

# Patronage for Revolutionaries: the politics of community organising in a Venezuelan barrio

Harry Greateorex

Thesis submitted for the PhD in Development Studies

University of East Anglia

School of International Development

August 2016

"This copy of the thesis has been supplied on condition that anyone who consults it is understood to recognise that its copyright rests with the author and that use of any information derived there from must be in accordance with current UK Copyright Law. In addition, any quotation or extract must include full attribution.

Word count: 94,266 excluding references and appendices

# Abstract

The political success of Hugo Chávez and Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution has relied on the promise of both emancipation and improved terms of patronage for the urban poor. This thesis takes a journey through barrio Pueblo Nuevo, the oldest informal township in Mérida city, to consider the tension between these ways of thinking about the relationship between people and government as a context for community organising.

Different kinds of evidence are presented from fieldwork conducted between 2013 and 2014, when Mérida made international headlines as violent protests erupted and the middle-class neighbourhoods around Pueblo Nuevo barricaded themselves against the state. Observations from community meetings in and around the barrio show how different groups position themselves strategically in relation to political parties and city authorities. Experiences from nine months volunteer teaching work is used to explore the participatory methodology of the barrio's famous 'little school' - the Fundación Cayapa education collective - and its work to reduce gang violence. Experiences of living and participating in Pueblo Nuevo and of building relationships with key community members are drawn on to explore perceptions of the lawlessness and political radicalism of Venezuela's barrio populations. Interviews with activists, residents and local officials are used to map the intellectual landscape of the barrio, identifying different overlapping folk concepts about the urban poor - including as ghetto thugs and as social revolutionaries - and connecting these to notions about government and democracy.

These connected areas of analysis are used to bring together the existing scholarship around Venezuela's experience of Chavismo – as a public narrative, as a set of institutions and policies and as the context for barrio organising. The thesis contributes to these existing areas of literature by challenging the representation of Bolivarianism as a break from the pre-Chávez political era. Historical evidence is presented to connect the contemporary experience of Pueblo Nuevo with the history of the barrio as Mérida's first so-called "land invasion" following rural-urban migration during the mid-Twentieth Century. Important continuities are identified with the pre-Chávez era in the strategies of community groups, their administration by partisan city authorities and within the Bolivarian public narrative of class warfare and popular empowerment. The thesis argues that community organising in Pueblo Nuevo is shaped by the inherited tension between processes of social emancipation and patronage and their premises in competing folk concepts about the urban poor.

## Acknowledgements

I am indebted to the people of Pueblo Nuevo who contributed to this study and who made my time in Mérida what it was. I was always amazed by your openness and your willingness to welcome a stranger to your community and into your homes. I have tried to show something of the community that people don't always see, and that they really should.

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of everyone at La Escuelita – especially Janeath, Gerardo, Vannesa, Lisbeide, Juan, Ewan, Andry, Griseide, Joshua, Marco, Pichi, Monchu and Tamara. Thank you for your generosity and your honesty. The work you do has to go on whatever happens outside Pueblo Nuevo.

Special thanks also go to my 'Venezuelan family' – to Marleny, Jose-Luis and Marco Angulo Quintero for your kindness and for letting a naïve foreigner into your home.

To Paul Dobson, thank you for your insights and your support. I hope what I've written doesn't disappoint you too much.

I am indebted to my supervisors, Peter Lloyd-Sherlock and Ben Jones. Thank you for everything you contributed to this thesis, for your patience and support, and for giving me the space that my idealism might be shaped first by what I found in Venezuela.

Finally, thank you to everyone at DEV who contributed feedback and ideas and who shared challenges of the PhD, especially Will Monteith, Rosanne Tromp, Brendan Whitty, and Pablo Dalby.

# Contents

1. The Revolution visits Pueblo Nuevo: politics, participation and the urban poor	8
1. Revolution in tension: emancipators or patrons for the urban poor? .....	12
2. Connecting discourse and practice: overlapping folk concepts about the urban poor.....	25
3. <i>Malandros</i> , criminality and theories of urban marginality.....	28
4. <i>Revolucionarios</i> , political radicalism and theories of grassroots emancipation.....	33
5. Aims and structure of the thesis: imaginaries of politics and Pueblo Nuevo..	37
4. A note on names.....	41
2. Politics, place and stigma: organising Mérida’s land invasions in the pre-Chávez era, 1945-1988 .....	43
1. The historic city and the first land invasions, 1813-1958 .....	46
2. Transition to democracy and the first grassroots organisations, 1948-1974	53
3. 1979-1988: Service Modules, Cultural Centres and the first Neighbours’ Associations .....	68
4. Linking contemporary and historical community organisation in Pueblo Nuevo.....	73
3. Citizens, revolutionaries and <i>opositors</i> : community organising around shifting representations of the urban poor, 1989-2014.....	76
1. Barrio populations as the agents of social change: the reorientation of Venezuelan national politics, 1989-1998.....	79
2. The new patronage of the Bolivarian Revolution: improved barrio services and another national system for community organising, 1998-2012.....	88
3. Living with new barrio identities: polarising narratives and the call for political loyalty, 2013-2014 .....	101
4. Conclusion: improved patronage and redeemed identities for some.....	107

4. Democracy, community and the Bolivarian Narrative: three literatures for explaining politics in Pueblo Nuevo .....	109
1. Chávez, Chavistas and <i>opositors</i> : using literature on the Bolivarian public narrative to understand the intellectual landscape in Pueblo Nuevo .....	113
2. Institutions, elections and organising: using the literature around different kinds of political participation .....	119
3. Building on ethnographic and other community studies on Venezuela's barrios.....	127
4. Conclusion: precedents for thinking about the relationship of people and government in Pueblo Nuevo .....	133
5. Building belonging and negotiating positionality: a methodology for living and researching in Pueblo Nuevo .....	136
1. Into the barrio: access, belonging and overcoming social separateness .....	139
2. Participation, politics and dialogue: managing different types of interactions in and around Pueblo Nuevo .....	148
3. Using historical evidence to reflect on a particular political moment.....	157
4. Conclusion: intersecting researcher roles and subjectivities.....	167
6. Epic strugglers and grateful clients: inherited tensions and strategies for organising in and around barrio Pueblo Nuevo.....	169
1. The <i>Brisas de Alba</i> collective: Chavismo's revolutionary clients?.....	172
2. The anti-government protest movement: <i>revolucionarios</i> on the right?.....	183
3. The Communal Council Calle Principal: participation for some, and a loss of credibility for the PSUV.....	193
4. Conclusion: three experiences of organising .....	201
7. New party, old <i>partidismo</i> ? Inherited tensions around the administration of participatory politics.....	204
1. Constrained participation in invited spaces: evidence from public meetings.....	209
2. Patrons or emancipators? The inherited challenge for Mérida's partisan bureaucrats .....	221
3. Notions about government and people: the disordered public and the dominant state.....	232
4. Conclusion: old <i>partidismo</i> , new tolerance?.....	237

8. Fundación Cayapa and Pueblo Nuevo’s ‘Little School’: continuing the tradition of semi-independent barrio organising.....	239
1. Teaching Pueblo Nuevo: meeting barrio circumstances with holistic education.....	243
2. “Our Revolution, here”: Cayapa as part of Bolivarian education reform.....	253
3. Cayapa as part of a regional culture of popular education .....	261
4. Cayapa’s history and context: a continuation of pre-Revolution organising.....	270
5. Conclusion: Cayapa as an example of organising in and around national political processes.....	277
9. Pueblo Nuevo: <i>sigue! Sigue!</i> .....	279
1. Continuity and change: Pueblo Nuevo through the Chávez era .....	281
2. Populism, democracy and Revolution: what next for Pueblo Nuevo and Latin America?.....	286
References.....	289
Appendices.....	305

# 1. The Revolution visits Pueblo

## Nuevo: politics, participation and the urban poor

*“Chávez lives, lives! The struggle goes on, on!”*

The ten foot-tall mannequin of the late President waves his approval, stumbles for a moment, then lurches forward as the march pushes on towards the barrio. Inside the costume Andre the puppeteer cleans his glasses, sweating proudly as he carries the weight of *el gigante* – the giant Chávez – on his shoulders.

There are several hundred of us now. At the front, the local youth brigade of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (*Juventud* PSUV) lead the chants. Andry Rangel, a student leader who works in the barrio, stands in the back of a pick-up truck, brandishing a giant red flag overhead. Her eyes flash with revolutionary pride as she calls into a megaphone and the crowd responds as one. From a stack of speakers an anthem rings out:

*“Chávez: heart for everyone!”*

I am marching with my adopted collective, the Frente de Vanguardia – the Vanguard Front - flanked by giggling schoolgirls still in uniform and followed by group after group of *Chavistas* in their red shirts. As we approach the barrio - or township – there are some nervous faces among our group. The voices in the crowd waver now. The clenched fists are a little less assured. For most, this is their first visit to the twin barrios of Simon Bolivar and my new home, Pueblo Nuevo. These



are the communities that people in Mérida City grow up avoiding. They are the areas where taxi drivers refuse to come and where even the right-wing militia and the police fear to tread. For those marching, these places are a contradiction: home to those responsible for the murders that fill the back pages of every local newspaper, but somehow also home to the new constituents of Bolivarianism, the righteous urban poor.

Down in the barrio, they hear us before they see us. The old men sitting on the steps pause in conversation. Curious heads begin to peer from between the bars of upstairs windows. Children look up from where they are playing in the street and the stray dogs start to bark. The march appears around the bend in the valley. First comes the pickup, then a news team and the marchers with the giant mannequin giving way to a sea of banners and upturned faces. As we reach the entrance of Simon Bolivar we stop outside three brand-new yellow tower blocks. Opened just five weeks before and painted with the watchful eyes of Hugo Chávez, they are the result of a four year occupation campaign by mothers from the two barrios. A child no older than six or seven addresses the collected crowd, her eyes screwed shut as she preaches revolutionary catchphrases into the megaphone. The marchers share a smile and answer her call.

We continue into the barrio and are joined by local children who scamper along the raised walk-way to keep pace with these strange visitors. Some of the residents watching seem bemused by the spectacle. A few leave their doorways and join the procession. The marchers snatch sideways glances at the houses – some crumbling into disrepair, others neatly painted. They mingle with the people in the barrio, until the only difference is the red shirts.



Photo 1. Looking up the hill from Pueblo Nuevo to Simon Bolivar, July 2014

We pass the crossroads where Simon Bolivar joins Pueblo Nuevo. I wonder if the marchers from my adopted collective, the Vanguard Front of Hugo Chávez, are aware that, just *here*, they cross a point that until recently the residents could not. It is the point where gang violence had separated the two communities until only a few years ago. Now we pass on, and head down the street where between 2005 and 2012 shootouts over gang territory would regularly leave the bodies of the sons and brothers of the barrio.

Into Pueblo Nuevo we go, and in the occupied school building on Calle Principal, the teachers at *La Escuelita* – the barrio’s famous ‘little school’ - stop class and spill out into the street outside. My colleagues for the previous year, Vannesa, Juan and Gerardo, joke with friends they recognise in the crowd. They are joined by Joshua Wilson – the North American doctor who stands proudly in front of the Barrio Adentro health clinic in his white doctor’s coat. They smile and watch the visitors file past - past the point where, only a year before, the Communal Council had last met on school chairs spilling out across Calle Principal, before moving inside as numbers and enthusiasm decreased.

We are moving faster now, gathering pace as the road slopes down and the street widens into the older barrio, Mérida's first *invasión* - or land "invasion" as they were once known. Janeath, founder of La Escuelita and a life-long resident of Pueblo Nuevo joins the flow of people and she and I link arms and walk together down the main street that is rich with memories and symbolism. Past the mural of Chávez's face and a saluting Fidel Castro, we march, waving to Miguel as he leans on the counter of the MERCAL subsidised food store. Faster now, past the stoop where the old men sit outside the *bodega* and pass their bottle of rum, where I sheltered with Jose when his wheelchair was stranded in the winter floods. Past Nico's new shopfront, where he weighs plantain on the scales behind the counter - the store opened, some speculate, with funds from his role as council spokesperson. Past the evangelical house church with Father William's tiny Renault parked outside, just returned home from his latest prison visit. Past my house on La Cuesta where my "Venezuelan mother", Marleny, must be inside shaking her head at "all this Chavista nonsense".

As we climb out of the barrio, the road winds past the half-finished police station, the bare girders grasping like fingers towards where Mount Bolivar dominates the horizon. The structure marks the site where the police destroyed the land *toma* - or "taking" - of 1973, crushing a student-led residents' movement when the barrio overstepped its limits. We pass the basketball court that marks the end of the barrio, renovated with public funds by the Communal Councils - depending on who you believe. We pass through the southern entrance to Pueblo Nuevo, where the student Juan Carlos Davila Barrios was murdered in June 2013, sparking student protests and police raids into the community (see Appendix Six). We cross the Campo Elias Bridge, where commuters still pass fearfully over the barrio and which was blocked-off with piles of rubble for months during the anti-government occupations in the spring of 2014. We pass the spot where we gathered to watch one afternoon in April, anxious spectators as the tanks of the National Guard rolled in to liberate the west of the city.

At the end of the bridge, the march turns left up Avenue Independencia, and Janeath and I turn back against the tide of people. The marchers who pass us seem relaxed now that they are back on the familiar ground of the city centre. They head on towards Plaza Bolivar, to hear speeches we have heard before and chant the chants

we have chanted many times. As Janeath and I turn back into Pueblo Nuevo, the tail-end of the march passes us and the excitement is over. Men lean into the bonnets of old cars. Conversations continue, the rum bottle passing from hand to hand. The stray dogs have returned to lie in the sun. In the school and the health clinic, the staff go back to work.

## 1. Revolution in tension: emancipators or patrons for the urban poor?

On my last day in Pueblo Nuevo in July 2014, the march through the barrio to mark the birthday of the late President Hugo Chávez illustrated something of the tension at the heart of this thesis. The enthusiastic but temporary spectacle of the march seemed to illustrate how the Bolivarian Revolution's grand political project in some ways struggles to connect to the day-to-day lives of the people I met in Pueblo Nuevo.

While the Bolivarian socialist project won support among the urban poor with its narrative of social inclusion and with the extension of basic services in the country's barrios, the social separation of the low-income townships that ring the country's cities continues in some important ways. For all the talk of compassion and political inclusion for the worst-off, Venezuelan political culture is still defined in part by tensions inherited from the pre-Chávez era – known as *Puntofijismo* – when party legitimacy was founded on the ability to provide services and broker the country's oil wealth. These tensions can be seen today both in the limited success of participatory politics and in the different ways that communities like Pueblo Nuevo and their populations are thought about by the rest of society.

This thesis brings together different kinds of information about the processes and discourses involved with the relationship of people and government in and around Pueblo Nuevo immediately following the death of Chávez. Observations from nine months of volunteer teaching work are used to explore the participatory methodology of the barrio's famous 'little school' – the Fundación Cayapa education collective – and its work to reduce gang violence. Experiences of living and participating in Pueblo Nuevo and of building relationships with key community members are drawn on to explore perceptions of the lawlessness and political

radicalism of Venezuela's barrio populations. Interviews with activists, residents and local officials are used to map the intellectual landscape of the barrio, identifying different overlapping folk concepts about the urban poor – including as ghetto thugs and as revolutionaries – and connecting these to notions about government and democracy.

