benefits from the missions and the other organizations? People always emphasised that also people who do not participate in the CTUs in the community, or participate in the voluntary work through the missions are benefiting from it. Especially this was the case with the work of CPTH, where they emphasised that those who needed the most, was attended first, regardless of their own participation. I did not have the chance to verify this through following the work closely over time, and it would also be difficult for me to judge who needed the most, and what processes and judgements lied behind deciding who was attended. It would however be an interesting field of investigation for further studies.

The *misiones*, like Barrio Adentro and the educational *misiones* are universally accessible. However, a double discourse could be encountered which was strongly coloured by the political polarization which is found, also in the barrios. Although the majority of people are government supportive there, there are also people in opposition to the government. I overheard on some occasions that people said that those who are *esqualidos* shouldn't benefit from the *Mercal* and the other Bolivarian Services, while other carefully emphasised that benefits should not be linked to political opinions.

### **A comparative glance at “participation”**

As elaborated in the outset of this chapter, it is my interest to compare the *misiones* and other local work with the “popular participative” approach as found within dominant development schemes. It is my tentative suggestion that a difference can be encountered at two levels: both at a discursive level and at a practical level. As we reviewed in the outset, the critiques towards “popular participation” are found along two, but intimately intertwined, axes. Let us shortly review them: it disguises the inherent “top-down” approach which is implicit in the methodology itself, which leaves the “stakeholders” in a space where they can participate within the parameters settled, but not to define the goals and scope of the participation itself. Furthermore, it “targets” certain groups as “women”, “children” and “peasants” without addressing the wider social structures they are entangled in. The other, but deeply interrelated axis addresses how these approaches

fail to acknowledge the need for radical redistribution in order to effectively combat poverty. The technical approach saturated in a de-politicised language serves to conceal the wider political economy and structural mechanisms which produce and perpetuate inequality. Inherent in this, is also the continuation of politics which seeks to minimize the state's responsibility in ensuring poverty reduction. It perpetuates the view that citizens should "pull themselves up by their own bootstraps" instead of making claims towards the state to provide a safety net which ensures that basic needs are covered.

I will suggest that there are some significant differences between these approaches to combating poverty, and the "Bolivarian" approach. Although "participation" is stressed also in the "Bolivarian" approach to combat poverty, the difference rests in both empirical observations and discourse analysis. According to my observations, and informants quoted above, there is a difference in methodology. To define and generate projects, and define what the communities *needs* are, are generated in the local community. The state has created financial mechanisms and state institutions which then shall support the work the community wants to initiate. As we could read out from the statements above, this is not a straight forward process, and entails continuous struggle and negotiation. However, it is worth remembering that these changes have come about very recently, and what concerns me with the argument in this context, is the potential this entails in the long run. As the organizations accumulate more self-confidence<sup>53</sup> and organizational and technical experience, they can generate and expand the scope of their work, and also broaden their autonomy-space vis-à-vis the state institutions.

However, my main argument rests in the wider context the political and social work is located in. As argued in the outset in this chapter, the definition of the political domain and the citizens within the neo-liberal dogma is based in a minimalist conceptualization of both the state and democracy (Dagnino 1998:49). The states' role is to create a domain whereby the individual and the market can freely interact.

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<sup>53</sup> People often talked about that they were in a process of learning how to effectively organize themselves and develop projects, and that this was a central part of the Bolivarian process.

Hyatt (2002) problematizes how the US-governments steady reduction of the welfare budget<sup>54</sup> has left social welfare in the hands of the community, the Church and other voluntary organizations. “*The volunteer is a new kind of political subject, one who is deemed better adapted to the particular requirements of the present form of neo-liberal governance*” (Ibid: 205). She contrasts this with former interpretations of liberalism which also put emphasise on a collective safety net provided by the state, while the citizen also was perceived as a political subject with social responsibilities and social obligations. Yet so, she maintains that the state has in no way withdrawn from the social sphere, it has rather created an array of mechanisms to structure the field of volunteerism and the social sphere at large. This is what Foucault calls “governmentality”, or the “conduct of conduct”, through which the individual is conditioned through a range of institutions to comply with the requirements of the society. The post-modern, neo-liberal discourse rests in an advanced form of “governmentality”: the individual is free as long as it manages to maneuver within the structures of the system. This dictum has created a discourse through which those not complying are labelled as pathologically dependent on the state and not living up to the requirements of a good citizen (ibid:206). Furthermore, it creates a discourse through which the states’ role in reproducing inequalities is obscured, and state-dependency is in effect perpetuated.

Some of the missions and organizations draw however much on “free labour”, as people carry out voluntary work in order develop and sustain them. Is it possible to direct some of the same critiques towards the situation as found in la Dignidad? I will suggest that the voluntary work in the Venezuelan context must be viewed within a wider framework. Amongst the popular movements as I encountered it in Caracas, there is a dual claim: there is a quest for the state in assuming its responsibility for providing a safety net and ensuring that human rights a covered with regards to health, education and other social services. Simultaneously, there is the claim for a political and conceptual space for developing the community on their own terms, a development, as we have seen through the empirical discussion, which entails more than material well-

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<sup>54</sup> In Europe and the United States, neo-liberal state reforms are often referred to a “New Public Management” a (ideological) process which started with the election of Margaret Thatcher in England in 1979.

being. It also entails to “build community”. This rests in the historical and ideological process they form part of.

*“[...] one can perceive that urban popular movements join historical movements that are also increasingly more social; they do not only search for their integration into a given societal project, but seek to critically interact with this process, developing a foundational practice and identifying allies and enemies in the process of gaining knowledge and consciousness about lived relations” (Barrierle, Sérgio and Gregorio 1998: 134, original emphasis)*

Inbuilt in this perspective is thus to expand the limits of the individual, the social and the economical, and the voluntary work becomes a part of this. The vision of human beings as “the Economic man” stands out in stark contrast to the perception of society which development within the Bolivarian Revolution entails. The emphasise on “social economy”, viewing economy and the Social as two sides of the same coin, is promoted by the government and reflected in a population who actively engage in developing their own communities within this perspective. I will thus suggest that the potential of radical empowerment through the *misiones* and other community organizations lies in the wider discursive and structural changes which surround it. Poverty and exclusion is not attributed to peoples, or the “poor” own inherent in-capabilities, but linked to the failure of the state to re-distribute resources as well as global processes of marginalization and exploitation. Through admitting the states duty in combating poverty, the co-responsibility between the state and the population in creating a sustainable society is established. Furthermore, through acknowledging this link, a discursive and political space is created which the population use to submit claims to the state. While the state was formerly a body of inaccessible and impenetrable power, people now conveyed an experience of a *right to access* the state.

## **Poverty rates dropping**

It is worth taking a quick glance at statistics. Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) published a report in May 2006, called “Poverty Rates in Venezuela: Getting the Numbers Right”.<sup>55</sup> Estimating that percentage of the population below poverty line

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<sup>55</sup> The article is based on numbers from the venezuelan National Institute for Statistics (INE)

was 50.4 % in 1998 when Chávez took office, it has now dropped to 43% percent in the final quarter of 2005. That is however only measuring cash income. Taking into consideration the non-cash benefits and services made available through the various *misiones* and other programs, such as health care, medicines, education and subsidised food, the number falls to around 35 %. Government spending on social services has increased from 8.2 % of GDP in 1998 to 11.2 % in 2005, and a steady increase is expected.<sup>56</sup>

It has been my attempt in this chapter to explore how every day work in La Dignidad can be interpreted as an essential part of the overall endeavour for developing a new society through the Bolivarian Revolution. I have sought to tease out if the social and political life-word which is an integrative part of the social work can be interpreted as a “thick” meaning. Through perceiving values of solidarity and humanism as intrinsically bound with the overall development of society, the individual becomes an active part of processes of transformation which transcends the mundane every day activity. Being a part of the missions and the every day work becomes a quintessence of the Bolivarian Revolution itself. I will suggest that their insistence of developing their societies on their own premises, drawing on their own values, networks, knowledge and visions for the future is also a powerful negation of the Third World Developmentalism which Escobar and others so harshly have criticised. This becomes a part of the wider discursive field which the Bolivarian Revolution encompasses; a negation of subjugation under the “Third World gaze”, and an insistence on re-vitalizing their cultural and historical heritage which have been a symbol of historical subordination rather than a source to identity and pride.

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<sup>56</sup> For a full overview, see Weisbrot, Sandoval and Rosnick (2006)  
[http://www.cepr.net/publications/venezuelan\\_poverty\\_rates\\_2006\\_05.pdf](http://www.cepr.net/publications/venezuelan_poverty_rates_2006_05.pdf)

## Chapter four

# Encountering sites for political negotiation and transformation

In order to deepen the insights gained through the foregoing chapter, I find it required to explore other arenas outside La Dignidad where political activities take place. Popular movements and other groups representing “struggles from below” are increasingly being drawn into the public sphere in Venezuela today. Frequent public spectacular events like the demonstrations described in the preface of this thesis create a forceful imagery of a country going through profound changes, where the government and its supporters invoke the same discourses and ideological expressions. It is nevertheless crucial to go beyond these public displays of unity, and pay close attention to the frictions encountered beneath the surface. The relationship to the state/government is often ambivalent: the social and political work done within the political-ideological sphere of the revolution, although largely dependent on resources, or at least “the good will” of the state, is not perceived to be work within the state, but rather outside the state and in some extent in opposition to the state. Although they strongly identify with the ideological aspect of the Bolivarian government, they still identify themselves as belonging to the “grass root sphere”; giving way to a struggle for more influence, autonomy and more decentralized power. The subsequent section will shed more light on how political influence is strived for and articulated. I will discuss how new forms of political public encounters between the formal political apparatus and popular organizations provides a setting where expressions and forms of political influence are negotiated. I will also briefly address how media plays a role in shaping the conceptualization of popular movements and *el pueblo* as a new form of citizens and political subjects.