Accounts collected through a “dialogical interview strategy” (Ritchie & Lewis 2003:140 in Bell 2013) are brought together with first-hand experiences of participating in a methodology, discussed in detail in Chapter Five, that connects in some ways with Schiller's (2011a) explanation of “activist research”. The resulting description of Pueblo Nuevo's experiences with community organising is connected in with historical studies of Mérida's first so-called “land invasion” following rural-urban migration during the mid-Twentieth Century. Important continuities are identified with the pre-Chávez era in the strategies of community groups, their administration by partisan city authorities and within the Bolivarian public narrative of class warfare and popular empowerment.

In this way, this thesis challenges thinking about the exceptionalism of participatory politics during the Bolivarian Revolution by showing important continuities with the pre-Chavez era - in the inherited tension between processes of emancipation and patronage and their premises in competing folk concepts about the urban poor. This is achieved through the development of a detailed account of the history, institutions and activities of a particular community that has played a historic role in the development of barrios and their organisations in Mérida City.

### **Revolution for the poorest? Pueblo Nuevo as part of national and regional politics**

Like many of the small group of international researchers, film-makers and solidarity activists working in the country in the first fifteen years of the Bolivarian Revolution, I was drawn to Venezuela by the promise of a political alternative and stories of vibrant and empowered grassroots movements. Bolivarianism promised social transformation instead of development - progress made from the bottom up,

without the IMF and the World Bank.<sup>1</sup> It was a promise of political and empowering change, without the contradictions of tied aid or the external agendas of international NGOs. The Bolivarian vision was of a Venezuela where the institutions of Participatory Democracy – the Communal Councils, cooperatives and social movements - define the direction for their communities (García-Guadilla and Pilar 2002: 90; Foley and Irazábal 2010: 108). It was a vision of a new kind of a ‘Twenty First Century Socialism’: a reimagining of Latin American populism that was different, fairer, and where the government wouldn’t only deliver change from above, but in the words of Janeath would “open the window” for communities to change themselves (interview w JL, 24.05.14, PN).

Inconsistencies behind this compelling vision provide the context for this study. The fetishisation of popular power seems to jar with the personality cult built around Hugo Chávez and his successor, the self-styled “son of Chávez”, President Nicolas Maduro. Orienting society to the needs of the people is hindered in Venezuela in part by partisan ideas about who counts as “the people”. This is socialism without much of an industrial working class, and where the economy still depends on the sale of oil to the country’s biggest foreign agitator, the United States. It is a system with a discourse of grassroots empowerment, but with an ever-present and penetrating national politics. Above all, Venezuela today is a country where talk of social emancipation clashes with the day to day experience of millions who still live somewhat separate lives in somewhat separate communities, where the patronage politics of the pre-Chávez era in some ways continues.

Despite these tensions, the Bolivarian vision retains its undeniable romance. Hugo Chávez’s divisive pro-poor rhetoric and his defiance of “oligarchs” at home and abroad are not forgotten. In Venezuela, Chávez’s progressive ideas around class, age, gender, race, and LGBT equality are still presented as part of a near-religious crusade of social redemption (Emerson 2011). During his fifteen years as President, the ex-paratrooper Captain-turned-political prisoner built a convincing

---

<sup>1</sup> Like Lula in Brazil, Chávez paid off Venezuela’s debts to the IMF, citing the need for economic self-sufficiency (Tran 2007). He also banned all international funding for Venezuelan development, in part out of concerns about the funding of opposition groups by the US. Finding an entirely blank page for Venezuela at the World Bank website was something of a shocking discovery during my initial research into Venezuela –one that would fit with the tone for the three years of research that would follow.

narrative for many on the left in Latin America. Many see his struggle as the continuation of that of Che Guevara, Fidel Castro and Salvador Allende. His election in 1998 has come to be seen across the continent as the antecedent for the 'Pink Tide' neo-socialist governments of Morales, Lula and Correa. Chávez, many believed, was not just another *caudillo* – an old-style Latin American strong man - but a new kind of compassionate and responsive politician. In Venezuela, he was seen by his supporters as both patron and emancipator, the missing father for a fatherless generation who not only built health clinics and schools in the country's barrios, but who Chavistas say “awoke the people” who lived in them.

Outside of Venezuela, the appeal of the Chavista political narrative can be seen not only in the solidarity literature that has grown up around the Bolivarian project (e.g. Dominguez 2011; Raby 2006; Harnecker 2009) but in the large international pro-Chávez Venezuela Solidarity Campaign (VSC), and Hands off Venezuela. The VSC is based in London, with groups set up around the country where committed groups of activists meet and work primarily to address what they see as a right-wing anti-Chávez campaign by the mainstream international media. As Venezuela became a symbol among activist networks as a country said to be empowering its grassroots, the VSC has developed considerable support in leftist circles – providing me the access to conduct interviews with Ken Livingston and Jeremy Corbyn for broadcast on Venezuelan television in support of Maduro.

My involvement with the VSC would also lend me a certain credibility and provide contacts in Venezuela's network of international activists and journalists. This association also helped me to build credibility - I was able to join the National Electoral Commission (CNE) as an international observer for the nationwide '6D' municipal elections in 2013. Mérida in particular has become a hub for international journalism, due in part to its reputation as a focal point for anti-government campaigning. During fieldwork, Paul Dobson (Correo del Orinoco), the film-maker Edward Ellis, the photographer Marcus Murray, and the leftist journalists Ewan Robertson (Venezuela Analysis), Tamara Pearson and Ryan Mallett-Outtrim (both Venezuela Analysis and Telesur) were all based in the city. My involvement with this network and with the UK solidarity campaign, meant a connection to some of the more pro-Chávez English-language material coming out of the region. In this context, it was often difficult to separate what we knew about

what was happening in Venezuela, from what we hoped was happening there. Analysing these hopes as part of the discourse around the Bolivarian Revolution would become an important part of the work of this thesis.

These different notions about Hugo Chávez also connect with different ideas about Latin America's 'left turn' in the first years of the Twenty First Century. For Ellner (2011: 96), this is about a distinction between the centre-left governments that were elected in Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay in the 2000s, and the governments in Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia that embrace a more "radical" understanding of democracy involving "direct popular involvement in decision-making". Likewise, Castaneda (2006: 28) identifies "two lefts" in Latin America – one "open-minded and modern", the other "close-minded and stridently populist". Beaseley-Murray (2009), however, rejects a simple distinction between what have been called the 'populist' and 'social democratic' currents of the Latin American Left, instead describing a multiplicity of left wing efforts that are defined by deep-seated tensions between socialism and liberalism. For Venezuela, different labels may be needed for different branches of the Venezuelan government. Enriquez (2013) characterises the state of "dual power" in Venezuela, in which different parts of the government remain in the hands of the previously predominant class, while a new powerful class gains influence in others. This is a reading that fits with the defence of the government's policy record made by Chavistas during fieldwork, but may overlook the inherited culture of *partidismo* described in this thesis.

These discussions continue the work of describing political processes in Latin America – from the literature that grew up around the different paths to democracy in the region (e.g. Mainwaring and Scully 1995), the role of social movements (e.g. Escobar and Alvarez 1992; Kaufmann and Alfonso 1997) to attempts to map trends of populism and neo-populism (e.g. Knight 1998; Conniff et al. 2012). This thesis uses a more situated approach, presenting evidence from a single, specific urban neighbourhood to explore local experiences and discourses of democracy. In Pueblo Nuevo, ideas about the relationship between people and government were less about definitions of democracy, and more about the ways that Chávez and the Bolivarian government were talked about in the community – as either the patrons or the emancipators of barrio populations.



Of particular relevance to this thesis is the connected regional literature that seeks to describe different local cultures of politics – from detailed accounts of community life (e.g. Scheper-Hughes 1992; Goldstein 2013), experiences from within social movements and the literature around clientelism and brokerage (e.g. Auyero 2000; Zarazaga 2014). Again, examples from the *villas* of Argentina (ibid) as well as the *favelas* of neighbouring Brazil (e.g. Perlman 1973; Ireland 2011; Arias and Rodrigues 2006) provide useful precedents, by engaging with assumptions about political life in poor urban communities. These community studies offer evidence to improve the way we describe political processes in the region. For Saskia (2016), for example, it is the predominance of clientelistic practices in Latin America has reduced the importance of the left-right distinction by offering an alternative rationale for voting. Cannon and Kirby (2012), meanwhile, draw on a range of studies from across the region – building a picture of political participation that identifies the corporatist and clientelist practices by so-called radical leftist governments.

Part of understanding these local political processes is about exploring the discourses they are bound up with. As Canel (1997: 190) puts it, social movements are engaged in a negotiation not only for goods and services, but for new identities for their participants. In Latin America, this connection of government processes and the identities of the people involved in them has often been usefully thought about in terms of citizenship (e.g. Roberts 1995). For this thesis, this analysis is about describing the ways that different identities represented by and about the urban poor provide the context for local experiences of community organising – including where these connect with ideas about government being either the patrons or the emancipators of the urban poor. This analysis draws on the “folk concepts” (Slater 2010) discussed in the remainder of this chapter as part of a description of these processes and identities in a particular community setting.

In Pueblo Nuevo, the grand politics of the Bolivarian Revolution - and its place in discussions about populism and democracy in Latin America - connects with people’s day-to-day lives in limited ways. Chávez’s system of Participatory Democracy is represented by several Communal Councils that each report low membership and irregular activity. Another Chavista initiative, the MERCAL groceries store offers food and household goods subsidised by the government –

sold mostly to Chavista customers and the occasional opposition supporter in disguise. The *Barrio Adentro* – “into the barrio” – medical clinic, set up with staff and expertise from Cuba, continues to offer free treatment with a new generation of Bolivarian ‘community doctors’. The *Brisas de Alba* housing campaign offers a chance to leave the barrio behind once and for all and move to newly-built apartments on land occupied at the edge of Pueblo Nuevo. For all this, some men of the community of a certain age still lounge on the steps outside the local alcohol store, sipping rum or Polar beers. Families keep to the strict curfew that comes with a history of drug-related violent crime in the community. In the occupied school building, residents organise alongside the latest generation of middle-class leftist students who have found their way to Pueblo Nuevo to teach participatory education.

The work of this thesis, therefore, is asking how the big political ideas surrounding Bolivarianism connect and don’t connect to people’s experience of participating in politics – where community organisations still position themselves as clients for government support, where the business of state is still enmeshed with party politics and where in Pueblo Nuevo, after the parade has passed, life goes on.

### **Venezuela during fieldwork: the death of Chávez and the anti-government protest movement**

Three months before fieldwork began for this study, and shortly following my first scoping trip to Caracas and Mérida, Chávez’s death in March 2013 made international headlines and brought hundreds of thousands to the streets of Caracas to mourn. This loss was deeply felt by the left in Latin America, where Chávez had symbolised the possibility of a lasting alternative to neoliberalism. It would also shape the tone of a political moment in Venezuela - where the commanding symbolism and personality of President Chávez had to be deployed differently to deflect from a deepening political and economic crisis. Since Chávez’s death, the PSUV have tried to maintain their association with their late leader. Chávez’s “hand-picked” successor, Nicolas Maduro, has sworn to follow *el camino de Chávez* - “the path of Chávez” – but to date has proven a less convincing figure. His victory in the Presidential elections in April 2014 was won with a 1.7% margin, sparking fears among the Chavistas and renewed energy for the divided and

weakened opposition coalition, the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD). Had people been voting for participatory socialism, or for Hugo Chávez? What would happen without him?



Photo 2. In 2013, Chávez's messianic status would be bolstered by one last campaign. Defying cancer to deliver a final rousing speech to a mass rally in the pouring rain, El Comandante – ‘the giant’ Chávez - won a sixteenth national election.

This thesis, therefore, is the story of a particular political moment - of a Venezuela trying to move on from the heady days of Chavismo at its height, as the country holds its breath and wonders what will follow. As people queue around the block to visit supermarkets with empty shelves, Chávez's new-style populism no longer provides the same returns for his supporters. As discontent around the party's growing disconnection from their support base has grown (Denis 2015), the PSUV have largely failed to show themselves to be capable of reform. Will the urban poor continue to turn out and vote for Chávez's legacy in their millions, or will the “hills come down” as they did in 1989 when barrio populations took to the streets in mass riots, sparking a movement that led to the end of the pre-Chávez *Puntofijista* regime?

For all this uncertainty, there is still a sense in Venezuela that politics matters. As part of Chávez's attempt to use election campaigning as a way of fostering public involvement in politics (in Harnecker 2005: 164), nearly every year the country is

plunged into another fresh round of voting: Presidential, National Assembly, State or Municipal. The fierce polarisation of the press, constant marches and public give-aways mean that Chávez's struggle never feels far away. Every government office or food programme is branded with the colours of the PSUV. Every slow-moving public works project is painted with a fresh slogan, boasting that community improvements are "*Only Possible in Socialism*". Today, in the "battleground city" of Mérida, the walls of the historic centre are still a canvas for a vitriolic political debate over Chávez's legacy. Here, utopian slogans make a patchwork with last year's faded campaign promises and compete for space with creative personal attacks on politicians past and present. In the spring of 2014, mid-way through fieldwork, the Andean city became a flashpoint for political conflict. As the country was thrown into crisis, as protesters occupied middle-class neighbourhoods, blocked roads and burnt down health clinics, it was the university city of Mérida where the *guarimba* occupations and street shootouts lasted longest. Now politics meant masked militants or National Guardsmen on the street corners, the smell of scorched tarmac and the burnt-out houses of Chavista supporters.

As with the coups attempts – one by Chávez's clandestine movement in 1992, and one against him by CIA-backed protesters a decade later – the heightened political tensions give Venezuelans a sense of being at the epicentre of a clash of political systems. There is a feeling of having the eyes of a continent on the struggle between two competing visions for society: one seen by Chavistas as home-grown and socialist, the other as imperialist and neoliberal. We are told that at stake is the survival of a political model, while the problems facing Venezuelans – the worst murder rates of any peace time country, endemic corruption, and record-breaking inflation – are sensational. For a decade, analysts have talked about "Venezuela at the Crossroads" (Ellner and Rosen 2002; Alvarez 2011; Ignacio 2013) as the country sags under a perpetual political urgency that seems to roll on from year to year.

For all the constant reminders of politics, however, there is a sense in Venezuela of a population going about their daily lives without thinking about the Revolution every second of the day. What Arberola (in Uzcategui 2010: 1) calls "the pretended renewal of the bipolar political struggle" doesn't seem to fit with the famously unhurried Venezuelan outlook. Where party allegiances are well-known to the man

on the street, families divided by political allegiance use humour to cope with divisions, as Chavista activists joke about “my husband the *opositor*”. In part, this fits with how people think about the relationship between people and government. Hellinger’s (2001: 42-44) survey of barrio populations found that providing basic services and “meeting the demands of the poor” were considered far more important elements of democracy than political pluralism or representing minority views.

For some people in Mérida, politics seem to simply provide someone to blame for economic hardship. For others, it means quoting Mao in neighbourhood meetings and feeling part of a process beyond the edge of their barrio. In more insulated communities like Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar, even the political violence of 2014 cannot compare with the gang violence of recent memory, when just crossing between the communities made you an instant target. Today, people in Venezuela shrug and get on with the business of dealing with the day-to-day symptoms of living a country in a seemingly endless transition from capitalism to something not quite clear. “This is not yet Cuba”, they say, and shrug at the endless queues, the scarcity of goods, and the log-jammed bureaucracy that makes the Soviet-style PSUV slogan “*Efficiency or Nothing!*” seem like cruel irony. For others, making a personal contribution to *el proceso* – to the revolutionary process – is an important part of how they spend and their time and construct their identities. This might mean becoming a community spokesperson – a *vocero* – or contributing to anti-government public actions. It might mean marching through Pueblo Nuevo, or moving to live there as a community doctor or a teacher. It might mean painting socialist murals, or joining the ranks of the pro-Chávez militia, the Tupamaros, who fight their own revolutionary struggle at night with petrol bombs and bullets.