### **Politics, the grass root and legitimacy**

The disregard towards the state has its roots in decades of rampant corruption and ineffectiveness, and as one woman said it: “*people believe in the president and people*

*believe in grass root work (trabajo de base), but they don't believe much in everything between".* This might be an extraordinary pessimistic view, but it nevertheless says something about the widespread disbelief in the state system, and the urgent need to effectively reform it. However, it is also great awareness amongst the popular movements regarding the danger of being subsumed by the political machinery. Political legitimacy is invoked "on the ground" through representing *el pueblo* and the community and through distancing themselves from the formal political apparatus.

This became very clear to me as I spent a lot of time with La Fuerza Popular de la Dignidad. As indicated above, they are a group composed of well- educated people between approx. 40 to 70 years, and have a large network to draw on from both their studying days and their careers. Throughout the past years since the elections of Chávez members of the group have expanded their acquaintances within the political institutions, the government, the new Trade Unions and the government supportive media. They thus comprise a political segment which has emerged in the aftermath of the election of Chávez: they have a long history of local community work and activism on the local political arena, while simultaneously having a network within the new political figures which have now gradually entered government and state institutions. Their success in getting one of them elected as the leader in the Parrish Council and making people really behind their representative as vice-representative (*suplente*) in the National Assembly, is based on their legitimacy through commitment and identification with the wider community. These forms for political actors are now representing a new formation of political actors which transcends the traditional party mechanisms. This can be furthered exemplified by an article from Diario Vea, a daily government supportive newspaper:

“Surprise was the reaction in the national directory of the political parties from Block for Change (the government supportive coalition. My comment) about the victory of the movement Tupamaro<sup>57</sup> and other allied groups in the elections for the Municipality of Nirgua, held last Sunday. Some national leaders from MVR, Podemos and PPT said that the defeat of the MVR-candidate was not expected. However, on telephone from Nirgua, we where told that Luis Vásquez had done a

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<sup>57</sup> Los Tupamaros was previously an armed Marxist-Leninist underground movement in the Forth Republic which have re-grouped and become a potent political force at different local levels during the past years.

more efficient work amongst the popular base, in addition to having a prestigious trajectory as a social fighter. The difference, they said, was that Vásquez represented the feelings and will of the pueblo Chavista in Nirgua.<sup>58</sup>

This news piece indicates how the political discourse evokes legitimacy to locally emerging network, based on their capability to rightfully represent its constituency through doing social and political work “on the ground.” People in La Dignidad expressed dissatisfaction with some representatives in the Parrish Council and the Councillor because they didn’t move around amongst people after they had gotten elected. However, the representative emerging from La Fuerza Popular de la Dignidad enjoyed great respect and approval because he really participated in work at the ground (*trabajo de base*). I frequently met him in different meetings in the local CTU and CPTH, and he were often present in the local assemblies. In a conversation he also told me that he preferred to work locally. He said he had been contacted by representatives from MVR (whom he knew from earlier years work in a Workers Union) and invited to work more closely with them. He had however not been interested, because he considered his role was to work in the community with the mandate he had gotten as a representative from the popular movement (*movimiento popular*). A split within Fuerza Popular de la Dignidad emerged from some of the same reasons. “Their man” who got elected as a vice-representative (*supplente*) to the National Assembly, distanced himself from some of the other distinctive grass roots activists in the group. What personal relationships and internal struggles for power lurking behind this do I not have the full overview of. But the reason for distancing themselves from him which was invoked amongst the rest of the members of the group, was because he thought about joining the government party MVR and did thus not have a real compromise (*compromise*) with working as a team through the group for the community. People claimed that his personal ego and ambitions had taken over his local compromise as soon as he got elected and could access formal power. To my knowledge, this conflict has become

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<sup>58</sup> “Sorpresa fue la reacción en las direcciones nacionales de los partidos políticos del Bloque del Cambio ante la victoria obtenida por el movimiento Tupamaro y otros agrupamientos aliados suyos en las elecciones para la Alcaldía de Nirgua, efectuadas el pasado domingo. Algunos dirigentes nacionales del MVR, Podemos y PPT dijeron que no se esperaba la derrota del candidato del MVR. Sin embargo, en comunicación telefónica con Nirgua, se nos dijo que Luis Vásquez había llevado a cabo un trabajo más efectivo en la base popular, además de tener una trayectoria prestigiosa como luchador social. La diferencia, dijeron, fue que Vásquez representaba el sentimiento y la voluntad del pueblo chavista de Nirgua” Diario Vea, 23d of May 2006

permanent a permanent division; the group is now split and many have sought new arenas to work through.

### **“Parliamentarism of the street”**

The electoral promise for the representative backed by La Fuerza Popular de la Dignidad was to create what they named “Parliamentarism of the Street” (*Parlamentarismo de Calle*). The goal was to organize Popular Assemblies in La Dignidad which would lead to the formation of a wide range of discussion-and action groups. These groups would find solutions to local problems and projects, but also engage in political debates which had relevance outside the community. “Their man” in the National Assembly would then push the community’s interests through his position. Few days after the elections, central figures in the more established party system, such as the head of the National Assembly, Nicholas Maduro (MVR), started to use this phrase, and announced that “Parlamentarismo de Calle” would be created through the formation of Popular Assemblies in Caracas. It was though that he had picked up “their phrase” throughout the election campaign they had staged for the representative from La Dignidad. This was up for discussion in a meeting held shortly after where La Fuerza Popular de la Dignidad were present alongside with people from other popular movements in Caracas. We were around 20 people gathered in their office in downtown Caracas, including the newly elected vice-representative to the National Assembly, as this was before the internal fission in the organization. I here cite some of the speakers present:

Speaker 1:

“...we have spoken a lot about popular power, but as an organization we are very weak...we have to start to work...the parliament has started to talk about *parlamentarismo de calle* but they are talking about it as an form of consultancy. We have to start to talk about executing power on areas both on national and international issues (...). We already have an ideology, but we have to start to talk about in specific on how to get popular power...the only guarantee for the revolution is the popular organization from the grassroots...they want to use it [*parlamentarismo de calle*] as a flag (*bandera*), but we have to make it into reality...”

Speaker 2:

“...we have ourselves to blame for what is happening here with *el parlamentarismo de calle* [being adopted by the parliament representatives]...we should be happy for them picking it up...we have

to ask why the expropriated it...didn't we use and utilize it enough?...we have to criticise and be critical, but we also have to remember that this is our National Assembly.....this is a revolutionary process in which we seeks to develop laws, norms, human conduct...and we are all a product of a capitalist society...we have to avoid secterism, dualism...we have to ask: what can we give to the people?"

Speaker 3:

"...now it is a reality that we have a representant in the parliament...we have to defend this (*parlamentarismo de calle*) in the way we mean it, and we have to develop a politic which can back up XX [their representative] in the parliament...there are people in the MVR who are *derechistas* (from the political right)....The opposition can come from within...we are not without allies [in the parliament] like 3-4 years ago, now we have representation....we have to find a strategy to use it"

Speaker 4:

"...we have to create a new paradigm of popular power...they [the National Assembly] are going to implement what they wants to implement, not what the people want...we cannot wait for them to implement what we want, we have to do it ourselves..."

Discussions like these where frequent. The main government party, MVR, is perceived as an electoral machine, and not as a vehicle for moving the revolution forward. People feared that central persons who had ascended to power within the political parties would bureaucratise the revolutionary process through the formal political machinery. Also, they complained about their lack of responsiveness to the needs of the organized community. At the meeting we held as referred to above, a woman present talked about how some people from La Dignidad had had problems with working in the *Casas de Alimentación* and *Barrio Adentro*, and she said that: "*no one dares to talk to papa Freddy or Maduro*<sup>59</sup>...we have to talk hard to them."

A couple of days later, the "Parliamentarism of the Street" were to be launched by the National Assembly and the Municipality Libertador through the formation of *Consejos de Poder Popular de Caracas* – "Councils for Popular Power". It was decided that La Fuerza Popular de la Dignidad and their allies would have to show up and manifest what their proposal (*propuesta*) of "Parliamentarism of the Street" was. We gathered at

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<sup>59</sup> Freddy Bernal (MVR), the Mayor of Municipality Libertador, and Nicolas Maduro (MVR), the president of the National Assembly

the main plaza in town, Plaza Bolívar, where the president of the National Assembly, Nicolás Maduro, and the Mayor for the Municipality Libertador, Freddy Bernal, was present. Six working tables would be set up which covered the following topics: public security, environment and garbage management, the new social economy (*economía social*) and labour, education and culture, transport and infrastructure and political participation. The councils would also be involved in discussing a series of new laws which were in the making, like the Law of Education (*Ley Orgánica de Educación*) and a new law regulating the police-force (*Ley de Policía Nacional*). Freddy Bernal (MVR) described the Councils for Popular Power as “*the unity and articulation of the work of the organized people (el pueblo organizado)*”. As people hadn’t shown up in time to gather before the event, La Fuerza Popular de La Dignidad didn’t bring a banner with their organization emblem along as planned, but they handed out fliers where their proposal of “Parliamentarism of the Street” was explained and printed.

Throughout my fieldwork in La Dignidad, several meetings were held locally with political appointees where discontent with the formal political apparatus was expressed. One occasion was a gathering at the plaza outside the local Parrish Council, where the Minister for Environment and several representatives from her department met with different organizations in La Dignidad to discuss how a heavily polluted river which runs through the city will be cleaned up. This will be a joint project between the Department for Environment (who will finance it) and different community organizations throughout the city. After the meeting with the environment minister, people grumbled that it was a show-off by the Parish Authorities, and that the projects were already almost finished by the Ministry of Environment before the community organizations had had to chance to have real influence.

Another occasion occurred when La Fuerza Popular de la Dignidad held their first “Parliament of the Street” at the plaza where their campaign had been coordinated from. The councillor for their area was present, which many had been deeply dissatisfied with for a long time as he was considered as efficient. The meeting ended up in a heated argument as he had given a construction contract to build a stairway to a cooperative consisting of his wife and daughter in law, but they had not even done the job.

In the end, people had to be calmed down and reminded of that this was not the occasion for personal attacks.

As the overall aim with the Bolivarian Revolution is to develop a participative democracy, this is a conceptual impetus and political goal which incites different decentralized political projects. While the political discourse mediates that the political processes rest in the participation of *el pueblo*, the paradox lies in the potential of the appropriation of this discourse by formal political actors and apparatuses as a veil which obscures the obstacles to significant influence. As these brief examples indicate, friction between community organizations and the formal political institutions flourished. However, the frequent meetings which are held over different topics and with different political institutions create an intense dynamism, and these are undoubtedly important encounters between political actors and the popular movements from the communities, especially seen in the perspective of previous governments who “*we never saw except during campaigns when they wanted our votes*” as many people said. These meetings facilitate direct contact with political elected representatives and the community where they have to meet face to face with their constituency, as we saw in the example with the councillor above. Until the Bolivarian Constitution was approved in 1999, councillors were directly appointed by the party apparatus, and thus didn’t have to respond to the electorate he or she was set to govern over.

At a wider scale, the actual potential political force which is gradually being developed amongst political and social activists can also in that regard be “nipped in the bud” by the formal political actors. I was told about an illustrative example: as a part of the national strategy for winning the recall referendum in 2005, so called *Unidades de Batallas Electorales* (UBE) (Unities for Electoral Battles) were conformed in the local communities across the country. The UBEs were composed by people from the *misiones* and other social and political organizations. They had been very successful in mobilizing for the referendum, and apparently this had generated a lot of fear amongst deputies, councillors and members of the Parrish Councils. I was told that they had feared that the UBEs would create a spring board for local leaders which would in the next round threaten their positions and challenge their jobs. There had thus been attempts to split them up and neutralize them. At another meeting in La Fuerza Popular de la Dignidad, a member commented that “*Venezuela has an old legacy of democratic centralism, and also a legacy from caudillismo. This is an obstacle for developing power from below and upwards.*” However, administrative reforms are now on the way,

which aims towards transferring more autonomy to the local communities outside the traditional political apparatus. *Consejos Comunales*- “Community Councils”, will be formed, based on already existing zones in the community emerging from the works of CTU and CPTH. These organizations have through their work organized the communities into different zones, delimited by “a sense of natural belonging” within a zone. The *Consejos Comunales* will be formed in a similar manner, and the government will trespass the Municipality and Parrish authorities and seek to hand resources and executive power directly to the *Consejos Comunales*. *Controlaria Social*- “social control organs” are already established in order to prevent corruption, clientelism and keep an eye on other check-and-balance factors. The Municipality also organizes these at higher levels, which i.e. control the expenditure and functions at public hospitals. This is seen as important factors to control corruption and petty theft from the workplace, which have been rampant for decades. The same mechanisms are gradually being implemented in the community, and will also supervise the work of *Consejo Comunales*. This reform was launched after I left, but friends in La Dignidad now tell me that they are vigorously implementing it.

## **El pueblo and the formal public sphere**

Scholars studying popular movements have been concerned with how to conceptualize “the public sphere”. To understand how popular movements engage in political-cultural struggles where quests for influence and attempts to undermine social authoritarianism and elite-based democracy are articulated, we have to look beyond official public environments (Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar 1998: 19). Different concepts to grasp this extension of our understanding of “the Public” has been suggested, such as public spheres, public space and subaltern counter publics (ibid: 18). Nancy Fraser suggests that the Habermasian conceptualization of the liberal public sphere is:

*“informed by an underlying assumption, namely, that the institutional confinement of public life to a single, overarching public sphere is positive and desirable state of affairs, whereas the proliferation of a multiplicity of publics represents a departure from, rather than an advance towards, democracy” (Fraser 1993:13, quoted in ibid:19)*

Thus, from this perspective, one can argue that social movements’ expansion to other spheres of political and cultural articulation can be interpreted as a form of advanced

democracy. The proliferation of community organizations and alternative media in Venezuela throughout this past years have undoubtedly facilitated the expansion of political expressions outside the formal institutions. I will however suggest that it is also highly significant how popular movements and other political activists have been incorporated into formal political arenas. As Baierle notes from Brazil,

*“the nature of the relationship between the sub-altern classes and the formal word of politics alternates between indifference, pragmatism, and violence, if not debauchery and carnivalization [...] the formal spaces of politics (government and parliament) appear as the private spaces of the educated and privileged”*  
(Baierle 1998: 121)

On the backdrop of former elite monopolization over political arenas, when disregard and state violence often was the answer to popular demands and protests, “positive” encounters with the government and state institutions, and access to formerly difficult accessible or un-accessible arenas, become crucial symbolic sites where the potential for societal transformation is manifested. The inclusions of formerly excluded social groups into such sites are significant signposts where contestations of power and conceptualizations of citizenry are formed. Let me give an example taken from my field notes:

6<sup>th</sup> of December 2005

The representants which got elected into the National Assembly from Gran Caracas are taken under oath today. The event is held at Plaza Bolivar, the main square in town, located between the Major’s building and the Governor’s building. The square is filled with supporters for the various candidates, many dressed in red T-shirts with pictures of “their” candidates on. Pavilions in red and white are neatly placed in a square around a small stage. There is an orchestra playing and lots of journalists. A group of guys are playing African drums as they enter the square. Some people are cheering “*el pueblo lo sabe y tiene razon, tenemos una Assamblea de la revolucion*” (the people know it and they are right, we have a revolutionary assembly).

The orchestra is playing the national hymn “Gloria al Bravo Pueblo” (Glory to the Brave People). The president of the National Assembly,

Nicholas Maduro, is entering the plaza surrounded by bodyguards and journalists as always. He is a former bus driver and Workers Union leader. The governor, Juan Barreto, is standing next to me, talking to journalists and trying to greet people around him at the same time. The director for the Office for Citizens' Participation (*Oficina de Participación Ciudadano*) in the National Assembly is greeting the crowd. He says that the plans are changed, the event is now held in the Metropolitan Theater, and encourages everyone to “*tomar las calles*”- “take the streets”, and walk over there, which is nearby.

This is a beautiful old theatre from 1876 which was formerly used for opera and theatre and other activities for the richer part of society. In 2000 it was decided that it should be used for the general public and it is now used for both political events and free theatre shows for the less privileged.

The crowd starts to move through the city centre and down Avenida Barralt. They are waving with banners, cheering slogans and some are dancing to the African drum beat. I ask the friend I am with from La Fuerza Popular de la Dignidad if the oath-ceremony for the representatives was a public event before as well. He laughs. “No, before it was a hermetic event for the elite, and people didn't care either. They felt that it had nothing to do with them”.

As we entered the theatre and started to find seats, it struck me as being a very symbolic event. Unorganized, cheering crowds of people, many dressed in red T-shirts with slogans for Chávez and the revolution, pouring into a beautiful and sophisticated old theatre with dark red drapes and balconies painted in gold. It would be more natural to see women in Victorian dresses and slim waists behind tight corsets.

But on the other side of the isle next to me sits a man who looks like he is a street dweller. He is half asleep, unshaved and has put his load of dirty newspapers next to his seat. On the top balcony someone is waving a gigantic flag of Ché Guevara. The crowd is clapping and cheering: “*El pueblo lo sabe y tiene razon, aqui lo que manda es Chávez y la revolución*” (the people know it and they are right, here it is the revolution and Chávez which rules). The leader for the ceremony is trying to calm people before the leader for the National Electoral Council and the leader for the National Assembly address the audience.

This was undoubtedly a particular spectacular event, which could not have been staged if the main opposition parties hadn't withdrawn from the elections<sup>60</sup>, and thus didn't get

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<sup>60</sup> The main opposition parties withdrew from the elections because they meant that the results would be a fraud and that the National Electoral Committee (CNE) was not trustworthy. The Organization for America States (OAS) negotiated between the two parts, and the opposition was admitted a number of

any representatives elected. But it was a very symbolic moment. An event like this would within conventional political cultures require following cultural codes as dress codes, silence and ceremonial rules associated with elite culture. Bourdieu argues that the organization of space does not have an inherent symbolic meaning; it is invoked and produced through the activities of social actors which make use of that space and the meaning they attribute to their activities and its relationship to the space. (Moore 1994:76) Moore builds on the works of Bourdieu, but argues that his notion of space and embodied *habitus* which locates you in a socially structured hierarchy is too static, and limits the possible of analysing how social domination can be resisted through contesting meanings inhabited in space. She is concerned with how space can be transformed through resistance towards the dominant discourses which it inhabits.