Photo 3. Mérida's Fuga Muralistas collective use paint-by-numbers so that local people - and the odd international researcher - can contribute. Their murals have been commissioned by Mérida State, but are kept free of any PSUVista symbolism. Avenida Independencia, 2014.

In Pueblo Nuevo, the Fundación Cayapa education collective has put the barrio on the map and in many ways reflects the participatory principles were part of Chávez's promise of emancipation. The barrio's famous "little school" - La Escuelita - with its mix of middle class leftist students and local residents has connected the barrio to a network of international and national leftist activists.<sup>2</sup> With their participatory model, the students and facilitators seems to prioritise the here and now over bigger ideas about social transformation. Community organisations like Cayapa continue a history of vibrant and combative barrio organising that goes back to guerrilla organising during the struggle for independence, via the Liberation theology worker priests that brought the ideas of participatory socialism in the 1970s (Fernandes 2010: 50-51). It is these rich experiences of

---

<sup>2</sup> The PROUT institute in Caracas, run by Dada Maheshvarananda, is a centre for learning around participatory socialist principles and the cooperative economy. As the centre - which overlooks Petare, the continent's largest poor urban settlement - is a hub for volunteers, activists and researchers, an irregular stream of visitors from around the world hear about *La Escuelita*. Many choose to visit on their way through Mérida, helping with youth work or teaching yoga classes. In a notable exchange, children from Pueblo Nuevo visited the capital in 2012 to visit the institute and display their photography of the barrio at a gallery in Belles Artes.

grassroots organising that are better thought about as part of the origins of Chávez, than as his legacy (Ciccariello-Maher 2013).

As much as politicians like to paint society as red and yellow – as PSUV or MUD – and draw neat lines around groups with shared identities and interests, these categories of Chavista and *opositor* cannot reflect the complexity of personalities and characters in Venezuela. Around Mérida’s commercial centre, my regular black market money lender takes time out from speculating on tourist dollars to eulogise on the imminent victory of international socialism. At loud community meetings in the dilapidated hall at the edge of Pueblo Nuevo, a feminist activist argues ideological points while clutching a Prada handbag. On Avenida Independencia, fierce critics of Maduro queue sullenly for goods discounted by the National Guard by Presidential decree. Down in the barrio, opposition supporters visit the government’s subsidised grocery stall in false beards (interview w MP, 16.04.14, PN). On my street, a local anti-government protester praises Chávez’s public record (interview w GM, 9.4.14, PN), while Pueblo Nuevo’s most well-known *opositor* works to make the communal council more inclusive and participatory. Here, Barrio Adentro doctors dream of visiting Paris and London, while in the town centre protesters wearing Guy Fawkes masks and waving human rights banners call for an end to free public healthcare.

In this context, understanding the importance of the myth of Chávez and the combative narrative of the Bolivarian Revolution for people’s day to day experiences is part of the challenge of conducting social research in Venezuela. A march by Chavistas through Mérida’s oldest barrio, appears at first glance to be a spontaneous example of popular power. At second glance it appears to be part of a strategy to consolidate what Mérida’s Director for Communes and Social Movements described to me as to establish “territorial authority” (interview w DA 12.05.14, OF). The march through Pueblo Nuevo, however, also shows us how the Bolivarian Revolution is more than simply the *Revolution as Spectacle* - the title of Uzcategui’s (2010) left-wing critique. Electoral success might depend on the votes of barrio populations, but an event where outsiders visit the barrios they fear the most shows the acknowledgement of the political importance of these long-avoided “red zones”. If nothing else, this new route forced the marchers to see what visitors often commented during fieldwork – that these notorious communities are not so

different after all. If Pueblo Nuevo's half-built police module is a failed electoral promise, the health clinic, the school, and the new tower blocks are all seen locally as the Chavismo answering the needs of the most vulnerable.

The description of political culture that is developed throughout this thesis is therefore an attempt to show how politics is important in different ways at different times and to different people. Part of what Chávez achieved, Chavistas say, was to make politics seem urgent every day – to bring his “struggle” into people's homes with weekly broadcasts and by telling people that politics was meant for them. Describing the political culture of Pueblo Nuevo today means connecting the experience of this one community at the moment of fieldwork both with its specific historical conditions and with the discursive context of the Bolivarian political narrative. It means understanding the curiosities of life in Pueblo Nuevo as at once unique, and as distinctly Latin American - part of a regional spectrum of different shades of personality politics, populism, and participatory socialist rhetoric. It means also leaving behind those phrases that have become inseparable from Chavista politics – the language of empowered, popular, protagonistic, direct democracy – to find a less normative set of language and to identify more stable reference points for analysis. This is done in two main ways: i) by tracing longer histories of community organising from the pre-Chávez era, and ii) by teasing out how different Bolivarian and older conceptions of the urban poor frame accounts and processes of participation.

The remainder of this introductory chapter introduces the language and concepts that I draw on throughout the thesis to communicate my findings. First, I make a case for the use of “folk concepts” as a way of talking about the ways that political notions from Pueblo Nuevo connect to everyday experiences. I then identify some important folk concepts for understanding attitudes towards urban poverty and community organising and for thinking about the role of the state in Venezuela. I argue that different theories about marginality provide useful reference points for describing Venezuelan attitudes towards the public and towards possible roles for the urban poor in political life. I then begin to map out two ways of thinking about poor urban communities and their populations that can be identified from the accounts of my participants. I link these back to the two roles that Venezuelan



governments have offered to fulfil for the urban poor in both the Chávez and pre-Chávez eras. Finally, I outline the structure for the thesis.

## 2. Connecting discourse and practice: overlapping folk concepts about the urban poor

Connecting the big ideas of Bolivarianism with observations of participatory politics in and around Pueblo Nuevo needs a set of analytical language. The work of this thesis is not only to connect Bolivarian rhetoric and local experiences, but to understand how tensions in practices link with tensions between different sets of political ideas that people and institutions draw on differently from one moment to the next. In this thesis I consider how different overlapping ideas about the populations of barrios like Pueblo Nuevo appear in the accounts of different research participants, and in the processes both for organising and for administering community groups.

Considering different notions about the urban poor is of particular relevance for contemporary Venezuela, where competing notions about the urban poor inform policy and are reproduced in political rhetoric in the street reformulations of political ideas that occur in meetings of activists and dissidents across the country. They are part of the big, messy sets of ideas that are drawn upon by people to make sense of their government, their politics and their immediate surroundings. These are ideas that are commonly overheard, that are part of the interplay from above and below – contained in the speeches of politicians or reproduced in activists' grumblings about party oversight. They connect to, and are part of, the public narrative of the Bolivarian mission (Emerson 2011). I argue in this thesis that these different notions connect with different ideas about the role of government contained within the Bolivarian ideology – where the revolutionary state appears as either the patron or the emancipator for the urban poor.

Relating these different notions about the urban poor to the different sorts of information collected during field work needs a theory to explain the role of ideas. Gramsci's (1971) and Foucault's (1980) theories about the political power of ideas – including as hegemony and governmentality – set out to describe processes where the control of ideas results in the influence of actions, typically to normalise

population behaviour and reinforce the status quo. For both, describing how social processes connect to different kinds of discursive information also has a political function to critique strategies for domination, and an underlying concern for the vulnerable.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, these social theories can be connected to Paolo Freire's (1972) analysis of systems of education and knowledge production. For Freire, the world of ideas is a part of the dynamic of the cultural and political oppression of the poor in Latin America. While Freire's work offers a framework for research and teaching, more expansive conceptions of discourse can become unwieldy for certain kinds of social and political analysis. At a certain point theories about discourse blur the line between signifier and signified, as discourse or culture come to mean to mean not only texts, notions, and ideology but the actions and social institutions that result from and inform discursive factors. Laclau (2005: 68), for example, rejects any distinction between discourse and social institutions, explaining that "...by discourse I do not mean something that is essentially restricted to the areas of speech and writing, but any complex of elements in which Relations play the constitutive role".<sup>3</sup>

Among political researchers, analysis of meaning includes examining representations of the urban poor. Wacquant (2008: 8), in the preface to *Urban Outcasts*, writes that:

"(I)t is imperative to establish a clear cut separation between, on the one hand, the folk concepts used by state decision-makers, city authorities and the residents themselves to designate neighbourhoods of exile and, on the other, the analytical concepts that social scientists must construct, against the pre-notions of urban common sense."

---

<sup>3</sup> From attempts to describe the interplay between ideas and behaviours, Bourdieu's (1979) social theory is among the more complete. Key to his analysis is the concept of *habitus*, which acknowledges the mutual interplay between ideas and actions as behaviours and inform social conventions, and conventions inform behaviours and dispositions. Bourdieu's concepts of *fields*, meanwhile, allows for the local renegotiation of guiding social ideas as "field rules" and prompts the independent study of different social instances and their different *doxic* or 'naturalised' sets of assumptions. These sophisticated theories have also been applied since the second half of the Twentieth Century to support the study of particular political communities.

This notion is somewhat flattering to social scientists, where the prevalence of subjective and *doxic* assumptions no doubt results in an equally 'folk' logic. However, in "folk concepts" Wacquant provides us with a relatively modest term with which to sum up the inevitably vague role that different ideas play for different actors. From Wacquant, the notion of the folk concept has been picked up by Slater (2010: 167), who calls for "a revolution in the politics of knowledge production" and turns his attention to the forces that encourage folk logic in academic scholarship. This analytical work – to consider discourse and meaning alongside experiences of community organising in Venezuela - is on display already in some of the important preceding studies for this thesis; in particular by Fernandes (2007, 2010), Wilde (2014, 2016) and Schiller (2011, 2011a 2011b).

During fieldwork, folk concepts were observable as notions that were commonly reproduced in interview responses, attitudes expressed in meetings and in different political symbols and actions. The march through Pueblo Nuevo, described above, connects to the folk concepts reproduced by many Chavistas, who argue that barrio residents hold the key to political change in Venezuela. Other sets of political notions were reproduced among more specific groups. Among the accounts of representatives of different city authorities, for example, these included an idea about the need to "correct" the behaviours of "disordered" parochial communities (see Chapter Seven). Different political notions can also be collected from the literature on community organising in Venezuela, for example in the different expectations of democracy among barrio residents (e.g. Hellinger 2005) and from analyses of the Bolivarian public narrative (e.g. Zuquete 2009; Emerson 2011). Again, it is important in describing these ideas to use specifically non-Bolivarian language, and part of the journey of this study has been a move away from the normative notions of "empowerment" or "constituent power" towards more temperate language that might help discuss what those ideas mean for my research participants.

Different kinds of evidence from Pueblo Nuevo showed how people reproduce and deploy folk concepts about different overlapping barrio identities. These occurred often as representations of the urban poor – notably as the *malandro* or ghetto thug and the social revolutionary. At other times throughout the thesis, overlapping notions about the urban poor – as the humble poor, as migrant invaders, as the

clients of the state and rightful citizens – are also presented as part of the intellectual landscape of Pueblo Nuevo. Most commonly, these related to assumptions about the criminality or the political radicalism of barrio populations. As described in Chapter Three, the former folk concept is a product of the pre-Chávez era, while the latter has been adopted by Chavismo and dates from the history of grassroots activism in Venezuela - including the resistance to authoritarian rule in the first half of the Twentieth Century (Velasco 2011; Emerson 2011). These ideas in turn connect with ideas about the relationship between people and government from both the pre-Chávez era, and from Bolivarian rhetoric, that represent the role of government as being either the emancipator or the patron for the urban poor.

### 3. *Malandros*, criminality and theories of urban marginality

In Mérida, notions of criminality were a fundamental part of the popular wisdom – the folk concepts - about Pueblo Nuevo. It is the *malandros* - or ghetto thugs - from barrios like Pueblo Nuevo that ‘ordinary’ *Méridenses* fear when they take the public bus or hurry over the Campo Elias Bridge above the community. It is people of the city’s barrios who are assumed to commit the murders that fill the back pages of the local paper, *Pico Bolívar*, and who sell drugs by day and fight each other in street shootouts after dark.

During fieldwork, folk concepts about barrio populations were produced inconsistently. Most people in Mérida City had never visited the barrio, and were shocked to find that I had moved to live there. Luciano Lopez’s personal experience of Pueblo Nuevo, however, meant his account contained different ideas about the community:

“Really, you live there? That’s the ghetto. That’s where they sell drugs. Have you never heard of the ghetto? Ghetto is a rap word. It means the marginal zones, the poor people - the *gente pobre*. In Pueblo Nuevo it is very dangerous... over there, there are murderers. It’s like that for anyone that goes there from the city. I know because I had a fucking addiction before. To the shit that they sell there. (...) But of course they have schools. The barrio is normal. They have bodegas, they have the

community radio. But it is another world.” (Interview w LL, 07.04.13, MC)

In accounts like Luciano’s, notions of criminality overlap with an awareness that “normal” life also happens in the city’s barrios.

In Pueblo Nuevo, notions of criminality are also part of the struggle of barrio residents. Mani Toledo was one of the few residents who had moved to the barrio. He explained how:

“This is a very tough community. Here you have to learn to live in the middle of good things and bad things. I’ve lived here on this land for eighteen years. Here was pure *malandros*, taking drugs, selling drugs - it was pure mountain and trees. And I rescued the land from both.”  
(interview w MT, 18.04.14, SB)

Here, the notion of ‘other’ community members who are somehow more primitive, more criminal are almost part of the natural hazards of the environment.

These ideas about Pueblo Nuevo are part of broader sets of overlapping folk concepts about Venezuela’s urban poor. In Latin America, a continent whose cities are often depicted as hot beds of urban crime, Venezuela is especially notorious for its street violence and gang culture. This violence, we are told, is perpetrated by *malandros*, the ghetto thugs from the country’s barrio communities who maraud city centres and whose communities are refuges from the police. As with Brazil’s *favelas* (e.g. Ireland 2011), we are told that in the barrios drugs are bought and sold openly and lives are cheap. There, violence is normal and an “alternative culture and morality” replaces the rule of law as people take justice into their own hands (Romero and Rujano 2007). In Venezuela, these ideas follow on from notions that developed around the first barrio communities. During the first wave of rural-urban migration in the 1930s and 1940s, new urban settlements were seen as “land invasions” (Jugo Burguera 1974; Hernández de Padrón 1998) that were populated by “migrant invaders” (Rogler 1967: 516). Venezuela’s new barrio populations were seen as being ill-equipped for city life, with frustration the resulting low quality of life in the country’s townships (Ray 1969).

The *malandro* was the dangerous criminal was made famous by the Venezuelan crime cinema wave of the 1940s (Chacón 2014), where they were represented as cunning, socially-disconnected and violent.<sup>4</sup> These folk concepts about barrio populations tie in with Venezuelan notions of bravado, *machismo* and masculinity (Fernadiz Martin 2003). In the wake of the 1989 *Caracazo* uprising, President Andres Perez emphasised the threat that these frustrated barrio populations posed to the middle classes. He promised to “safeguard the right to peace and safeguard the property of our nation” against protesters from poor urban communities (in Emerson 2011: 92). These ideas were reinforced by the rising violent crime in the 1990s that would provide an ongoing problem for Chavismo from 1998 to the present day.