*“If meaning is given to the organization of space through practices, it follows that small changes in procedure can provide new interpretations of spatial layouts. Such layouts provide potential commentaries on established ways of doing things and divisions of privilege.”(Moore 1994:83)*

Drawing on these insights, we can understand the potential of contesting traditionally symbolic displays of elite power by imposing popular expression in a context like this. The whole act- from the African drum beats which entered the plaza, to the flag of Che Guevara waiving from the balcony to the chanting of revolutionary political slogans- was a forceful expression of the popular movements cultural and political idioms invoked on a site which had an inherent traditional association with dominance and class divisions. Curiously, many explicitly mentioned how theatres in Caracas previously had been exclusive sites for the elites, but that they now were frequently used for political meetings and cultural events for the popular sectors. To “conquest” of important spaces becomes thus a part of manifestations signalling an overall societal transformation.

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claims put forwards about extra scrutiny of electorate lists and monitoring on Election Day. Yet so, they withdrew, to OASs surprise

It is also worth taking a glance on the role of the media in opening up new channels from exposure of the popular sectors and popular movements' life world and political articulations. As both the five private opposition channels and the two government friendly TV-channels are so politicised, their forms of mediation are very political and ideological. The two government friendly channels, Channel 8 and VIVE TV screen Chávez' speeches and political events regularly, and similarly, the private TV-channels screen programs hostile to the government. It is impossible to stay in Venezuela without being conscious about the central role media plays in the polarization between the government and the opposition.

It is however far beyond the scope of this thesis to give a consistent media analysis. But I want to mention a few aspects from the government supportive media. Television is an important site of mediating how the normative imagery of citizens are shaped and for signalling who are, and who are not, valuable and legitimate social actors. We remember the informant who was also cited in chapter two, who said that

“...the upper class wasn't used to people without teeth, people of the lower classes on TV, being leaders and talking with authority. They were used to only pretty people in the public, and all of a sudden these people appear on the screen also.”

While television was formerly monopolized by the elites and upper- and middle class, signalling an imagery of the European-looking middle class citizen as what it means to be “Venezuelan” in a normative sense with regard to class and race, it is now being used actively for mediating the life world of other societal sectors. The director of VIVE TV is a young woman who was the former director of Katia TV, a grass root activist TV station from one of the largest *barrios*, Katia, in the western part of Caracas. This channel is clearly characterized by its influence from grass root media, and a typical TV program can be a group of grass root activists which are sitting at plastic chairs in a *barrio* discussing community issues or the current political situation. They also frequently screen political documentaries about social and political issues, both within Venezuela and from the rest of the world. The channel also has a very explicit focus on women and indigenous people. Channel 8 is dominated by a range of political debate programs where both academics and intellectuals and “ordinary people” from the

popular sectors participate, as well as screening public events where Chávez and other politicians are present and articulating with “ordinary” people.

Thus, these two government supportive channels, VIVE TV and Channel 8, serves not only as a medium for articulation and identification amongst activists nationwide, but it is also an arena where the popular sectors knowledge and every day life are recognized and acknowledge as valuable social capital (Bourdieu 1986). As political discourse underscores “popular knowledge” as the basis and prerequisite for societal change and the execution of government policies, politics are symbolically taken out of the exclusive hands of experts and technocrats and the symbolic and cultural capital of *el pueblo* has been merged into the domain where it was previously not only excluded from, but also regarded as invaluable and even despised.

The government is also actively using these channels to mediate their political and social messages, and it thus becomes a central part of communication between the government and viewers, where the imagery of the new Venezuela is being formed. The slogan for the Bolivarian Government is “Venezuela is now everyone’s” (*Venezuela ahora es de todos*). Allow me to give two particularly interesting examples in that regard I witnessed on Channel 8:

The 2<sup>nd</sup> of February 2006 Chávez launched a new social services program which provides poor (single) mothers with 80% of minimum salary.<sup>61</sup> He then held the following speech:

“the other topic, the other topic is the following: you know that there are some persons who are working a lot, a lot, but who are recognised little, little: the housewives (...) not necessarily those [house wives] who have someone who helps them, persons who is working in the house [maids]. No, there are housewives who have nothing but their heart, their dreams, often their tears, four or five children, often they don’t have an husband, nor a boyfriend, [they have] a shack over there, and a faith, a love and a pain. [...] To them [goes] my love, my commitment, to these Venezuelan mothers, housewives in a situations or state of great necessities”

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<sup>61</sup> This is a part of Mision Madres del Barrio, which goal is to improve their living condition and provide poor women with micro-credits for small enterprises.

The speech was used in a television spot which was sent at the state channel for a while in February, showing poor mothers with their children outside impoverished shacks. It was filmed in a manner as to grant them pride, grace and dignity, and accompanied by Chávez' speech as a voice-over. This TV-spot can undoubtedly be discussed from the perspective of the imagery of Chávez as the "guiding father" as discussed in chapter two. However, what concerns me here are the shifting imageries of "poor single mothers" as discussed in chapter two. Through this TV-spot, keeping in mind Chávez' significant influence amongst his followers, poor single women were given acknowledgment as parts of the Bolivarian Project. Their job as mothers, admitting "reproductive labour" status as valuable occupation were recognized. During the same month, there was another TV-spot (both made by the Ministry of Communication and Information) showing street sellers walking in the streets offering stuff to cars waiting for the green light; a common livelihood in many poor countries. The spot also portrayed homeless people. The text said "show respect, they are citizens too".

I do not want to over-estimate the importance of these TV-spots. But I find it significant to recognize them as parts of a wider discourse which seeks to overcome the traditional marginalization of the most fragile and excluded social sectors. As both the event from the Municipal Theatre and the discussion about the media conveys, social sectors which were formerly ignored or even despised, are now accessing and forming various arenas where the vision of the Bolivarian Revolution is being created. At an individual level, right of entry to political arenas is important signposts which symbolize their new role in society. For example I was taken to the Municipality building by an elderly woman from a *barrio* who had never in her life participated in politics until she started working in the CTUs three years ago. Visibly conscious about showing me that "she could get me in there" she presented me to a politically elected employee who worked there with political planning and whom she knew, as I understood it, from previous political work. This woman was one of my main informants, and in our frequent conversations she often talked about how the governments had never cared about people before and never been accessible in any way. She is now involved in political work not only in the *la Dignidad*, but also leaving for activist-conferences other places in the country. She talks about political work and government politics in a very familiar voice, clearly expressing that she looks at herself as an "insider" in working within the Bolivarian project which the government represents.

I will suggest that the experience of inclusion and participation many people conveyed, is composed of the transformation of a multitude of different social and political arenas which in its totality generate an experience of “thick transformation”, to again paraphrase Geertz’ concept of “thick description”. This “thick transformation” is multilayered; it arises from the political and social work carried out in the *barrios*, the various political meetings and marches one attends, the multitude of political expression which surround you in your daily life: wall paintings, political posters, music and political TV-debates, and practices and discourses mediated by the government and the state, where *el pueblo* and the revolution is the order of the day. These different arenas are thus what constitute the dominant part of their public life world, and it is on these arenas the expressions, aspirations and identities in relationship with the Bolivarian Revolution are configured and re-configured. Let us consider the words of two women from La Dignidad about how they experienced the difference between the 4<sup>th</sup> Republic and the 5<sup>th</sup> Republic:

“I started working [with social work] in the 4th Republic, I was 13 years old. Now I am 35. The fight now, in the 5<sup>th</sup> Republic, have been a lot less difficult, because we have the President as an ally with the people, and he wants to help us, so it has been more easy. While in the 4<sup>th</sup> Republic, the guards came [if we wanted to claim help], and many went to prison. Even me they took to the police one day, and they hit me in the leg...yes, it was ugly...and we couldn’t protest. Now it is different because we can claim our rights and we can be sure that the government won’t send out the Metropolitan Police or the National Guards...look *mamita*...the 4th Republic took from us the right to everything, [the right to] participation, they took from us the right to protest, to complain, the right to life. With the 5<sup>th</sup> Republic, for me...its...there is future for my children...it is easier for them to go to school and they can study...its more easy...I don’t have to worry about how they can enter the university...so *conchale*...it’s a big difference between that we suffered in the 4<sup>th</sup> Republic and what we have now in the 5<sup>th</sup> [...] we are like more relieved, we can little by little take off us the weights we carried.”

“Well, in the 4<sup>th</sup> Republic, people didn’t participate like now. In the 4th Republic, there wasn’t any *misiones*, there was more analfabetism [...] In the 4<sup>th</sup> Republic people didn’t participate to construct laws, people like us, people from the *barrio*, weren’t included in the society. We were seen as *marginales*. Now, with this scenario, the difference is enormous because it [society] is constructed from the bottom. It isn’t only the state which is constructing it, we are construction it together as

we are all citizens. And the *misiones* allow you to read and write. I think that you are not a citizen if you don't read and write, and that was convenient for them [in the 4<sup>th</sup> Republic] (*eso es lo que los convenía*). Now, it is not like there isn't any [analfabetism], but there is less and there are more possibilities in total. Like food for example, you get that easier. Before people didn't have it even if they worked. Now we have the *cesta básica*<sup>62</sup>, although not everyone gets it, but we have more possibilities, we have the *Mercales*. Now, besides from what we have, we have this strength to participate, the strength to get together in meetings, even with people from the state. We feel that the state is here, available, and if it isn't, we can easily march against it, and you don't get attacked. In the 4<sup>th</sup> Republic, I was attacked. If you went to a manifestation, you got attacked, above all by the Military Police. Now there is a big difference.”

What we can read out of the words of these two women, is that exclusion was not simply attributed to lack of material resources, what is emphasized is how they experienced a negation of their citizen role and citizen rights. Thus, just as important as improved access to material resources and services, are the different arenas where political participation is encountered and negotiated, and how the public sphere has been opened up and transformed to a space where formerly excluded sectors are represented and established as political subjects with their own symbolisms, identities and knowledge.

Throughout this chapter, I have continued the gradual exploration I started in Chapter two of how the Bolivarian Revolution unfolds as a political process which is encountered, conceptualized and generated on various arenas and through a multitude of practices, expressions and imageries. It has been my aim to convey to the reader the dynamism which is encountered, which the grass roots activists and the popular movements not only play vital part of, but also vigorously generate. It is a broad field of investigation I have set out to cover, and it is undoubtedly a number of paths I could have discussed further. My fieldwork was carried out amongst groups where many of them had a long background of political and social work. Although many of the people I also spent time with were unfamiliar with such work until recently, it would have been very interesting to explore further how “political novices” are partaking in the processes, and what power-divisions are generated in the communities in a wider time perspective. It

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<sup>62</sup> *La Cesta Basica* is basic groceries such as oil, maize, rice i.e. which is given monthly to the poorest families stipulated on their needs for a month. Approx. 1 million people receive it.

would also be relevant to continue this investigation with exploring how the changes taking place on public arenas permeates the private arenas. I have, however, had few chances to thoroughly participate on the domestic arenas, as the events I had my focus on are played on in various public spaces. As an extension of this, it would also be a central theme for further investigation to investigate if gender roles, and in what way, are transformed in the transcourse of the political and social work. Do women's' partaking in constructing houses and sewage system change gendered labour divisions? Do increased opportunities for starting small-scale enterprises through government credits change the gendered divisions of labour within the household, or does it only increase women's' burden of labour? Unfortunately, these questions must be left open for now.

As I have indicated previously in the thesis, there have been several occasions of political violence taking place in Venezuela throughout the past years, including an aborted coup in 2002. In the subsequent chapter, I will address how this shapes their historical and ideological contextualization of the Bolivarian Revolution, and how violent encounters are experienced and mediated.

## Chapter five

# Defending the Bolivarian Revolution: resistance and imperialism

He started to cry. Firstly the tears poured down his cheeks, silent. Afterwards his shoulders started to shake. “Why do I have to live in this”, he said. “I’m not like this; I do not like to engage in violence. But we have to. Why can’t they just leave us alone and let us live in peace? Why can’t I just live in peace, be with my children? Why do I have to live with this constant threat? When shall this stop?” He didn’t expect an answer from me. Neither did he have an answer himself. We sat in silence while his tears slowly dried up.

**T**his chapter has undoubtedly been the most difficult one to write. As Valentine Daniel writes, “*only the extraordinarily gifted or the excessively unmindful (mindless?) can write a book or a chapter on violence without being troubled by the particular challenge the representational forms of writing poses for the task at hand [...]*” (E.Valentine Daniels 2000:335). Violence is a particular complex phenomenon to write about. It is chaotic, dramatic and complex, and it touches the most intimate parts of human life: pain, fear, and possibly death. Additionally, violence is located in a duality; sometimes diffuse, sometimes more clear-cut, about who is the victim and who is the perpetrator, or both. The two perspectives will always tell a different story. What makes it extra troublesome in this context, is that the political situation in Venezuela, which is the context for the violence I write about, is an ongoing conflict. I have frequent contact with my friends there as I’m writing this thesis, and they are concerned with the perspective of escalating violence towards the presidential elections in December 2006. There are also indicators of the Bush-administrations continuous intentions to incite a “regime shift” in Venezuela, though it remains un-clear

how that eventually would happen and when.<sup>63</sup> These perspectives makes it more complex to get an analytical distance to the topic, yet I wish to write it in a way which does not abstract the lived experiences of oppression and fear of the people who shared their stories and feelings with me, nor obscure the potentially dramatic situation Venezuela is facing. I will explore this field by discussing violence in a multilayered form, primarily through the use of narratives. I will try to grasp how violence or threats of violence are intimately interwoven with political ideology and how it serves as a motivation for resistance. Furthermore, my aim is to show that a historical narrative mediated through political ideology is embodied through personal experiences of fear and oppression. I will allege that an anthropological approach to both ideology and violence must grasp both the personal and historical implications if these. I will also explore how the potential threat of future violent action is an ever-present factor which creates what I would call “a low-intensity violent landscape”. This consolidates the group identity as protagonists in the Bolivarian Revolution and their determination to defend the revolution against domestic and international enemies.

### **The multiple faces of violence**

Violence takes multiple forms. It can come as an open aggression or disguised through other expressions. It can be linked to full scale wars between nation states, asymmetric wars as seen in Iraq today, or simplified as ethnic wars<sup>64</sup>, or civil wars. Violence is encountered every day in personal relationships, as gendered violence or encountered in the streets as so-called blind violence. Moreover, one talks of structural violence which produces less visible forms of violence such as poverty, identity deprivation, hunger and illness, which is experienced and embodied in multiple and diffuse forms. Whatever form it comes in, “*violence enacted is but a small part of violence lived*” (Nordstrom and Martin 1992: 8, cited in Broch-Due 2005:1). It is political, social and personal. It goes far beyond the actual violent act encountered, being victim and perpetrator or both; it creates narratives and stories which shapes your experience as a subject in the world, it shapes your social identity towards the “significant others” and it touches the most intimate parts of what it means to be a human being (ibid: 2).

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<sup>63</sup> See i.e. John

Pilger:[http://www.vicuk.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=71&Itemid=30](http://www.vicuk.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=71&Itemid=30) or Salim Lamrani: <http://www.voltairenet.org/article136545.html>

or Larry Birns and Michael Litteri <http://www.voltairenet.org/article139043.html#article139043>

<sup>64</sup> For an dissection of the simplification of “ethnic wars”, see Broch Due (ed): 2004

Latin-America has a violent history. Millions of indigenous people was killed or died as a result of colonialization, so did slaves brought from Africa. In recent history, repressive dictatorships across the continent installed regimes where disappearance, torture and murder were central elements in maintaining control. Caracas and São Paulo are amongst the cities with the highest rate of people killed by gun shots in the world.<sup>65</sup> Caldeira (2000) provides a comprehensive analysis of how violence as crime is experienced in São Paulo. Through accounts of crime, or what she calls “the talk of crime”, (ibid: 2) people organize narratives which also reflect larger processes of societal transformation in Brazil during the past decades. The fear of crime and violence becomes a symbolic reordering of a world with increasing social and spatial segregation and instability:

*“The talk of crime works its symbolic reordering of the world by elaborating prejudices and creating categories that naturalize some groups as dangerous [...] the universe of crime [...] offers a fertile context in which stereotypes circulate and social discrimination is shaped [...] (ibid:2).*

Goldstein (2004) explores how collective lynching of criminals in Bolivia can be interpreted as a “spectacular cultural performance” (ibid: 3) performed by people who are politically, socially and economically excluded from the mainstream society under the processes of neo-liberal re-structuring. The lynching becomes a means of drawing attentions to their living conditions and “*force themselves violently into the public eye*” (ibid). Both of these authors attribute violence in its multiple forms to a wider political context reflecting the social and political struggles which Latin-America is facing.

In the context of this thesis, violent actions are performed in an explicitly stated political context and played out and shaped by the political polarization Venezuela is situated in. The people who form part of this thesis mediate that engagement in violent actions is motivated by a political ideology which aspires for a better future, and because they fear for their own safety. Christian Krohn-Hansen uses the phrase “political life as cosmologies” in order to show how historical interpretations evolve as a powerful world view which legitimizes and orders the use of political violence. “*Political power and violence is executed, experienced and seeked justified by the means of specific*

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<sup>65</sup> Throughout my fieldwork I lived next to barrio and got used to hear occasional shootings at night

*imaginations*” (Krohn-Hansen 2001:10). He argues that in the post-colonial world, configurations of imperialism continue to live in changed forms through specific patterns of violence, power and meaning (ibid: 131). History, or rather histories, is crucial for anthropological understanding of how people understand and experience their lives.

Similarly, I will suggest that political ideology must be interpreted as a world-view located within history and shaped by social configurations and personal experience. Ideology has by anthropology often been treated as a system of belief compared to religion. It has been interpreted as a structuring order amongst members of groups which share a set of beliefs or values. *“Ideology has been said, for example, to be a structure of signification that defines roles and the purpose of individual activity”* (Wilson 1992:18). However, this perspective on ideology fails to acknowledge the historical context it has evolved and gained significance. While Marxism linked ideology directly to class-consciousness and the societies’ super-structure, a post-Marxist interpretation looks upon classes as rendered less significant in the new global division of labour and production, but yet locate the production of ideology to political-material processes embedded in relationships of power. Ideology would thus be *“constrained by, expressed through, and linked with the material it organizes and the historical context in which the configuration of meaning (which often has to do with power) it renders coherent are recognizable to social actors.”* (Nugent 1993:36, original emphasis) It is thus crucial to treat the concept of ideology as grounded in history and politics while also being sensitive towards the way it is transformed in the transcourse of social relations (ibid 36-37).