### **Connecting folk concepts from Pueblo Nuevo with theories of urban marginality**

These notions about Pueblo Nuevo and Venezuela’s other barrios have parallels in academic thinking about urban marginality. The concept of urban marginality can be traced from the Chicago school in 1930s, where it developed as part of an attempt to describe what was seen as the difference and separateness of poor urban communities. Following the proliferation of new urban settlements around the cities of Latin America, these theories would later applied to Latin America. Vekemans and Guiusti (1969) and Germani (1980) began to explain the lack of social integration of poor urban areas with so-called contemporary institutions and values as being about a division between two coexisting sectors, one modern and the other traditional. Here, marginality was presented as a state of exclusion from participation and development: a “multi-dimensional phenomenon” where the conditions of economy, production, consumption, culture, politics and education were meaningfully different to the rest of society (Delfino 2012: 23).

North American scholars sought to explain what they saw as new social environments both within the US sphere of influence (e.g. Lewis 1966) and in cities like Chicago (e.g. Suttles 1968) and New York (e.g. Bourgois 1977; Gans 1982). As

---

<sup>4</sup> These ideas are also reproduced in contemporary Venezuelan cinema. Recent films that dramatise the clash between barrio and non-barrio people include *Piedra, papel o tijera* (2012), and *Hermano* (2010).

these new settlements also emerged in the historical centres of cities, as well as at their edges, the idea of marginality lost its topographical meaning (Delfino 2012: 20), and came to reflect an otherness that is more cultural, behavioural and even psychological. Oscar Lewis's (1966) controversial ethnography, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty* focused on a family of prostitutes from the Costa Rican slum of La Perla. Lewis' "cultures of poverty" theory argued that the poor in capitalist societies shared a culture that transcended national boundaries, "...including in family structure, relationships, psychology and personality, and in the relationship between the poor and the larger communities they lived in". The behavioural and psychological traits outlined by Lewis form a cultural explanation for poverty. They include: a lack of class consciousness, people seeing themselves as marginalised or unworthy, dependence on others, fatalism about the world, provinciality, and not connecting their struggles with those from elsewhere. More positive characteristics include high levels of community pride, the existence of some basic organisations like youth gangs, but no stable structures beyond the extended family.

In the *Social Order of the Slum*, Suttles (1968) describes what he sees as an alternative morality of the urban poor. He describes social rules that are established within street corner groups and other informal institutions, who established "their own" social standards that both compare and contrast with the conventions of "the wider community". Likewise, Gans' (1982). *Urban Villagers: group and class in the life of Italian-Americans*, describes the North American 'urban jungle', for example Little Italy, the Ghetto, or the Black Belt. Like Suttles, Gans (1982: 14) compares the West End to the 'rest' of society, stating that how everyday life in was "not that much different from that in other neighbourhoods, urban or suburban."

The essentialising generalisations about poor urban people that form a part of theories of urban marginality have been challenged by writers like Perlman (1979, 2005, 2007), who gives an account of the diversity of experiences and identities in the *favelas* or Rio de Janeiro. Despite this, these sentiments persist in the study of poor urban communities. Wacquant's (2008) *Urban Outcasts: a comparative study of advanced marginality* reinforces the idea that marginal communities around the world are separate places, inhabited by people who share important differences to

mainstream society. For Wacquant (2008: 272), marginal communities are at the bottom of a "...hierarchical system of places that compose the new spatial order of the city...".<sup>5</sup> Here, "street capitalism" is law, leading to the "virtual imprisonment" of the residents (ibid: 121).<sup>6</sup> Wacquant's assessment of community relations identifies "logics of urban polarization from below", including the loss of "identification and attachment to a community":

"This weakening of territorial based communal bonds (...) fuels a retreat into the sphere of private consumption and stimulates strategies of mutual distancing and denigration ('I am not one of them') that further undermine local solidarities..." (271).

For Wacquant (2008: 197), residents of marginal communities therefore adopt "the mental structures of marginality" - a mind-set that leads to basically entrenched, often ethnic violence.<sup>7</sup>

After living, working and building lasting relationships with people in Pueblo Nuevo as well as in some of the most disadvantaged urban areas of the UK over several years, Wacquant's description of marginal "creatures" makes for an abrasive read. Nevertheless, the descriptions by Lewis, Gans and Wacquant have a certain common sense appeal. They reflect certain aspects of how people in Mérida and in Pueblo Nuevo itself talk about the community and its populations. It is important to emphasise that the reproduction of marginality-type folk concepts is not limited to opponents of the Chavista project - with its narrative of emancipation for the urban poor. In this thesis, these folk concepts appear in the accounts of Chavistas, barrio residents, and officials that connect to the particular experience of participatory politics practiced in Mérida.

---

<sup>5</sup> In his book, Wacquant (2008: 242-243) describes the marginal community as "a perilous battlefield" between gangs, state agencies, grassroots residents' groups and "outside institutional predators" (2008: 242-243).

<sup>6</sup> The people living in Wacquant's (2008: 226) "imploding ghetto" are "...first and foremost creatures of state policies..." (272) who are "divided" (157) and who live in "virtual imprisonment" (242).

<sup>7</sup> For Wacquant (2008: 157), "(i)n the American ghetto, physical violence is a palpable reality that overturns all parameters of ordinary existence." His accounts of the effects of crime and violence - the exaggeration of which read as if they may be tied up with the bravado of an urban folk tradition - appear to be taken at face value, without having their subjectivities considered.



The application of these conceptions of urban marginality in Venezuela scholarship can be seen in particular in the wake of the Caracazo uprising of 1989. Discourses of alternative morality developed, used in part to blame of barrio populations for the massacres that had taken place at the hands of the police and National Guard (Lezama 2012). More recently, some scholars have turned their attention to the ways that ideas about *malandro* culture are experienced by barrio populations, including Ferrándiz Martin's (2003: 712) discussion of a young delinquent's struggle with both the stigma of the *malandro* label, and the pressure to live up to notions of family honour and machismo.

In Mérida, these folk concepts were also by Chavistas as they seek to explain a recent loss of support among the urban poor, or deviation from communitarian values, for example through the misuse of community funds (see Chapter Seven). The alternative values in Venezuela's barrios are described as being more in line with the individualism of capitalism than the communitarian mind-set of the revolutionary. For some, this might appear in the belief that people in Pueblo Nuevo are "not accustomed to" participating in politics (interview w AR, 03.06.14. MC), while people in the barrio talked about feeling the shame of *malandro* stigma.

#### 4. *Revolucionarios*, political radicalism and theories of grassroots emancipation

These ideas of lawlessness also feed into assumptions about the political radicalism of barrio populations. In Mérida, Pueblo Nuevo and the city's other barrio communities were talked about not only as being Chavistas strong-holds, but as being areas with especially high grassroots activism and collaborative community development. This folk concept of the barrio *revolucionario* is one that is central to Bolivarian discourses about the relationship between people and government.

During fieldwork, at Chavista meetings at the edges of Pueblo Nuevo, people sought to connect with this revolutionary identity in different ways. At the Frente de Vanguardia de Hugo Chávez, participants wore military green in place of the traditional red shirts (see Photo 1), while members of the militant *Tupamaros* group wore Che Guevara-style berets and camouflage clothing. Chavista *militantes* from the barrios were talked about as being hardworking, principled and often

portrayed as living on very little – for example as living with food shortages by stoically going without, or by taking showers instead of using scarce toilet paper. In Pueblo Nuevo itself, notions about autonomous, heroic barrio activists were part of the “epic version” of community achievements (Auyero 2000: 170-171). They appeared especially in accounts of community progress that emphasise the spirit of communitarianism, including in the *Brisas de Alba* housing movement, and at the Communal Council Calle Principal (see Chapter Seven).

Marcelo Lischinsky, a member for the Frente de Vanguardia de Hugo Chavez and a community organiser from Mérida, took time out from the May Day workers’ march to explain the new place at the centre of politics for the formerly-marginalised in Venezuela:

“The Bolivarian Revolution has (...) enabled us to recuperate our own collective memory: our memory of struggle, our memory of battle. The Bolivarian Revolution has converted the forgotten story of Venezuela into the official story of Venezuela. Where before we had the perspective of the dominant class, now we have the perspective of the dominated class.”<sup>8</sup>

This notion of the urban social hero is connected to the history of guerrilla struggles in Venezuela, when the barrios of Caracas were the base for guerrilla resistance against the dictatorships of the first half of the twentieth century (Fernandes 2010: 62; Velasco 2011). Since 1989’s Caracazo, it is the barrio populations who are seen as having the numbers and tenacity to change the political trajectory of the country. Today, Chavistas connect with this “rebel history” in the ways they think about the urban poor (Velasco 2011). In the Bolivarian narrative, the barrio revolutionary is seen as being the empowered agent of social transformation (Spanakos 2008; Emerson 2011). He or she is often presented as holding communitarian values, as attending community meetings and working to improve their communities. The barrio revolutionary is seen as being well-versed in political theory, as understanding of the vision of Bolivarianism and often as holding feminist and other progressive views. Coming from barrio communities is now something of a

---

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix Four for full interview.

badge of honour for Chavistas - the state media makes heavy reference to Nicolas Maduro's childhood in Petare, while Mérida's Director for the Ministry of Communes quickly established his revolutionary credentials during our interview by bringing up his childhood in the famous 23 de Enero barrio (interview w DA, 12.05.14, OF).



Photo 4. Lisseth Pavon was presented in the media as an example of a modern *revolucionaria*.<sup>9</sup>

### **Connecting folk concepts from Pueblo Nuevo with theories of grassroots emancipation**

As folk concept of the *malandro* barrio residents connects with theories of urban marginality, ideas about the barrio *revolucionarios* connect with the body of Marxist-oriented literature that has grown up in Latin America around the practice

---

<sup>9</sup> After the death of Chavez in March 2013, this photo of Lisseth Pavon, a 23-year old woman from a poor barrio in Tachira was widely circulated. Lisseth is a law student, a young mother, a National Guard member and community activist and was described as having made the 25-hour journey to Caracas, then in the same clothes she'd been travelling in, with some water and an empanada, before waiting ten hours to visit Chavez's remains. As one of the more famous images of mourning for the late President, it encapsulates the values of the social revolutionary: humble, informed, patriotic, communitarian and a committed Chavista.

of community organising and popular education. These theories provide a more optimistic conception of the urban poor (e.g. Freire 1972; Gómez and Puiggrós 1986; Becker 1995) and have proven influential in leftist political movements of the Twentieth Century Latin America, including Bolivarianism. These theories argue not only that poor populations ought to be emancipated, but that they have leadership qualities, resilience and learnings needed for social change.

More emancipatory thinking about marginality developed from the 1950s in connection with Latin America's Dependency Theory scholarship. Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Aníbal Quijano, Miguel Murmis and José Nun all shifted from a technical analysis of marginality to a political analysis - one that broke from modernisation theory and demanded a break from imperialism and the national bourgeoisie (Delfino 2012). Writers in this Marxist-oriented tradition saw marginality less as a state and more as a process - a distinction that offers and explanation and attributes blame for the ongoing process of marginalisation (ibid: 23). These theories of urban poverty are part of a broader critique of capitalism. They explain marginality as the growing inability of industrialisation to absorb the growth of the labour-force. In this context, Murmis and Nun argue that it is the urban poor who are most affected by changes in the system as it moves between different economic phases.

These alternative theories of marginality also have a message of social emancipation and look to marginal populations as the driving force for social revolution (Delfino 2012: 23). For advocates of popular education, it is through sharing experience from poorer communities that "...people who have historically lacked power can discover and expand their knowledge and use it to eliminate societal inequities" (Wiggins 2011: 357-358). The anti-imperialist sentiment and the notion of a transformative role for Latin America's working and landless classes has been a central idea for the social movements across the continent. This role for marginal populations also informed their reconceptualization. Touraine (1977: 1105) described Latin America's urban poor as having been shown by history to be "the most conscious and most militant of the exploited workers." Che Guevara's (1965) call for *el hombre nuevo* - the new socialist man - joined the development of poor populations as individuals with broader processes of social and political change. Leftist movements in Cuba, Nicaragua and elsewhere found new

empowering narratives to give marginal sectors a sense of inclusion in political life. These narratives would be told and retold across the continent, and would be taken up by grassroots movements in Venezuela and elsewhere, and finally be institutionalised by the government of Hugo Chávez and the new “pink tide” governments in Bolivia, Ecuador and elsewhere.

These theories of emancipation and the notion of the barrio *revolucionarios* play different roles in Venezuela today. The narrative that has developed around Bolivarian Participatory Democracy, emphasises the role poor urban communities can play as the “protagonists” to shape social change (Raby 2006), as new Bolivarian Citizens (Emerson 2011). In Pueblo Nuevo, this empowering sentiment was central to the ways that teachers and volunteers in Fundación Cayapa talked about community development. In addition, and lie the “alternative culture and morality” of the *malandros* (Romero and Rujano 2007), Chavistas in some barrios are also considered to have their own standards of revolutionary behaviours. Wilde (2014: 22) describes how, in barrio El Camoruco, “...residents could be admonished, often by their own neighbours, for failing to live up to Chavista aspirations of participation”. In both El Camoruco and in Mérida, Chavistas also talked about having *formación* – ideological development – a value inherited from the pre-Chávez era and one of the characteristics and expectations of *revolucionarios* (Hernández de Padrón 2000: 208).

## 5. Aims and structure of the thesis: imaginaries of politics and Pueblo Nuevo

In Venezuela the folk mythology around barrio *malandros* and *revolucionarios* overlaps with other ideas about the urban poor as the passive clients of the state or as the rightful citizens of a new era of pro-poor politics. These different identities also connect a broader discussion that is taking place around identities in Latin America, not least those analyses that pay greater attention to the roles that race and gender play both as part of the relationship between people and government. In Venezuela, race is seen as being deeply entwined with class (Cannon 2008), meaning that ideas about the emancipation of barrio populations connects with historic struggle against discrimination around ethnicity (Fernandes 2001: 87-90) and the analysis of Chávez’s “ethnopolitism” (Gottberg 2011). Lallander (2016:

149), is among those who talks about both about “... the empowerment of Venezuelan women (...) achieved through their protagonist roles in the new participatory democratic model...” – and the lack of similar progress around race politics. New political roles for barrio women as part of the relationship between people and government also connect to a broader discussion of Venezuela’s *machista* culture, and to the longer-running negotiation of gender roles within families and communities.

These identities, along with the overlapping folk concepts of the *malandro*, the revolutionary and their academic reference points in theories of marginality and emancipation are used in this thesis to discuss the relationship between the big ideas of the Bolivarian Revolution and local experiences of participatory politics in and around Pueblo Nuevo. For Perlman (2005: 15), marginality ideas about the urban “other” are part the “common sense view” of Brazil population - a view that has been legitimized by social scientists and used to justify public policies of *favela* removal. In this way, marginality, she writes can be “a material force as well as an ideological concept and a description of social reality” (ibid). Part of the contribution of this thesis, therefore, is to expand this analysis to include the analysis to examine the function of equally political but less-studied folk concepts, including the Chavista discourses that represent barrios as places of political radicalism. Different kinds of evidence are used to show how inherited tensions in the ways of thinking about poor urban populations connect with both contemporary and historical experiences of participation in Pueblo Nuevo.