However different they may be in organization, context and expression, many Left-winged radical groups in Latin-America share a Marxist or Marxist-inspired political ideology<sup>66</sup> based on a discourse directed towards liberating *el pueblo* from imperialism and domestic oppression by the political and military elites. While the upper-and middle classes has embraced the project of modernity, development and consumerism, subaltern resistance groups has maintained an identity based on a historical interpretation of the continents violent history which traces contemporary poverty,

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<sup>66</sup> For an collection of the most well-known resistance groups in Latin America, see <http://www.colectivoalexisvive.org/enlaces.htm> (in Spanish)

violence and sub-ordination back to the Spanish conquest as an unbroken line of oppression, exploitation and domination. Columbus` colonialization started the exploitation of human and natural resources which the contemporary matrix of national and international economic, military and political power continues. The present regime of neo-liberalism has not only subjugated people into poverty through these exploitative historical mechanisms, it has also subjugated the human being into mental and cultural oppression which in a multitude of forms oppress particular groups such as indigenous, women, peasants, and workers, and indeed the humanity as such. The discourse and symbolism invoked across the continent drawn on much of the same historical templates, icons and rhetoric, while located in the particular struggle each is situated in. Symbols as Ché Guevara, historical events like the defeat of socialist governments in Chile and Nicaragua and popular folk songs of comrades who fell in battle form part of a life world which keeps the historicism of the present alive.

During my fieldwork I met a number of people from popular movements who had been involved in various violent confrontations throughout the past years political turmoil, such as the coup in 2002 and the *guarimbas*<sup>67</sup> in 2004. I soon realized that this was crucial for grasping how they experienced the contemporary political process.

I asked one of them why he was willing to risk his life for the Bolivarian Revolution. This is what he answered:

- Why do you risk your life for this?
- Because for us this is a utopia coming true! This revolutionary process, for us who have years fighting, I for example have 40 years in this fight, fighting against the bourgeois system, the capitalist system ,the exploiting system we lived in the 4th republic...it was a two-party dictatorship...I was imprisoned, chased by the state...but I always fought for a change, for social justice...an now we are starting to see social justice...we are seeing the fruits of the revolution, we only need to concretize it more, consolidate it...And now, with the new international situation we have, with the support, from the Latin-American people, and other parts of the world...I think we have an solid situation, because we know that we are not going to fight alone against imperialism if they invade us. The Latin-American people would fight together to defeat the imperium completely if they invade us. “

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<sup>67</sup> As explained previously, it refers to a wave of violence incited by opposition militants in February 2004. It started in middle class neighbourhood Altamira, where they he blocked roads, denied people to go out on the streets, and tried to spread violence across the city and to the barrios. It lead to shooting and some wounded.

This quote eloquently illustrates how their collective identity draws on the ideological-historical narrative which is elaborated on above. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, I am careful with how much I specify them. Most of them come from different places in Caracas and are men between 30 and 60 years old. Some of them have a background from the rural guerrilla, which for the most collapsed in the 1960ties (Gott 2000: 60). They mostly belong to the lower middleclass in terms of economic and educational level, but live in barrios.

I will suggest that group identity and its ideological orientation must be analysed as intrinsically bound with the life world in which it arises, develops and is shared in a progressively wider or denser context. In order to understand human beings actions and ideas, however unfamiliar it may seem, we must ask question about what individual and collective experiences have produced and developed these actions and ideas. Prior to the election of Chávez, many of these people had been actively engaged in resistance towards the former governments. I also spoke with some people who had formed part of the attempted coups of 1992 and 1994. They told me that after el Caracazo in 1998, many had been so horrified by the atrocities committed by the police and military by government orders, that they had realized that the situation was unbearable. The present government is thus the achievement of a long history of resistance, as is being explained by this man:

Chávez says that this is a non-violent revolution. It is not true. We have spilled a lot of blood and lost many *compañeros* throughout the last years in order to make this revolution happen. [...] It is not that we are violent because we want to. There is nothing we'd rather want than to live in peace with our children, to see our grandchildren grow up. But we have been violent out of necessity, because there was no other way.

Engagements with the Process were often discussed in emotional terms, as a feeling and strive for solidarity and justice. It can be illustrated through this passage:

“A journalist from one of the opposition channels once asked me in a demonstration, probably in order to intimidate me, what “Socialism of the 21st Century” is. I answered that I haven't studied enough to give you an academic answer. But I mean that socialism is when I'm willing to sell my car without hesitation in order to save the life of my sick neighbour. Socialism is when I care about my neighbours' everyday

life- without intruding in his privacy of course. Socialism is when I cannot sit in my house and enjoy a big steak, knowing that my neighbour next door doesn't have food. Socialism is when you really feel this. The problem is that there are people in the process who haven't really understood this aspect, haven't captured and understood what the process really is about. People doesn't feel it here (a touches his heart). The problem is people who are in the process for their own benefit. I have a good life; I have a beautiful wife, 3 beautiful children and a good job. But if the moment comes and I have to defend this process [and sacrifice my life] I will do it. Because I feel it here (touches his heart again).

The fight for a better future for their children was, as above, by many invoked as the most important vision for promoting the Bolivarian Revolution. Similarly, many I spoke with mentioned the same in their engagement in resistance during the coup in 2002 and at other violent events. A man explained his feelings around this coup like this:

The evening the 12<sup>th</sup> of April I was sitting in my house, listening to the radio. I cried and cried. What made the strongest impact was a conversation between a journalist and Patricia Poleo [a leading opposition figure and journalist who was in the presidential palace with the "interim" government]. The journalist asked her what made her most happy about what had just happened. She answered something about that this and this person would not become ambassador to Brazil and something else. And then Patricia asked the journalist what she was most happy about. She answered: "that my girl will grow up in liberty." My wife was pregnant and we were also expecting a girl at that time. And I cried and cried and thought: "your girl. But my girl just lost her possibility to grow up in liberty."

When talking about the coup, the fear of having another repressive regime was frequently evoked. Apparently, there was a list circulating amongst the militias which supported the coup plotters. Some of the people cited in this chapter was on that list, and their houses were broken into. The prospective of an oppressive regime forced them to take actions, as is explained by this informant:

Well...you ask about the coup. We knew beforehand that there was coming a situation of confrontations. Even the government knew it I think. We felt rage and impotence. Many of us have a background from rural and urban guerrilla. When the situation was there, we found our weapons, and went to Fuerte Tiuna and Miraflores. We just knew that we couldn't live with another dictatorship, one imposed by the United States. And we knew what our prospects were. The police was already in the streets, oppressing us. The dictatorship started already the 11th and

the 12th. And we knew that they were coming for us, the spokespersons in the Armed Forces said it [on TV]. I remember a general who said on TV:” we know where the Bolivarian Circles are, we know where the revolutionaries are. We are coming after you.” So, we went out to give them an answer, we had to react. “

## **The recurrent memories of terror**

Throughout my studies in anthropology, the book which has made the most impact on me was Taussig’s *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man*. Taussig tried to explore how the history of colonialism and violence is mediated through shamanic rituals and myths, how the *epistemic murk* (Taussig 1987: xiii) is dealt with, generations after the slaughtering of their forefathers. He writes in chapter one:

*Most of us know and fear torture and the culture of terror only through the words of others. Hence my concern is with the mediation of terror through narration, and with the problem of writing effectively against terror. (Ibid: 3)*

Taussig, who writes within a radical post-modern and de-constructivist genre, is concerned with how anthropologists’ theories and ideologies categorise experiences of violence and thus is un-able, through the language this generates, to capture how violence is experienced and embodied (Gaines 1995:71). He has however been criticised for his condemnation of hegemonic discourse and legitimacy, yet he still steers his story through his own body of academic knowledge and representations (see i.e. Kapferer 1988).

I see the value of these critiques, but my fascination for his book yet remains. The Colombian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez has criticised Europeans for not understanding the violent social landscape he tries to tease out through the Latin-America literary genre “magic realism” (Krohn-Hansen 2001:45). Taussig plays on these elements in his book, where reality, history and subjective experience merged and blurred into each other. It is chaotic and un-systematic, and also left me with a feeling of exactly this: chaos. My interpretation of the book is that this is what Taussig wants us to be left with. He writes about terror, and terror is chaotic. It can not be put in neat categories or eloquently elaborated in structured, academic passages.

As Taussig shows in his way, a history of oppression is lived again and again through generations. But terror and violence is not only physical pain and deprivation of freedom and life, it does also come in the shape of injustice, hunger, exclusion, helplessness. It is when you feel that the safety of your family is threatened, when you fear that your children will not have the possibility to live a dignified life. It is when you locate yourself in a historical narrative of oppression and injustice, and when your efforts to escape this are cut off by the very structures of power and dominance which also oppressed your foremothers-and fathers.

Many pointed out the hopelessness, marginalization, state oppression and the feeling of having no rights to claim justice they experienced during the 4<sup>th</sup> Republic. I often met a woman who had lost her son in 1989 during el Caracazo. The family had feared that the riots would last for several days and that they would run out of food. She sent one of her teenage sons out to buy some milk and *harina pan*, the cooked corn meal which is the basis for Venezuelan staple food, the *arepa*. She urged him to be careful before he left the house. He was shot dead by riot police at a street corner in La Dignidad on his way to the shop.

She is a lively and talkative woman in her 50ties, enthusiastically involved in community work. But she is always wandering restlessly around at the meetings. Her face is marked by a web of fine lines and she has something very haunted in her eyes. She talked with me numerous times about el Caracazo. Always very intense, as if she really wanted convey to me what it was like, what it felt like. Talked about the violence, the riots, the mass grave outside Caracas she managed to save her dead son from, because she “knew someone”. About the government which withheld food in the aftermath of the riots in order to “punish” the people. How they never excused themselves, never tried to make up for the atrocities they committed. How all the dead victims never have been publicly recognized before now, under *Chávez*’ government. Her rage against the governments during the 4th republic is still visible, today 17 years later.