Chapter Two outlines a history of Pueblo Nuevo from its founding in 1945 as part of the rural-urban migration of the mid twentieth century, to the economic crisis of the 1980s and the birth of Chavismo. I map the evolution of Pueblo Nuevo’s different community organisations against a history of political change, including the transition to democracy in 1958 and the barrio’s experiences of the power-sharing politics of the pre-Chávez era. I show how representations of barrio populations changed from migrant invaders, to rightful citizens, and finally to the notions of criminality with the events of the *Caracazo*.

In Chapter Three, I chart the evolution of community organisations and public services in Pueblo Nuevo between the *Caracazo* uprising of 1989 and 2014 when

fieldwork began. I map local changes in barrio services against the rise of the Chavista mass movement and the period of Bolivarian government from 1998. I show how new public services and organisations in Pueblo Nuevo in the 2000s were part of a new national era of pro-poor politics that followed the increased political significance of barrio populations in the 1980s and 1990s. As new opportunities for local organising and for basic healthcare, education, housing and subsidised goods formed part of improved terms of patronage under the Bolivarian Revolution, I connect this history to shifting ideas about barrio populations, as the new Chavista rhetoric redeemed the urban poor and cast them first as empowered social revolutionaries, and then as the embattled loyal subjects of a deepening political crisis.

In Chapter Four, I describe the different bodies of literature used in the thesis and locate my contribution among i) analyses of the Bolivarian public narrative, ii) analyses of institutional and policy changes under Chavismo, and iii) studies on Chávez era and pre-Chávez era community organising. I show how these bodies of literature provide precedents for understanding the politics of community organising in and around Pueblo Nuevo. I argue that there is a need for a study that links these bodies of literature to help understand how contemporary tensions with their roots in different conceptions of the urban poor, and different state roles, have been inherited from the pre-Chávez era.

In Chapter Five, I outline my research methodology. The challenges of living and doing research in Pueblo Nuevo are used to explain the ways that the social separateness of the barrio is maintained. I discuss how my participation in community life, and the dialogical approach used during fieldwork help to break down my assumptions about the community. A timeline of political events during fieldwork is presented, and I make a case for the role of secondary historical literature as a way navigating the complex politics of the current era. I also discuss my own shifting political attitude and subjectivities.

Chapter Six describes three contemporary examples of participatory politics in and around Pueblo Nuevo. The *Brisas de Alba* housing movement, the anti-government protests movement and the Communal Council Calle Principal are used to show different areas of continuity with the different kinds of political organising seen in

the pre-Chávez era. These examples are used to related Mérida's participatory politics in Pueblo Nuevo and Mérida to the processes of brokerage from Villa Paraiso in Buenos Aires, where processes of exchanging political support fit alongside the "epic version" (Auyero 2000: 170-171) of community collaboration told by local people.

Chapter Seven brings together observations from thirty city-level community meetings to identify how certain characteristics of these meetings work to exclude non-Chavistas and fuel discontent among the Chavista grassroots. The chapter also presents evidence from interviews with key bureaucrats from seven government institutions, outlining the extensive bureaucracy involved with administrating Mérida's community organisations. These accounts are used to show the tensions faced by bureaucrats to balance inclusiveness with more conventional bureaucratic priorities and the influence of the PSUV. Finally, the accounts of community organisers and officials are contrasted to show some of the contemporary tensions around party and state involvement in participatory politics.

Chapter Eight draws on observations made during nine-months spent working as a volunteer teacher with the education collective Fundación Cayapa's little school - La Escuelita. Observations, interviews with staff members and recordings of staff meetings are used to locate the project within three connected sets of precedents: Bolivarian education reform, Latin American popular education and Pueblo Nuevo's history of student-led, alternative community organising. I argue that in working against violence, so-called "private" family problems and the social separateness of the barrio, Fundación Cayapa draws on the rich regional and local history of education and community work to outreach both Mérida's conventional public services and new Bolivarian popular institutions. In particular, I consider the contribution Cayapa makes in encouraging the freedom of movement of non-residents to the community, to help challenge folk concepts about the barrio's population.

Finally, in Chapter Seven, I conclude the thesis by connecting Pueblo Nuevo's past and present to wider debates about Chavismo and community organising in Latin America.



These different chapters work together to connect experiences of community organising from Pueblo Nuevo with both shifting folk concepts about barrio populations and different notions of the role of government in Venezuela. I show how mapping this intellectual landscape can help us to understand local processes of participatory politics as part of a particular political moment, as Venezuela enters a deepening political crisis after the death of Hugo Chávez.

#### 4. A note on names

In almost all cases, the people I mention in this thesis gave permission for their real names to be used. In most cases, real names have been used. I took this decision in part because some people in the text are easily identifiable from their descriptions, and in part because I gave this decision over to my research participants, who would be disappointed to see that they are not mentioned. In this respect I follow Fernandes (2010). In the cases where permission to use real names was not given, and in the cases where I felt that the details from people's accounts might bring about unpredictable consequences, names have been changed.



## 2. Politics, place and stigma: organising Mérida's land invasions in the pre-Chávez era, 1945-1988

In May of 1973, a force made up of National Guard and Municipal Police approached Pueblo Nuevo from the south in large numbers. As they neared the edge of the barrio they entered a new *rancho* –a settlement of lean-tos and improvised houses, made from scrap wood and corrugated iron and built on land that had been recently cleared by the settlers. The police entered the homes, forcing the occupants out. They proceeded to demolish the new houses, breaking their materials apart until the residents dispersed. Several who resisted or were identified as the leaders of the settlement were arrested and removed to the police station. Among them were the settlement's student leadership, who would be held as collateral for negotiations with a growing university movement which supported the city's poorest residents.<sup>1</sup>

This short-lived community was made up of sixty families who had moved from Pueblo Nuevo in a coordinated *toma* - a “taking” or occupation. In clearing the new land they had attempted to extend the community to the south. The *toma* was reportedly planned by the mothers of the more vulnerable families in the barrio, supported by students and university workers who led residents' assemblies and

---

<sup>1</sup> See Hernández de Padrón (1998: 97-89) for a description of the incident.

coordinated a *committee de lucha* – a committee of struggle – to improve the new area and work on their reputation with local authorities (Hernández de Padrón 1998: 88). The *toma* was the third of the year in Mérida, as new arrivals from a wave of responded to the failure of the city authorities to provide a generation of new urban citizens with adequate housing.

City authorities said the violent reaction was in the interests of national security – the group were accused of holding communist sympathies and of having connexions to national guerrilla groups. In this way, different emerging ideas about Mérida’s new barrio populations – as invaders, as citizens and as political radicals - connected with the way the *toma* organisers encountered city authorities. The incident also shows how Pueblo Nuevo fits with experiences from across Latin America, where community organisations in new urban settlements encountered shifting thinking about the urban poor. During fieldwork, the National Guard and police again engaged in violent clashes with students and residents’ groups. This history of organisations, ideas and policies from the pre-Chávez era is central to understanding the continuities that shape politics in Pueblo Nuevo today.

### **Aims and structure of the chapter**

This chapter charts the evolution of popular organisation in Pueblo Nuevo alongside a history of Mérida’s urban expansion and the growth and politicisation of so-called “unplanned” (Prato Vicuna 2013) barrio communities in the city. Thirty years of community organisation in Pueblo Nuevo and Mérida’s other barrios prior to the rise of the Chavista mass movement in the 1990s provide important precedents for thinking about community participation today. This chapter supports the analytical work of the thesis by showing the antecedents for contemporary tensions around community organising in Pueblo Nuevo – in the actions of local groups, in their encounter with city authorities and in the evolving ways that Latin America’s poor urban communities have been thought about across the continent. This history connects with the evidence presented in the remainder of the thesis, where I show how different contemporary groups have found ways of organising around the state, including by positioning themselves as clients, or by fitting with more emancipatory Bolivarian notions of citizenship.

This chapter makes two connected arguments about the experience and evolution of barrio politics in the pre-Chávez era. First, I show how community organisations in Pueblo Nuevo were shaped by the encounter with city authorities. These experiences are connected with emerging thinking about the new urban poor. Political parties and city officials attempted at different times either to gain authority over what they saw as disordered barrio communities, or to appeal to emerging regional thinking about political emancipation. These different ways of thinking are also part of a discussion of the historicity of the different sources drawn on for the chapter. Second, I show how patronage politics, the co-opting community organisations and the division of student and barrio activists led to a complicated politics of community organising in Pueblo Nuevo. These experiences discredited formal barrio organisations and also led to a lasting sense of social and separation in Mérida.

The structure of this chapter situates the history of community organising in Mérida within the attempts of successive governments to manage the proliferation of barrios and barrio organisations – including through different representations of barrio populations. The chapter begins by drawing on Jugo Burguera's (2014) history of town planning in Mérida, contrasting the colonial vision for the city with the "uncontrolled" land invasions by so-called rural "migrant invaders" (Rogler 1967: 516), beginning with Pueblo Nuevo in 1945. The chapter continues by tracing the evolution of barrio organisations during the 1960s and 1970s, drawing on Hernández de Padrón's (1998) study into the different attempts by barrio residents and political parties to establish different groups and institutions. For Pueblo Nuevo, the *toma* of 1973 was in part a response to the failure of city authorities to live up to the notions of citizenship rights that had been promised during Venezuela's transition to democracy. Histories of barrio politics from Caracas (Ray 1969; Fernandes 2010; Duffy 2012; Ciccariello-Maher 2013) and Valencia (Wilde 2014), are used to support Hernández de Padrón's analysis and to locate Mérida's experience in national context. The successful incorporation of barrio organisations into clientelist networks is then connected to the decline of formal community organisations in the 1980s. Ellner's (1999) analysis of the Neighbours' Associations is used to explain the shift towards more cultural and

social forms of organising in Pueblo Nuevo, as barrio residents disengaged with political narratives that represented them through notions of criminality.

## 1. The historic city and the first land invasions, 1813-1958

### **The city reaches its limits**

The history of the Mérida State is characterised by the negotiation of territorial authority. The Andean province was the site of the invasion of Simon Bolivar in 1813, as his army entered Venezuela from Colombia and declared independence from Spain. In 1810 Mérida province separated from Maracaibo State and allied itself with the political project of the new national government in Caracas. In 1811 it was recognized in the Venezuelan Constitution as one of the provinces of the new Republic of the United States of Venezuela, with the City of Mérida as its capital. During the Nineteenth Century, the city developed into the administrative centre of the coffee-growing region and as an ecclesiastical centre and a centre of education, with the founding of the University of the Andes (ULA) (Franco 2014). As well as negotiating the post-independence conflicts and geographical marginalization (Rios 2008: 13), the nineteenth century saw successive territorial disputes as neighbouring municipalities competed for jurisdiction (Cesar 1994).

These negotiations over jurisdiction would change, as the accommodation of new urban populations became the priority for city authorities. The oldest street plan of the city (Map 1) dates from 1856 and tells us something about the city's intended expansion. On the 1856 street plan, the right side of the map shows the steep drop to the valley of the Chama River. The drop of several hundred feet marks the natural limit to the city centre, and would only be connected by cable car in 2012.<sup>2</sup> At the left side of the map, running top to bottom, lies the Albarregas River basin which would come to house the twin barrios of Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> cross streets. The map shows a cluster of houses, churches and open-places, including the plazas that were the main public spaces in Spanish

---

<sup>2</sup> A series of cable car projects to connect lower-income residential areas to city centres – including several in Caracas – were part of Chávez's attempts to link barrios to areas of economic opportunity and incorporate barrio communities. As well as heavy symbolism of physically connecting of these areas, residents save an enormous amount of travel time. In Mérida, the drive from El Pueblito had been over two hours on heavily congested roads and subject to changing bus fares. This journey is now just four minutes and is free of charge.

Colonial cities. The grid lines stretch north and south, housing empty and half empty plots that indicate parameters for expansion that would be kept to until the rapid population growth of the middle of the twentieth century (Jugo Burguera 2014: 94).



*Map 1: 1856 Street Plan, Gregorio F. Mendez (Jugo Burguera 2014: 94)*

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as today, the area directly adjacent to Pueblo Nuevo’s future site was the cultural centre of Mérida. Plaza Bolivar was the only built-up plaza in the city, and marked the route of the Bolivar’s march through the area in 1813. Then, as today, Plaza Bolivar was used to congregate and for different social and economic activities. These included markets on Mondays and cultural festivals including bull-fights. The Plaza became the social centre for the city with a fountain fed by a channel in the street and the gardens and sidewalks a place for strollers, social gatherings and music events (Photo 1) (Jugo Burguera 2014: 92).



Photo 1. An early image with the Plaza Bolivar on the right (date unknown, Jugo Burguera 2014: 92)

The early part of the twentieth century brought modernisation and the new economic opportunities and services that would draw migrants from agricultural areas. These new arrivals would populate the first city's first barrio communities. In the 1920s the Trans-Andean highway was built under the government of General Vincente Gomez, connecting the city to Tovar and San Cristobal. Following the arrival of the first motor vehicles, city authorities built paved streets and new sidewalks throughout the city and began building the city's first sewers, a process that would continue for the next three decades.<sup>3</sup> After the death of Gomez in 1935, Venezuela underwent a period known as the "transition to modernity" (ibid: 95). During the governments of Eleazar López Contreras and Isaías Medina Angarita, between 1936 and 1945, city authorities built a series of important private and public infrastructures, including the Municipal Market hospitals, colleges, new

---

<sup>3</sup> For some people in Pueblo Nuevo, Chávez's political appeal was founded partly on a symbolic connection with this earlier productive period. His military position and patriarchal public persona connected to a belief that a return to dictatorship would have been better than the clientelism and inefficiency of the two-party democratic system.



public plazas and cultural and services facilities.<sup>4</sup> In 1945 the runway was completed, connecting Mérida to increased possibilities for trade and tourism.

During this period, Caracas was the first Venezuela city to experience significant rural-urban migration, in part due to a declining agricultural sector and the draw of city jobs and the growing bureaucracy, commercial services and an acceleration of public works and social programs (Fernandes 2010: 42).<sup>5</sup> This new unhoused population would lead to the founding of the first *ranchos* – communities of the basic dwellings constructed by the new arrivals that would become Caracas’ distinctive barrios.

### **The founding of Pueblo Nuevo: Mérida’s first land *invasión* (1945-1958)**

As in Caracas in the 1930s, and at the same time as cities like Valencia (Wilde 2016), Mérida experienced its own first wave of rural-urban migration in the 1940s. As the agricultural sector continued to decline, workers came to the newly-modernised cities to take advantage of economic opportunities and make use of schools, churches and hospitals. Once the natural limits of the city were reached, Mérida’s urban expansion took the form of so-called land “*invasiones*” as existing residential areas could not accommodate the new arrivals (Prato Vicuna 2013: 13). This terminology in itself is revealing of the perceptions about barrio settlers. Prato Vicuna’s (ibid) use of the phrase in 2013, echoes the use of the English-language equivalent by scholars within the marginality literature during the mid-twentieth century. Rogler (1967: 516), for example, sought to make sense of Latin America’s experiences with urban “migrant invaders” which he saw as contributing to the “vast problem of slum growth” across the continent (ibid: 528). Here, the notion of invading outsiders has connotations of illegitimacy, violence and a sense of

---

<sup>4</sup> These included the Mercado Municipal, the Hospital of the Andes, the Arzobispal Palace, various colleges, the Belen Children’s Hospital, cinemas, the School of Medicine, Plaza Glorias Patrias, Mérida Stadium, the Municipal Police station and the Tuberculosis Hospital (Jugo Burguera 2014: 95).