Once I went to cinema with a friend and informant to see the famous Venezuelan director Roman Chalbaud’s film about *El Caracazo* in 1989. It was a cross-cutting of contemporary actors and black-white tapes shot during *el Caracazo*. My friend was in

the streets that day, and was nearly killed by the military police as he was outside after the curfew. For two hours straight after the movie, he had goose bumps on his arms, and he was nearly incapable of talking. Earlier, he had told me that he and several other friends had been arrested in 1996 or 1997, transporting propaganda material for MVR. He had been tortured and jailed for 15 days, and mentally prepared himself for getting killed. Coming from a left-winged family, he had always grown up within revolutionary vision. He was born to be a fighter in this fight, he said, and had always been prepared for the possibility of being killed in this historical battle.

The violent memories from the 4<sup>th</sup> Republic represents a stark violent imagery which is vividly alive through the present situation. For many of the persons I have presented in this section, the former regimes caused them great personal suffering. Thus, with reference to Taussig, and the foregoing section in this chapter, I would argue that violence and resistance as experienced now, by my informants, is located in a conscious and unconscious historical imagination of violence and terror, mediated through personal histories, historical accounts, music and poetry. The political ideology is a structuring narrative, but the Latin-American history of oppression and violence, comprise a cosmology of oppression, martyrs and combatants which is vividly alive as a part of their life-world. Thus, their motivation for defending the process now, with violence if necessary, is a political ideology and historical narrative feeding back into personal engagement with violence and oppression. Similarly, the Bolivarian Process is a revindication for the oppression they suffered, and for other combatants who fell in battle in other countries, other epochs.

### **An ongoing low-intensity violent landscape**

The prospects of another coup or other violent actions were a frequent topic, both among people and on televisions programs. People had vivid memories of the day of the coup, and the anger and desperation they felt. The coup resulted in a massive mobilization across the city, and “*Radio Bemba*” (the word of mouth) was set in motion to mobilize people to take to the street. An informant told me that he and other *motorizados* (with motobikes) drove secretly from barrio to barrio and urged people to take to the streets. The government’s TV-stations were cut off, and the oppositions TV-stations announced that Chávez had resigned and that a new government was installed. When the city exploded and people were flooding the streets to protest, they cut news

broadcast and started to send soaps and “Pretty Woman”. In spite of violent police repression, people took to the streets. An informant, a voluptuous woman in her 30ies with pained legs, told me that she had walked for hours from where she lives to go to Fuerte Tiuna, the military base. “*I was so angry that I would rather die than accepting this,*” she said.

As mentioned above, a general said on television that “*we know where the Bolivarian Circles are, we know where the revolutionaries are. We are coming after you.*” The list which targeted many of the people I came in contact with throughout the fieldwork was probably provided by local opposition militants who lived in La Dignidad. During the campaign I participated in, there were a few occasions when a car with dark windows parked next to the square where the campaign coordination was located. This resulted in speculations if it was people from the opposition spying, and the police was called in order to check who was inside the car. There were also a few episodes where bottles were thrown in at the campaign area from people hiding behind the trees above the square. Another episode came one night we were out at an outside restaurant:

We are sitting at a table, drinking beer and chatting, when one of the men around the table suddenly stops talking and freezes his gaze at something behind my back. I turn around and see 7-8 young, fit men leaning up against a car at the other side of the street, looking in our direction. They do nothing, not even talking to each other, a quite strange behaviour a late Saturday evening. There is suddenly an eruption of activity between the other people I’m with, and they start to whisper intensely. One of them goes into the bar, and comes back, saying that it is 10 or 12 of “our people” present (in case something should happen). But after a few minutes, the men on the other side of the street slowly start to walk away.

As the situation calmed, they told me that the men on the other side, was protégées of a man from La Dignidad who belonged to the opposition militias. One of the men, whom I was with, had met him on the street earlier that day. They knew each other from a long time back, but were now bitter enemies. They had in a cold, calm tone “flexed their muscles” when they met, acknowledging their position as bitter adversaries in the political conflict. He was a very dangerous man I was told, and had thrown a hand

grenade into an election station during the referendum in 2005. Apparently, he had sent his boys out that evening as a warning and implicit threat to the man I was with.

I don't know more about this particular occasion than what I have written here, and it might be more to the story but what I know. But I will suggest that episodes like those described above compass a low-intensity threat coming from within and constitute a constant factor in a potentially violent landscape. The political conflict has thus created an ongoing violent landscape which permeates these peoples everyday life; particularly for those who explicitly have participated in violent actions and have a background from these kinds of groups, but also for other people. I asked a woman in her 30ies who works in CTU and CPTH if she feared for her safety if a new violent overthrow took place. *“When the last coup came, I hadn't been very visible”, she said. “But now I have been very visible, so I think I would be more unsafe in case of a coup now”.*

I heard many accounts of the coup, *las guarimbas* and the oil sabotage, but as the situation was relatively calm when I was there, I didn't really understand the impact it had had on people. Steven Lyng (1998) writes about anthropologies goal as not only co-presence with the people you engage with, but also

*“getting inside the skin of one's subject- that is, when the researcher experience of the external evens, places, and people that constitute the subjects world is embedded in the emotions, sentiments, and physical/mental states that shape their responses to the world” (ibid: 225).*

During the fieldwork an occasion came up which made great impact on me. This happened a couple of days before the elections for the National Assembly. The main opposition parties had withdrawn from the elections, as they meant that the results would be a fraud and that the National Electoral Committee (CNE) was not trustworthy. The Organization for America States (OAS) negotiated between the two parts, and the opposition was admitted a number of claims put forwards about extra scrutiny of

electorate lists and monitoring on Election Day. Yet so, they withdrew, to OASs surprise<sup>68</sup>. The situation was already tense, and then this happened:

I tried to send a sms-message to my main informant all morning to get the exact time for a meeting in La Dignidad scheduled for that evening. I eventually got a cryptic message back: *“Something has happened. Code red. Come here and I’ll tell you”*. I arrived in taxi an hour later. Everyone seemed stressed. We sat down at some rocks a little bit away from people. I asked him what has happened. He had a worried expression on his face. *“Mira”*, he said. *“Look. We have gotten information from contacts higher up in the government system that there is violence planned for the Election Day. We don’t really know what it will be, if they will start violence like the “guarimbas”<sup>69</sup>, try to scare people away from voting, try to generate a coup or what they will do. But the intelligence has picked up information. But we are all on alert. Don’t worry”*. I didn’t know how to respond, it was just too surreal. I looked around and noted that it seemed liked many of the people present were armed. I asked some more questions about where the information came from and what the exact information was, but he couldn’t say more. I don’t know if it was because he didn’t know more or because he didn’t want to tell me more. We sat in silence for a while. *“Aren’t you afraid”*, I asked, eventually. He paused for a while. *“Look, we have been through this so many times the last years. You just came, but you have no idea what we have lived through....repression before Chávez...and afterwards...the coup, “las guarimbas”...this is nothing new...This is the work of the American Empire, they are behind this. It is not only the opposition we are up against. They are ready to do everything to stop this process. But we are prepared to fight. Don’t worry. If anything serious happens we will get you out, to your embassy or some place safe.”*

No violence took place on the Election Day, except a gas pipe line blown up in the Zulia state the night before and some smaller bombs in Caracas which didn’t kill anyone, but left some injured. A week later, however, the National Assembly had a press conference in which they presented telephone conversations captured by the intelligence service (DISIP) between dissident army generals belonging to the opposition. They discussed how a military garrison outside Caracas would be taken control over, government buildings would be attacked and hopefully loyal military and armed citizens would take to the streets and a blood bath would start. They expected up

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<sup>68</sup> For an throughout analysis of the election, see Gregory Wilpert: [www.venezuelaanalysis.com/articles/php?artno=1633](http://www.venezuelaanalysis.com/articles/php?artno=1633)

<sup>69</sup> As explained previously, it refers to a wave of violence incited by opposition militants in February 2004. It started in middle class neighbourhood Altamira, where they he blocked roads, denied people to go out on the streets, and tried to spread violence across the city. It lead to shooting and some wounded.

to 15 000 dead, they said. The intelligent service had been able to stop all these plans, arresting a number of people and confiscating a lot of weaponry. The opposition media, however, claimed that it was fabricated by the government in order to demonize the opposition and consolidate the government's support. I don't know the absolute truth about this event. Navigating between the version of the government and the versions of the opposition regarding political events is a schizophrenic experience, as their interpretations are completely opposite. But given the coup in 2002 and other violent and subversive events planned and executed by sectors of the opposition, I find it very possible that it was true.