<sup>5</sup> Analyses of rural-urban migration in Latin America in the mid-twentieth century differ. Yap (1976) found that most new arrivals in Brazil’s cities quickly found themselves gaining the economic benefits of their migration and eventually caught up with the earnings of with city-born workers. Shultz (1971: 159-163), however, used evidence from Colombia to show the variety of reasons for rural-urban migration. While these included the search for improved schooling and personal security, assumptions of higher urban wages by rural workers were found to be inaccurate. In both cases, migration is motivated by notions about the benefits of city life that may or may not have been accurate.

separateness from the existing resident population. This term also emphasises ownership, and distinguishes the newer processes of migration from equally 'invasive' practices of colonial settling. Ray (1969: 41), who uses the term in reference to Venezuela, describes the "extreme informality" of the way parcels of land were distributed in Venezuelan barrios. Again, this sentiment, along with stories about new residents drawing lots for their plots of land, is part of a discourse of otherness that tacitly questions the legitimacy of ownership and belonging. For Perlman (2007: 5), this notion of new settlers "who had 'invaded the citadel of the elite'" is part of a powerful classist ideology against the Latin American urban poor. In Venezuela, this sense of lawless invasion may also be unfounded - Matos Mar's (1960) survey found that 93% and 96% of residents owned their homes in two Caracas barrios.

In Mérida, the first of these new communities was founded in the Albarregas valley in 1945 with the construction of the settlement that came to be known as Pueblo Nuevo - translated as either 'New Village' or 'New People'. Although the steep valley sides had prevented the expansion of the historical centre up to this point, the proximity of the community to Plaza Bolívar meant new arrivals had access to economic opportunities in the centre, while the river itself provided a natural water supply. Older inhabitants also recall how, before the Albarregas became polluted, the river also provided swimming and fishing opportunities (interview with DV, 19.09.13, PN). The physical difference of the barrio is also likely to have contributed to the sense that the people living in these new urban areas were being somehow different - most barrios cling precariously to hillsides, giving the impression that life there is equally precarious and unstable, while Pueblo Nuevo's site had previously been overlooked for development and is physically separated from the centre. The lack of a grid-style street system is another mark of difference that connects with historical social hierarchies. The European system of urban planning had been a symbol of colonial power across Latin America, with plazas typically bordered by the buildings that symbolised foreign authority (church barracks, gaol, house of the governor) (Wilson 2000: 245).

This sense of difference is also maintained through language. The term "barrio" itself translates simply as "neighbourhood", but the connotation in Venezuela is more accurately translated as "slum". Gilbert (2007: 697) challenges the use of the

word “slum”, describing it as “an old and dangerous word” that recreates the myths about poor people, in part “by confusing the problem of poor quality housing with the people living there”. For barrios like Pueblo Nuevo, this was evident through a wider variety of language during fieldwork. Barrios were described variously as “red zones”, *barrios humildes* or *barrios populares* – emphasising the neighbourhoods as being dangerous, humble or popular. These three descriptions relate to the overlapping folk concepts about barrio residents discussed in Chapter One, including the ghetto thug, the humble poor and the social revolutionary.

Although the word “invader” is used in descriptions about Pueblo Nuevo, the historical accounts cited in this chapter do not provide information about the legal conditions around the founding of the community. In Caracas, however, much of the settlements of rural migrants in the late 1930s were on land owned by the government, much of it that been reclaimed from General Gomez’s vast landholdings in 1935. Some new residents bought land from the government, while others were technically squatters (Fernandes 2010: 43). In Pueblo Nuevo today, community members describe the area as having once been a single *hacienda* known as *La Lyria*. One resident, Dafne Vega, described how the first families had worked for the landowners and had bought plots from them with the purposes of building houses (interview with DV, 19.09.13, PN). This account conflicts with the accounts of Jugo Burguera (2014: 96) and Garcia et al. (1994: 113), however, who state that the river basin had been designated as a protected area during the 1940s.<sup>6</sup>

The physical difference of Pueblo Nuevo, with its informal construction techniques<sup>7</sup> and spatial separation, may have emphasised the challenge the community

---

<sup>6</sup> Garcia et al. (1994: 13) report that 87% of the territory of the state of Mérida was designated ABRAE or ‘Area under the Regime of Special Administration for the department of Ministry of the Environment and Natural and Renewable Resources. This meant that there were restrictions for the occupation of these areas and an obligation on the state to conserve them, although they suggest that the state would later be the first to violate these laws.

<sup>7</sup> There is little information about early construction techniques for Pueblo Nuevo. The first houses in Caracas’s barrios during this period were typically made with precarious zinc roofs and wooden or carton walls (Fernandes 2010: 42). Today, houses in Pueblo Nuevo almost all have brick walls with corrugated iron roofs. These vary significantly in size and condition - while a few have three stories, tiled floors and balconies, others are much smaller and more basic. Some are in a state of disrepair, while a small number of homes at the extreme periphery of the community - for example those adjacent to the Eastern

presented to the territorial jurisdiction of city authorities. This signified the end of colonial-style planning as the compact development in the Spanish style gave way to a surge of diverse growth and the urban sprawl more characteristic of North American city landscape (Prato Vicuna 2013: 13). From this period, the historical accounts of the architects and urban planners describe the start of “urban disarticulation” (Jugo Burguera 2014), with Pueblo Nuevo symbolising the transition from planned expansions to a new era of “spontaneous” and “anarchic” urban development (Prato Vicuna 2013: 3). Again, here we see how language serves to reinforce a sense of difference for communities like Pueblo Nuevo. While Ray’s (1969: 38-43) account of barrio settlement describes a process that is different to the way building work is planned in Venezuela’s modern city centres, this is a different kind of planning, rather than the chaos implied by this language.

### **Response of authorities and the continued expansion**

These new urban settlements across Venezuela, driven by rural-urban migration, reshaped the spaces and imaginaries of Venezuela’s cities. New urban settlers appeared to be taking advantage of a particularly unstable political period for Venezuela, with the overthrow of General Isaías Medina Angarita in 1945. This was followed by three years of revolutionary government, leading to a first and temporary taste of democracy in 1948 with the election of Rómulo Gallegos. Despite this instability, new policies to deal with urban growth were introduced, with the creation of the National Urbanism Commission in 1941 with goal of establishing “...an urbanism that corresponded to legal norms and was coordinated by national technical agencies” (D’Onghia 1973, in Jugo Burguera 2014: 100).

In Mérida, a surge in the general population following the modernisation of the city throughout the 1930s and early 1940s saw the city’s population double between 1945 and 1958 and triple by the 1970s. As well as the invasion of Pueblo Nuevo, buildings were built to fill the grid-system of the centre, while some buildings had

---

entrance - are crude constructions with simple roofs and cardboard walls. These construction methods are a potential health hazard in a country where the low-quality construction of barrio houses led to a national crisis as recently as 1999, when tens of thousands of people were killed in mudslides in communities surrounding Caracas. This detail is a particular relevance as the river basin also follows the Albarregas fault line, the source of the earthquakes including one that killed between four hundred and five thousand people in Mérida in 1812 (Laffaille and Ferrer 2005).

additional floors added to cope with demand. Jugo Burguera (2014: 97-98) describes an early attempt by Mérida's city authorities to manage the growth in working class populations by designing a new 'workers' neighbourhood' in the south of the city. Barrio Obrero, today known as Santa Elena, was constructed between 1947 and 1948 to accommodate the growing urban working class. Designed following Pueblo Nuevo's "spontaneous" construction and development, the new community was an attempt to return to public planning, and to the colonial style of a regular grid system organised around public spaces including a plaza and a park (ibid).

Attempts to prevent the proliferation of spontaneous barrio communities would ultimately be unsuccessful in Mérida. Ray (1969: 43) described how city authorities permitted barrio advances in some cases due to the fact that they did need to take planning responsibility for what they saw as new informal zones, meaning they didn't need to send architects, planners or provide services. In Mérida, a second wave of settlements saw the development of three new barrios in 1950 known as Campo de Oro, Pie de Llano and El Llanito. In 1953 three more barrio communities sprang up, as new roads connected the centre to the areas known today as La Hoyada de Milla, La Vuelta de Lola and El Amparo. This trend continued nationwide – the invaders were here to stay.

## 2. Transition to democracy and the first grassroots organisations, 1948-1974

Venezuela's series of political transitions in the 1940s, including a ten year return to military dictatorship, would lead to the increasing importance of barrio communities as sites of potential political insurgence. The brief democratic government of Romulo Gallegos was ousted by the military in November of the 1948, and in 1952 General Marcos Pérez Jiménez seized power. Like General Gómez in the 1920s, Pérez Jiménez saw himself as a moderniser and a nation-builder, channelling rising oil revenues into public works, centralising government and brutally suppressing the growing public dissent (Wilde 2014: 30). During this period, Caracas's emerging barrio neighbourhoods became the location for dissent against the regime, contributing to the conception of these areas as both lawless and politically radical. Militant dissidents from Acción Democrática (AD) and the

Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV) built support bases among the popular sectors and used the barrios as refuges for their leadership and as sites for demonstrations against the government (Fernandes 2010: 44). Notions about the political radicalism of barrio residents can be traced through the barrio movements of the 1970s, while evidence from fieldwork described in the remainder of the thesis shows how these folk concepts persist today.

### **Revolutionary student leadership and the *Comités Pro-Defensa***

Hernández de Padrón's (1998) study, *Historia de las Organizaciones de base en los barrios populares de Mérida*, uses interviews with residents, local leaders, and technical planners from State institutions to tell the story of the evolution of barrio politics. In Mérida, the first grassroots organisations were formed from the movements of *campesinos* who had recently arrived in the city. Hernández de Padrón (1998: 80) describes how new 'Pro-Defence Committees' arose in the late 1950s, led by members of the Communist Party of Venezuela and helped by university students who saw territorial redistribution as part of the national revolutionary struggle. The main objective of the new organisations was to promote and preserve the recently created communities and to look for new territories and opportunities for the out of work agricultural workers and their families. One participant described this philosophy:

“The communist leaders - above all the students and a few university workers, like in my case - we entered the struggle in defence of the most poor that live in the *ranchos*. We decided to organise them, to enact land seizures and to support them in the construction of their houses... it was a constitutional right that had to be defended... the students were the great support within the Pro-Defence Committees...”  
(Interview with University worker and “communist militant”, in Hernández de Padrón 1998: 81)

In this description, we see ideas that had become familiar from the pro-poor discourses emerging across Latin America, as movements inspired by the 1959 Cuban Revolution adopted a rhetoric of class solidarity and took up the struggle for land rights. Hernández de Padrón argues (*ibid*) that in Mérida, the participation of workers and students together in the city's first grassroots organisations instilled

the new settlers in the 1950s with a philosophy that promoted the rights of all Venezuelans to land and housing.

As in Caracas, the evolution of these movements in Mérida was connected to fundamental questions about the relationship of people and government. This reflected a growing challenge to notions of democracy, as social movements across the continent began to reconceptualise social structures (Escobar and Alvarez 1992: 8). The collaboration between the student leaders and barrio residents again reflected a growing trend across the continent, seen for example in the Mexican student movement of 1968 (Sanders 2013). This collaboration also provides an important precedent for the contemporary political landscape in Mérida, where leftist students participate both in Pueblo Nuevo's *Fundación Cayapa*, while many of their peers take to the streets as part of the anti-government protest movement.

In Mérida, the Pro-Defence Committees organised into working teams, with areas including medical assistance, support to help families to build and improve their houses, and legal support for the territorial disputes. Their leftist leaders "put the committees to work" first to improve existing communities, like Pueblo Nuevo, and secondly to mobilise the recently arrived populations to look for new land, new houses, and to improve them (Hernández de Padrón 1998: 81). These new organisations sought improvements in communities that had little in the way of basic services, with limited or contaminated water supplies and flooding during Mérida's frequent heavy rains (Garcia et al. 1994: 114-115).

Life in Mérida's barrios also meant a readjustment from rural lifestyles and agricultural employment. Writing from first-hand observations in the early 1970s, Jugo Burguera (2004: 8) describes the first residents as "not qualified for urban life", arguing that rather than improving these areas, quickly contributed to the deterioration of living standards until they were much worse than the areas that residents had migrated from. He describes the lower incomes of new arrivals, cultural differences between metropolitan and agricultural communities and the ongoing absence of the state as leading to not only a deterioration in living conditions, but worsening exclusion and social stratification. This account fits with other accounts of rural-urban migration from the region (e.g. Shultz 1971: 159-163), but also connects with descriptions from the marginality literature. Gans

(1982: 4) describes the struggle of new city arrivals to adapt “...to the urban milieu”. Perlman (1976: 136-137) questions these representations, and uses survey data from Rio de Janeiro to challenge the notion that recent migrants have not benefitted from the move, or long to return to rural areas. The idea of a new, more primitive population who are unsuited to life in the city challenges the legitimacy and belonging of poor urban communities. This conception is challenged by other studies that show that rural-urban migrants adjust quickly to city life (e.g. Yap 1976).

### **Democratic transition and the *Juntas Pro-Mejoras***

Thirteen years after Pueblo Nuevo’s founding, and following Mérida’s second wave of barrio *invasiones*, Venezuela’s transition to democracy<sup>8</sup> reoriented national politics towards questions of political legitimacy. The fall of the ten-year dictatorship of General Perez Jimenez resulted largely from the loss of support in key areas of the armed forces after 1957’s fraudulent plebiscite victory. This led to two weeks of street protests and finally a general strike, which saw Perez Jimenez flee the Miraflores Palace on the 23rd of January 1958. Mass looting, an attack on the National Security headquarters and the lynching of some officials underlined the importance of the public support for the incoming government. Urban populations also took advantage of the crisis period to seize new territories for residential areas (Fernandes 2010: 45).

Rómulo Betancourt – who had been President in the short-lived democratic government of 1945 to 1948 - won Presidential elections in December 1958 for the *Acción Democrática* party (AD).<sup>9</sup> Among the tasks facing Betancourt’s new government was a housing crisis fuelled by the continued migration of rural

---

<sup>8</sup> Mainwaring et al (1995) group new democratic systems in Latin America according to progress towards a certain political ideal, with Venezuela, Colombia, Argentina and the Southern Cone states as having the most developed “institutionalised party systems”. This linear idea of democratisation, however, is challenged by the more nuanced literature around the experience of politics of poor urban communities.

<sup>9</sup> It is worth highlighting a certain coherence between the environments of the democratic transition in the 1960s and the early years of the Bolivarian Revolution from 1998. Both saw new national policies directed at improving the lives of barrio residents and new forms of community organisation arising in an environment of recovered democracy and alongside a national political narrative of liberation and transformation.



workers to Venezuela's cities (Fernandes 2010: 45).<sup>10</sup> Betancourt needed Venezuela's new barrio populations to support his new plan or urban development, and tried to court them by promising that the new democratic state would mediate between the poorer labouring and landless classes, and a "parasitic elite" that had previously "enriched themselves at the public expense through political favouritism" (in Emerson 2011: 90). Here we see an example of a populist rhetoric in Venezuela. As in new democratic governments across Latin America, Betancourt tried to connect with the emerging citizenship discourses that recognised the rights of poorer citizens to basic public goods as part of the transition from authoritarianism. Prefiguring the Bolivarian public narrative, Betancourt presented his government as the patrons who would deliver this emancipation.

Despite this discourse, some of Venezuela's new urban settlements would become sites of dissent and insurgency against the new democratic government. Betancourt's AD party, along with the leaders of the newly formed Christian Social Party (COPEI), signed the power-sharing agreement known as the Pact of Punto Fijo. Despite the leftist origins of the two parties involved, the agreement notably excluded their former ally, the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV). The PCV, along with the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR) began a decade of guerrilla insurgency that relied on urban barrios for support. '*Puntofijismo*' would come to symbolise the power-sharing, clientelist politics and "pacted democracy" (Karl in Fernandes 2010: 45) of the pre-Chávez era.

In Mérida, despite overcrowding and declining living conditions in barrio communities, population increases continued due to the arrival of domestic migrants throughout the 1960s. As across Latin America (Koonings and Kruijff 2007: 8), the promise of citizens' rights that accompanied Venezuela's transition to democracy was not fulfilled for the growing numbers of the urban poor. Mérida's growth matched that of the industrialising cities in the interior of the country, with an average growth of 5% per year during the decade (Lopez 1974). For Pueblo Nuevo, new arrivals led to an expansion north up the river valley with the founding of barrio Simon Bolivar in 1962. Despite their physical connection, the

---

<sup>10</sup> The transitional government's (1958-1959) Emergency Plan, which set a first minimum wage for unemployed workers in Caracas and encouraged more rural-urban migration (Fernandes 2010: 45).

two barrios retain distinct identities today, and would enter a state of violent inter-barrio conflict during the 2000s (see Chapter Three).

While it is unclear if the Simon Bolivar invasion was planned by a Pro-Defence Council in Pueblo Nuevo or elsewhere, the role of barrio organisations in settling new areas and politicising their populations across the country had drawn the attention of the new democratic government. In response, and as part of a new national Emergency Plan intended to stabilise new urban communities, the government created the “*Juntas Pro-Mejoras*” (Wilde 2014: 164). These were a new form of grassroots institution that was intended to replace the Pro-Defence Committees - whose student leaders remained loyal to the Communist Party - with new, less combative barrio organisations.

Hernández de Padrón (1998: 81) argues that this change signalled a transition from a more spontaneous form of participation to one that followed a national model, set out by Acción Democrática. She describes how “...(i)n the case of Mérida the pro-defence committees were dismantled and their leaders were persecuted”. In her study, one student leader recalled how:

“The government of Betancourt attacked with strength against the student movement, finishing with the organisations that had been created in the barrios... From this moment, the *Juntas Pro-Mejoras* were created and controlled by the official organisms” (interview with a student *dirigente* in 1961, Hernández de Padrón 1998: 82).

Following the loss of their student leadership, Hernández de Padrón (*ibid*) writes that these groups “submitted to and acted from the actions of the state” and were easily controlled by members of the new ruling party, Acción Democrática. This assessment is supported by experiences from elsewhere in Venezuela, as the State established patterns of “‘dominated’ articulation” with the popular urban organisations (Hurtado 1991: 12; see also Fernandes 2010: 45). This collaboration between the student leaders and barrio residents provides another important precedent for the contemporary political landscape in Mérida, where leftist students participate both in Pueblo Nuevo’s Fundación Cayapa, while many of their peers take to the streets as part of the anti-government protest movement.

Although she sees the *Juntas Pro-Mejoras* more as an instrument of the party of the government than as an instrument to improve the barrios, Hernández de Padrón (1998: 83) suggests that these groups did bring some important benefits to Mérida's barrio communities. Materials were donated by the state to help with the improvement of houses and party leadership meant mobilisations were well-controlled and largely free from conflicts. Formalised links with the ruling party also brought legal recognition for the invasions.<sup>11</sup> In other parts of the country, however it was these benefits that were used to incorporate barrio communities into clientelist networks and to install community leaders who were loyal to Acción Democrática. Ray (1969) describes how intermediaries with close links to party or municipal officials would offer tacit approval for the so-called land invasions, in exchange for electoral support from the new settlers. These practices have a strong regional precedent, and are similar to practices of vote buying in Buenos Aires's *villas* (Auyero 2000, 2001) and to patterns of political patronage in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro (Arias and Rodrigues 2006; Ireland 2011). Where these kinds of shifting and complicated political relationships take place in the context of unclear legal status of communities' tenancies, as Ramakrishnan (2014: 759) also observes in her study of resettlement colonies in Delhi, they keep community members guessing about what sort of intervention might come next. This intervention into barrio politics by the state, characterised by the transition to *Juntas Pro-Mejoras*, signalled the regularisation of clientelist relationships between political parties, the State and grassroots organisations in Venezuela (Ray 1969; Fernandes 2010: 46; Wilde 2014: 164). Hernández de Padrón (1998: 82) describes the transition between the two forms of organisation as a moment "when all of the ambiguities that existed in the committees and *Juntas* were eliminated", as political pluralism had come to be seen as a destabilising factor by the newly established political order. Ultimately, Hernández de Padrón (1998: 82) writes, the *Juntas* coordinated the different special urban services of the government and served as their

---

<sup>11</sup> The value of "recognition" for barrio organisations remains today, where resources are attached to formal status of Councils Communal and where the legacy of the questionable legal status of land invasions like Pueblo Nuevo adds symbolic importance to registration processes (see Chapter Six).

“intermediaries with the population”, eventually being accepted as legitimate by barrio populations due to their recognition by the state.<sup>12</sup>

This takeover in Mérida took place against a background of optimism in transitional democracies across Latin America around the potential for community organisation to bring about meaningful change. A new ‘autonomist school’ of thought emphasised the capacity of collective action for transforming social relations. Ellner (1999: 76) describes how “...much of the writing of the period emphasised the autonomy of social movements and their consciousness-raising impact rather than their political function as interest groups which negotiate with power brokers.” In Venezuela, these negotiations were brief, as the functions of the Pro-Defence committees were assumed formally by the new *Juntas*, as part of what was renamed the National Plan for Community Development (ibid: 78). Under the Plan, the State promoted a mobilisation in the popular sectors around housing needs and basic urban services.

In Mérida’s city-wide census of 1961, the barrio population had grown to twenty five percent of Mérida’s total population. However, as politics in the barrios became oriented to the technical plans of the AD, only the *Juntas Pro-Mejoras* in Sana Anita, San Jose de Las Flores and Campo de Oro actually implemented the to improve the barrios (Hernández de Padrón 1998: 83-84). In the rest of the barrios, *casas de partido* –or “party houses” – were set up by AD to recruit and train new leaders and to encourage electoral support. For Hernández de Padrón, (1998: 84) this system was a new form of patronage, as campesinos arrived in Mérida and quickly transferred their loyalty from the rural landowners to the party and their leaders.

### **The *Organizacion Comunitaria* and the first barrio studies**

While AD consolidated their new clientelist relations with barrios, COPEI, in opposition, attempted to design their own, city-wide institution INCOATE. When Rafael Caldera won the Presidential election for COPEI in 1969, this alternative

---

<sup>12</sup> The relationship between state, party and community in this scenario is reflected today. Voceros in the Communal Council at Calle Principal attribute low levels of participation in Pueblo Nuevo to the lack of formal recognition by the state. The exclusion of Communist Party members is also fundamentally similar to how *opositores* are seen today, with some Chavista activists explained the exclusion of non-Chavistas due to this fear of destabilisation (interviews w LD, 15.07.14, SB; LR, 16.05.14; PN, VR, 21.07.14, PN).

structure was formalised, bringing Mérida's barrio organisations under the *Organizacion Comunitaria*. The *Juntas* then multiplied, as barrio organisations constructed under the AD government transferred their loyalty to COPEI, who used the new umbrella institution to strengthen ties with the city's poorest communities.<sup>13</sup>

Although there had been various planning initiatives in Mérida in the 1960s, it was only in 1970 that the city designed its first Plan for Urban Development. From this point on, city authorities would consider the barrios as areas of potential redevelopment. The Plan included the first proposals from a group of architects at the ULA, headed by Professor D'Onghia, aimed at developing new public spaces for the city and reducing congestion (Jugo Burguera 2014: 101). These included the three bridges that linking the different sectors of the city, including Campo Elias Bridge over the Albarregas to the south of Pueblo Nuevo.<sup>14</sup> The river basin itself was reimagined as Albarregas Metropolitan Park, but on investigation the architects they found that the river was contaminated and also that "the area had been taken over by land invasions" of Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar (Jugo Burguera 2014: 101). The planners' proposals show a divergence between their vision of "Mérida, Park City" and what they saw as the "savage urbanism" of the barrios (1973, in Burguera 2004: 104, see also Prato Vicuna et al 2013; Burguera 2014). It is not clear whether city authorities planned for the relocation of the populations of Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar, as they had in Caracas,<sup>15</sup> but the planners' proposals for "transitional populations" did include the relocation of

---

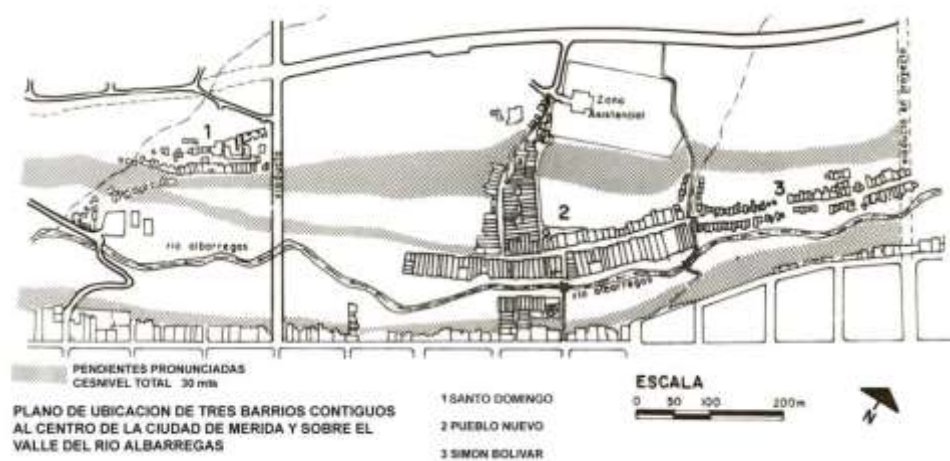
<sup>13</sup> This was achieved partly through the support of the church and different religious groups, as COPEI framed these popular organisations as part of their "social Christian project" (Hernández de Padrón 1998: 86). This political connection to the church was reinforced by donations of materials and medicine via voluntary associations of the church but funded by international organisms like the Catholic group Caritas from the United States (ibid).

<sup>14</sup> Today this bridge is now a source of income for some residents, with food and pirate DVD stalls. Along with these, the bridge is a regular site for begging and muggings that take advantage of the only commuter routes for the Western suburbs whose residents fear to take the path through the barrios and would do so only during the street protests of 2014 when the entrance to the bridge was occupied by armed militants (see Chapter Six).

<sup>15</sup> In 1971 plans were made to demolish parts of barrio San Augustin in Caracas to make way for a park, but were met with active resistance from local groups, and the plans were eventually abandoned (Fernandes 2010: 212).

those barrios on the precarious hillsides at the edge of the city (1973, in Jugo Burguera 2004: 82).

As well as providing evidence of a contested vision for Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar specifically, the 1973 study describes the characteristics and socio-economic conditions of the seven “most important” barrios in Mérida, including Pueblo Nuevo, Simon Bolivar and near-by Santo Domingo (in Jugo Burguera 2004: 83). Up to this date there had been no government study of conditions in these communities. Map 2 shows the areas examined in detail in the study, with Pueblo Nuevo in the centre.



*Map 2. Showing the location of the three barrios in 1970 including Pueblo Nuevo (2), Simon Bolivar (3) and Santo Domingo (1) (Jugo Burguera 2004: 79)<sup>16</sup>*

From 1969 onwards, Mérida’s barrio communities had continued expanding and by 1973 Jugo Burguera’s study estimated that of 36,138 inhabitants lived in “marginal zones” in the city (ibid: 79). In describing the living conditions for these communities, this study exposes the extent to which the state had failed in its promises to fulfil basic citizen’s rights by providing basic services and regulate building work for public safety. Most families lived at the most basic levels of subsistence, Jugo Burguera writes, often with contaminated water supplies, a lack

<sup>16</sup> The key reads: “Prominent Slopes, total change in elevation 30 metres.” Title reads: map of the location of three neighbouring barrios in the centre of the City of Mérida in the Albarregas River valley.” The bridge in construction at the far right of the map was never completed.

of sanitation, and conditions where water-borne parasites and illness bred.<sup>17</sup> The main problems for barrios included in the 1973 study include spatial organisation and lack of electricity, water, garbage collection, and an lack of social spaces, including for the “amusement and recreation for the young people and children” (ibid: 82).<sup>18</sup> Other problems highlighted in the study included dangerous housing, unstable employment and the lower incomes of residents and lower education when compared with the residents of the city centre and middle class suburbs.

As well as noting the physical disrepair and lack of services in the barrios, Burguera, writing in 1973, commented that seven communities, including Pueblo Nuevo, had “not been properly assimilated by the social, economic, political and cultural structures, causing a rift between the inhabitant of marginal sectors and the rest of the core in which they live.” (in Jugo Burguera 2004:79). Again, these notions about barrio residents connect with ideas from the marginality literature that suggest that rural migrants are unsuited for city life (Gans 1982: 4. In Mérida, conflicts between the barrios and the rest of the city revolved in particular around problems of waste collection and disposal (Garcia et al. 1994: 116, see Photo 2).<sup>19</sup> After the Bolivarian Revolution, the politicisation of class in government narratives would attempt to recuperate the image of barrio residents.

---

<sup>17</sup> The state was not entirely absent in Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar and had tried to protect Pueblo Nuevo from flooding with dredging and concrete flood defences (Jugo Burguera 2004:83). This concern with flooding remains a community priority today, centred around attempts to repair the storm drain on Calle Principal, for which the council must negotiate with the state’s water company, Aguas de Mérida. These negotiations are hampered by the lack of official recognition for the Communal Council (see Chapter Six).

<sup>18</sup> Burguera’s concern in this respect predates a contemporary priority for Fundación Cayapa, as the group tries to provide alternatives to gang culture for young people as a way of disrupting the cycle of violence in the barrio (interview w JW, 31.05.14, SB).

<sup>19</sup> Garcia et al. (1994:116) comment that when the mayor had gave the contract for refuse collection in Mérida to a private company, this reduced conflict in the city by raising cleanliness levels. In 2012, the Mayor Lester Rodriguez would be accused of the theft of the funds for waste collection, leading to piles of rubbish in the streets, months of protests and a variety of organised community responses (see Chapter Six).



Photo 2. 'Aseo protests', undated. Garcia et al. 1994: 116

As state and political parties sought to use community organisations to gain authority in barrios like Pueblo Nuevo, however, these aspirations were not matched by the delivery of improvements for these communities, which Burguera (2004: 82) comments saw only gradual improvement or deterioration. The resulting lack of legitimacy of political actors would leave the urban poor ready for a new vision for Venezuelan politics. Twenty years later, Hugo Chávez would tap into these attitudes, promising solutions for basic needs, social inclusion for Venezuela's barrios and the creation of more autonomous and empowered community organisations. These visions of a longer-term social transformation were part of the political ambitions in the 1970s, but shared space with shorter-term social demands as residents in Caracas organised around water, public services and amenities (Velasco 2011: 168-174), and in Mérida, around housing and land.