My first reaction that evening was fear, and I thought "The Norwegian embassy". My second was anger, a profound anger and a determination to stay in the neighbourhood throughout the Election Day. That evening people from the community gathered in order to discuss what had happened. This is taken from my field notes:

There is no doubt amongst people that this is monitored from the White House in Washington, through the opposition organization *Súmate* and the American embassy in Caracas. This evening there is a big meeting in the commando, where all the leaders from community organizations, UVES (grass root election mobilization committees) and the *misiones* involved in the campaign are gathered. Approximately 70-80 people are sitting in a circle outside the campaign tent. Some children are running around. Some of the men have surrounded the outskirts of the campaign area watching out for suspicious people or movements. There is a more serious atmosphere in the air than normally. A man holds a speech:

"They are trying to scare people from voting. We have to stand together and make people take to the streets like we have done before. Our biggest enemy on Sunday is the abstention. If it is a large percentage of abstention, they can say that this National Assembly is not legitimate. We have to mobilize everyone, mobilize the *misiones*. They know what's at stake here (...). This is no longer about our candidates to the National Assembly. This is about the process which is in danger, we are in danger. We know that this is the imperialism, *cameradas*. It is not anymore the opposition we are up against, this process is now controlled from Washington, and it is Bush which runs this show. And we know what they are after, it is the President. We know what they did the 12th of April, that they had planned for 100 000 dead. If it happens in the days to come what they are planning, it will be bloody. *Cameradas* can die."

Throughout the speech people were very attentive. Afterwards other people spoke, and everyone revolved around the same themes: that we had to stand together in order to

defend the process, that this was the work of imperialism, that we had to defend everything we had achieved, that this was a process we were defending for our children and grandchildren.

Later that evening a group from VIVE TV came in order to make a program which encouraged people to vote. A person from each of the *misiones* and organizations in the community spoke; emotional speeches about what were at stake. Two of the girls from the campaign command lead the program. Between the different speakers, everyone was cheering slogans:

”Alerta, alerta, alerta que camina,  
la espada de Bolivar por America Latina”  
(Look out, look out, Bolivar’s sword is passing through Latin America)

”La patria no se vende, la patria se defiende”  
(the fatherland is not sold, the fatherland is defended)

“Si vienen como el once, saldremos como el trece”  
(If they come like the 11th, we will take to the streets the 13th. (Refers to the coup in April 11-13, 2002))

To mediate the dense feeling of threat in the air which hung as a shadow over us that night is almost impossible to describe through a text. Equally difficult is it to convey the fierce determination to defend what they felt they had achieved throughout the past years of the Bolivarian Process. The two following days before the election were marked by intense discussions, both in the media and amongst people about the days to come, but simultaneously a confidence in their collective ability to stand up against whatever aggressions would come.

In her analysis of how the threat of violence is narrated amongst citizens in São Paulo, Caldeira writes that “*the talk of crime*” feeds a circle in which fear is both dealt with and reproduced, and violence is both counteracted and magnified” (Caldeira 2000:19). I will suggest that the continuous potential violent landscape which the threat of violence, sabotage or another coup entail, constitutes a similar structuring narrative for their experience of living the Bolivarian Revolution. The experiences with violence and potential of more violence and sabotage structure their life world on various levels: it shapes their identification and unity with the “significant other” in their immediate

surroundings and the ‘imagined community’ of *el pueblo*. It becomes an inherent part of their political and social universe, and shapes and consolidates their antagonistic identity vis-à-vis the opposition and *los esqualidos*. The various conflicts and violent happenings during the past years are recurrent themes in every day conversations and discussions. As Caldeira writes: “*in fact, it is the recurrent translation and continuous reflection of these different levels through the common vocabulary of crime [violence] and its categorizations that dramatize the evaluation of society’s predicament*” (ibid: 34). Thus, inherent in their perceptions and aspirations for the future is also the latent threat of being exposed to aggression and violence. However, they transform it into active resistance through their collective aspiration to defend the Bolivarian Revolution. As one informant told me: “*if something happen, everyone will mobilize and fight together, everyone will have a role*”. Thus, through the potential threat of aggression, being military or through other disguised means, the engagement in the Bolivarian Revolution constitutes an embodied resistance against historical domination and imperial intervention.

In this chapter I have tried, through various perspectives, to mediate how violence and threats of violence were experienced amongst people I met and spent time with throughout my fieldwork. I have suggested that the ideology and world-view, which they share with many left-winged groups in Latin-America, stems from their personal experiences with oppression and resistance, and simultaneously re-enforces their engagement in defending the Bolivarian Revolution. I have tried to show how the historical perspective of colonialism and imperialism is an embodied and lived part in their life, and creates what I called “a cosmology of resistance, martyrs and combatants”. I have also sought to explore how the ongoing political conflict and the possibility of more violence and attempts to violently overthrow of the government, creates a constant, low-intensity threat, which is a structuring part of their social life and envisioning of the future.

# Epilogue

**T**hroughout this thesis I have sought to gradually explore how the Bolivarian Revolution entails a series of political processes unfolding on various arenas and mediated through various discourses and imageries. Lewellen writes in the introduction to his book *Political anthropology. An introduction: “in sum, anthropologists are torn between diametrically opposed demands: to be true to the intense particularity of the field experience and to give meaning to that experience by generalizing it to the world at large”* (Lewellen 1983-xii). I have strived to meet these demands through searching for how the field I studied was entangled in global historical and political processes. Concurrently, I have tried to convey a vivid imagery to the reader of how the every day life evolves in La Dignidad and other places in Caracas, and the intense optimism and pride, but also frustrations and anxieties I encountered. For the people who form part of this thesis, they have a great awareness of the linkages between their everyday activities and the wider context it is entangled in. From their perspective, this historical époque is constituted by an escalating global struggle between the oppressed and excluded, and powerful global forces which seek to control the world’s resources and populations through monopolizing military, political and economic power. Also, they often talked about how they feel that Venezuela is playing an important role in this struggle. One informant, a woman in her 60ies from la Dignidad, said to me once with pride: *“no other country in the world has a process like we have here in Venezuela. But as they gradually see what we have achieved, other will follow.”* If I have managed to gradually convey their achievements and the enthusiasm this is accompanied by, it is my way of giving something back to all those brave women and men who let me into their lives.

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# Appendix 1



Venezuela, officially named Republica Bolivariana de Venezuela, is situated at the South American east coast, bordering to Colombia, Guyana and Brazil. It covers 916.445 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of 25.7 millions.<sup>70</sup> It has a tropical climate, though drier in the inlands. It is a federal republic, divided into 23 states, 1 federal district and 1 federal dependency.<sup>71</sup> The capital is Caracas; other larger cities are Maracaibo, Valencia and Puerto la Cruz. The president is both chief of state and head of government and appoints a Council of Minister to the cabinet. The legislative branch consists of unicameral National Assembly with 165 seats<sup>72</sup>. The country is rich in natural resources such as oil, natural gas and gold and iron, and has the 5<sup>th</sup> largest oil exporter in the

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<sup>70</sup> 2006 estimate. <http://www.cia.gov/publications/factbook/geos/ve.html>

<sup>71</sup> The federal dependency consists of 11 federally controlled island groups

<sup>72</sup> Three additional seats are reserved for indigenous representative

world. The petroleum sector counts for roughly one-third of GDP. The official language is Spanish, but there are also numerous indigenous dialects. The majority (96%) are Roman Catholics. There are around 25 indigenous groups, comprising approximately 500 000 individuals, mainly living in the tropical areas bordering to Brazil, Colombia and Guyana. The capital, which official name is Santiago de León de Caracas, is located in a valley at the east coast and inhabits approximately 5 million inhabitants. The country gained its independence in 1811.

# Appendix 2

## Part of the Bolivarian Constitution of Venezuela regulating de-centralization and political participation:

### Article 184

“Open and flexible mechanisms shall be created by law to cause the States and Municipalities to decentralize and transfer to communities and organized neighbourhood groups services the latter manage and demonstrate the ability to provide, promoting:

(1) The transfer of services in the areas of health, education, housing, sports, culture, social programs, the environment, maintenance of industrial areas, maintenance and upkeep of urban areas, neighbourhood prevention and protective services, construction of works projects and providing of public services. To this end, they shall have the power to enter into agreements, whose content shall be guided by the principles of interdependence, coordination, cooperation and shared responsibility.

(2) Participation by communities and citizens, through neighbourhood associations and nongovernmental organizations, in the formulation of investment proposals for presentation before the state and municipal authorities in charge of preparing the pertinent investment plans, as well as participation in the execution, evaluation and control of works projects, social programs and public services within their jurisdiction.

(3) Participation in economic processes, stimulating manifestations of the social economy, such as cooperatives, saving funds, mutual funds and other forms of association.

(4) Participation by workers and communities in the running of public sector business enterprises, through self-management and joint management methods.

(5) Creation of community service enterprises, organizations and cooperatives as mechanisms to generate employment and social Welfare, providing for their permanent existence through the design of policies whereby these groups are given means of participating.

(6) Creation of new decentralized organs at the parish, community, ward and neighbourhood levels, with a view to guaranteeing the principle of shared responsibility in the public administration of local and state governments, and developing process of

self-management and joint management in the administration and control of state and municipal public services.

(7) Participation by communities in activities to establish closer ties with penal institutions and ties between the latter and the general population.

For full version in English, see [http://www.vheadline.com/printer\\_news.asp?id=6831](http://www.vheadline.com/printer_news.asp?id=6831)

# Appendix 3

Venezuelan Presidents since 1950 preceding Chávez<sup>73</sup>:

1950-1959: General Marcos Pérez Jiménez

1958-1959: Military Civilian junta (presided over by Rear Admiral Wolfgang Larrazábal)

1959-1964: Rómulo Betancourt

1964-1969: Raul Leoni

1969-1974: Rafael Caldera

1974-1979: Carlos Andrés Pérez

1979-1984: Luis Herrera Campíns

1984-1989: Jaime Lusinchi

1989- 1993: Carlos Andrés Pérez

1993-1994: Ramón Velásquez

1994- 1998: Rafael Caldera

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<sup>73</sup> Source: Coronil 1997: xvii