### **Mérida's *Comités de Toma*, and the invasion of barrio Pueblo Nuevo, 1973**

Although Hernández de Padrón's study describes the proliferation of *Juntas Pro-Mejoras* in Mérida under AD and COPEI governments, the team of architects visiting Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar in 1969 found that there were no communal organisations (Jugo Burguera 2004: 206). They did report the existence of some Cultural Centres, however, described by Burguera as:



“...a species of organizations emerging from the base, bringing together young leaders with radical ideas who persisted in their struggle to promote an organized movement, and whose initiatives gradually began to take hold in the rest of the population.”

This account fits with local memory, with reports of a cultural centre called Simon Bolivar in the 1970s. Although these alternative institutions were primarily engaged in cultural activities, residents also described consciousness raising activities (Lopez 2009). In this way, political discussions continued away from the dependent organisations such as the *Juntas Pro-Mejoras*. This impression of an apparent rejection of state-run community institutions is reinforced by Hernández de Padrón’s account of the events of 1973, as the dependent governance institutions were gave way to more combative social movements. Hernández de Padrón (1998: 86-90) presents these movements as a test of whether it was possible in Mérida “to have democratic movements within a political system that was perfectly able to control and integrate any form of social protest.” The responses by the state provide us with precedents for the management of social movements in Mérida in the present day.

Venezuela had suffered a chronic housing crisis throughout the 1960s and 1970s, due to an ever-expanding urban population and made worse by the concentration of state resources into projects for the middle classes under President Caldera (Hernández de Padrón 1998: 90). In Mérida, a new wave of land seizures were planned and executed by the city’s existing barrio populations. In May of 1973, the incident described in the introduction to this chapter took place, as sixty families invaded the land next to Pueblo Nuevo in a coordinated collective action.<sup>20</sup> Hernández de Padrón describes how these families had largely been living in precarious conditions, or renting parts of the houses of friends and family. The movement in Pueblo Nuevo was led by the mothers of these families who “decided in a spontaneous manner” to use the vacant land and set up new *rancho*-style

---

<sup>20</sup> While the story of Pueblo Nuevo’s Comité de Toma did not appear in interviews with residents of Pueblo Nuevo, the area to the south of the community has been a used by Municipal police for the several years, and reportedly was the location for a police module until the electoral campaign of 2011, when the module was demolished to make way for a new police station that was never completed.

dwellings (ibid). The mobilisation was completed with the support of leftist student and university workers who lived in barrio Pueblo Nuevo, and who led the organisation.<sup>21</sup>

The destruction of the *ranchos* by the municipal police and National Guard and the imprisonment of the student leaders of the *toma*, were met with mass student and union mobilisations in the form of street protests. The protesters denounced “violations against public opinion” and demanded the liberation of the leaders (ibid: 89). Here, the demands of the Student Federation differed somewhat from the objectives of the barrio residents because they gave more attention to those who were imprisoned. To negotiate with the forces on the left, the state said they would free the students if they abandoned the Pueblo Nuevo movement. The state again offered to deal with the families on an individual basis, and the invasion eventually dispersed.

The example of the *Toma* of 1973, led in part by the mothers of the barrios, also shows us something about the role for women in the more combative types of barrio organising in Mérida. Hernández de Padrón (1998: 90) also describes two other *tomas* in the early 1970s in the city, each led by mothers attempting to alleviate the problems associated with poor quality housing and over-crowding. Although these examples show that ideas of gender roles did not prevent these women from playing leading roles in the more combative community organising of the period, this may also be evidence of what Fernandes would later observe in Caracas during the Chávez era - that reoriented gender identities ultimately leave some barrio women with responsibility for Moser’s (1986 in Fernandes 2007: 119) “triple burden” of productive, reproductive and community managing work.

---

<sup>21</sup> The movement formed a Comité de Lucha, distributing tasks among the group. They organised in work groups to prepare the land, parcels of lands and streets, and improve the new *ranchos* (Hernández de Padrón 1998: 87). The new leadership did this in part because they wanted to present the image of an organisation as being well-organised. They intended to politicise the *toma* and tie in with the themes of other collectives of longer-term socialism and the revolutionary transformation of society. This, however, gave them a certain combative character which would provoked the violent reaction from the state

Pueblo Nuevo's location within a broader picture of contested relations between politics and society is further illustrated by Burguera's eyewitness account of the encounter between city authorities and the local leaders:

"In 1975, in an Assembly to organize the *Junta Comunal*, held in Calle Primera of Pueblo Nuevo, convened by ORDEC (Regional Agency for the Development of the Community) we were witnesses to how a *funcionario* tried to direct the participants to elect their candidates, while the young people from the Cultural Centres did not slacken in their struggle to elect their leaders, which in the end they achieved. However, you could see from that moment that the relations of collaboration between the public *funcionarios* and the elected young people would not lead to fruitful work." (Jugo Burguera 2004: 206)

While this account implies a continuation of the contested forms of community organisation in Pueblo Nuevo, it is not clear from Burguera's account if the Junta was successfully convened on this occasion. This contest between *funcionarios* and barrio residents appears in all of the sources drawn on for this chapter, and will be drawn on for the analysis of contemporary frustrations with city authorities described in Chapter Six and Chapter Seven.

Hernández de Padrón sees these attempts to control community organisations - along with the violent reaction to Pueblo Nuevo's expansion and the other barrio movements of 1973 demonstrate the social-Christian government's intention to "pacify" the urban poor. This perceived intention connects with discourses in neighbouring Brazil that Wacquant (2003) describes as 'penalising' poverty. Hernández de Padrón's analysis reflects much of the optimism about community organising from the New Social Movements literature. In these accounts, the limited results of community organisations are more often explained in terms of structural pressures from above, as state and class power are structurally maintained (Kaufman and Alfonso 1997: 6). Evidence from Pueblo Nuevo today, where levels of participation are relatively low (see chapters five and six), suggests that the romantic idea of vibrant community organising limited only by state controls may be unrealistic. What is especially useful however, is where Hernández de Padrón's account fits with studies into shifting ideas about the urban poor in

Latin America. Although the notions of citizenship for the urban poor that accompanied the transition to democracy had to some extent replaced the idea of barrio “invaders” in Venezuela, the new discourses of the made little difference for communities like Pueblo Nuevo.

### 3. 1979-1988: Service Modules, Cultural Centres and the first Neighbours’ Associations

Representations of barrio residents as Venezuela’s new urban citizens would give way to representations of barrio criminality, as fearful attitudes towards poor urban populations were taken up by a new AD government with the election of Carlos Andres Perez in 1979. In contrast with Betancourt’s rhetoric about the integration of barrio populations, Pérez accused identified the poor majority of being “obstacles to progress” (Emerson 2011: 92). Folk concepts about barrio populations as “barbarous law-breakers” were developed (Leary 2011: 41-42). These conceptions had existed in the public consciousness since the 1940s and 1950s – when a new wave of Venezuelan crime cinema sensationalised “*malandro* culture” (Chacón Mora 2014; see also Martínez Aponte 2012). Now these notions about the urban poor became a central part of the national political discourse.

Perez’ new discourse in part developed around a promise to protect Venezuelan elites at a time of national prosperity (Emerson 2011: 92). Due to an enormous rise in oil revenues, Perez presided over the best economic conditions in the history of the country. While these new resources helped overcome some of the symptoms of the national housing crisis, they also led to the expansion of the state bureaucracy and to new centralising tendencies, as the President sought to control the distribution and was awarded ‘extraordinary powers’ by the National Assembly.<sup>22</sup> This new, affluent era saw a vision of “la Gran Venezuela”, with the cities were now seen as the location for the new national project, fuelling another wave of urbanisation in the 1970s.

Under Perez, the *Juntas* would soon be outdated. A new national Plan for Urbanisation and Equipment, and Programs for the Marginal Zones, was

---

<sup>22</sup> Extraordinary Presidential powers, known today as “*poderes habilitantes*”, would be secured by both Hugo Chávez and Nicolas Maduro in times of supposed national crisis, including as recently as 2014. The laws allow the President to legislate by decree.

coordinated by a new institution, the FUNDACOMUN. This institution remains a part of the administrative structure for civil society groups to this day, including coordinating funding and registration for the Communal Councils. In Mérida, FUNDACOMUN reports from this period state that 50% of the barrios did not have adequate public services (FUNDACOMUN-Mérida 1978 in Hernández de Padrón 1998: 92). This was the “*illusion petrolera*”, as the AD government promoted the idea that the State can do everything, a sentiment Hernández de Padrón describes as “*el Estado lo puede todo*” (Hernández de Padrón 1998: 92). This reinforced a culture of paternalism by using petrol money to reinforce clientelist networks. This era, according to Hernández de Padrón (1998: 92), also saw the new idea that civil society organisations could be “like a subsidy of the political economy”. This sentiment has some reflection in contemporary public narrative around community organisation in Venezuela, where officials emphasise the potential of the Communes to contribute to “productive capacity” of the country (interview w DA, 12.05.14, OF).

The mechanism for the coordination and service delivery in the barrios were new Service Modules. Hernández de Padrón’s study questions the effectiveness of these modules in Mérida, drawing on the government’s own appraisal. One Corpo Andes worker commented:

“The service modules did not succeed in their functions, contributing more to reinforce paternalism, to the solution of the immediate and individual problems. Furthermore, the local government and the party gave exit to the problems, bypassing the technical plans (...) (T)he planned *Juntas Comunales* never worked (...) for the majority of the inhabitants it was easier to go to the *Gobernación* or to the house of the party (AD), to solve their problems, than participate in a community activity with the Modules...”<sup>23</sup> (Interview with Corpo Andes technical staff, in Hernández de Padrón 1998: 93).

---

<sup>23</sup> To some extent this process remains in place today, as the AD functionary in the barrio, uses his access to party resources as part of his role as a vocero in the Communal Council Calle Primera.

From the different reports, these ineffective and dependent forms of organising appear to have damaged public confidence in the potential of community organisations with government or party involvement. This resonates with contemporary evidence from Pueblo Nuevo, where clientelist practices were blamed for the decline in participation (interviews w GL, 04.07.14, CD; and RS, 11.05.14, PN, see also Chapter Six). This shift away from the optimism of the 1960s was occurring across the region, as the radical social transformation predicted by the autonomist school had not come about, and social movements and community groups had not become major political actors (Ellner 1999: 76). At this time, experiences from across Latin America that fit with the dependent and “dominated” articulation described in Mérida (Hurtado 1991: 12) would lead to the emergence of the 'political interaction' school (e.g. Evers 1985), which was influenced by North American social movement scholars who rejected the optimism of the earlier period. This new school began to analyse the day-to-day performance of social movements under new democratic regimes that were coordinated around networks of political influence (Ellner 1999: 76). During the 1970s, neither the networks of political influence or the autonomous power of community groups were delivering significant change for barrio communities. While Barrios (1987:32), for example, highlights this period in Venezuela as “a new chapter of progress” with the building of an integral programme to provide services and organisation for barrio communities, this era of the high revenues of the *bonanza petrolera* were not matched by improvements to barrio services.

In line with this declining optimism across the continent, Hernández de Padrón (1998: 93) reports that studies in Mérida’s barrios in the 1970s found little evidence of the older forms of spontaneous participation, with groups instead functioning to reinforce party influence and loyalties to local political elites. However, these studies did find Cultural Centres in some barrios led by leftist groups. Hernández de Padrón reports that these were created as part of the thesis of the rescue of the *cultura popular* – the “popular culture”. The Cultural Centres also drew on the support of the ULA and recalls that “(t)heir activities were isolated, but recognised in particular by the young populations in the barrios.” This analysis is supported by the subsequent development of community organisations in Pueblo Nuevo from the 1980s until the present day.

## **The Neighbours' Associations and Pueblo Nuevo's cultural projects, 1980-1988**

In line with Burguera's account above and Hernández de Padrón's study, which runs to 1980, participation in formal political organisations in Pueblo Nuevo declined, in favour of cultural and young persons' activities that were beyond the remit of the State or political parties. Local activist Gerardo Lopez's account for the barrio for this period reflects Hernández de Padrón's city-level analysis, in that the first barrio organisation he mentions is the Critical Cultural Centre Simon Bolivar. The cultural centre, he writes, organised theatre, dance, song, and sports activities, but also gave classes designed to "improve the consciousness" of residents about national geography (ibid: 3). From these experiences, a succession of groups were started that practiced non-political activities. These groups would eventually move into more political territory.

In Pueblo Nuevo, the presence of the Communist Party (PCV) – leaders of both the original barrio organisations in the 1950s and the *toma* of the 1973 - continued in this period with a branch of the Communist Youth. Gerardo describes how their activities included creating a cultural space in the community with a library containing copies of the communist manifesto, Marxist philosophical texts and Latin American political literature.<sup>24</sup> Here, residents could study the Bolshevik and Cuban revolutions, and participate in different circles of political agitation. According to Gerardo, members also participated in electoral movements with other parties from the Revolutionary left Movement (MIR).<sup>25</sup>

The desire for more autonomous community organisations than the dependent *Juntas* would also lead to a national change. The Neighbours' Associations originated not with the state, but from the successful lobby groups in the wealthy areas of Eastern Caracas. Ellner (1999: 78) describes how the first associations were "generally free of political party interference" when compared with the *Juntas* that they had replaced. The two main networks of organisations, the Federation of Associations of Urban Communities (FACUR) and the Escuela de Vecinos embraced

---

<sup>24</sup> Today, the CEDECOL library includes Chavista pamphlets and related political literature, but is dedicated primarily to educational texts, in particular geography and the sciences.

<sup>25</sup> There is no Communist Youth organisation in Pueblo Nuevo today. In Venezuela, the rise of Chávez's MBR and later the PSUV would lead to a decline in support for the PCV.

an anti-party discourse that attributed shortcomings of community organisations to the party intrusions that had damaged their autonomous status. These new movements organised against a backdrop of economic crisis and increasing public dissatisfaction at the effects of structural adjustment throughout the 1980s.

In the Albarregas Valley, the Neighbours' Association AVEPUNSIMBO was founded to cover both the barrios of Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar (Lopez 2009). The Organic Law of Municipal Regimes of 1979 required that an area had two hundred families to constitute an association. Burguera's (2004: 7) 1973 study recorded two hundred houses in Pueblo Nuevo, with no data for Simon Bolivar, which would have had much less. If most households contained one family, this would have meant that there were only enough families for an inter-barrio organisation to be recognised.<sup>26</sup> This inter-barrio format would provide a hindrance to community organising in the 2000s, when the violent conflicts between gangs in the two communities made each barrio a no-go zone for residents of the other (interview w JW, 31.05.14, SB; and Focus Group 2). This threshold of two hundred families would be challenged by the associations and amended in the LORM's amendment in 1990 after pressure from communities who said they had not been consulted for the 1979 law (Ellner 1999: 79).

In Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar, Gerardo's report describes the Neighbours' Association's health committee, which ran a first aid course for community members. This committee had high levels of involvement of young people from Pueblo Nuevo, who started a primary care service in a space borrowed from by the nearby ambulance service at the edge of the barrio (located at the 'Zona Asistencial' on Map 2, above). This activity shows the desire among the residents to provide those services that were not provided by the state during this period.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> On the evidence of today, two hundred may also have been a serious obstacle to registration. Today, it is also about how many people a group can mobilise to attend meetings, vote for proposals and complete any census. This remains a real barrier to recognition for the Communal Council at Calle Principal today, as a proportion of signatures is required to complete any official application or formal status and resources (see Chapter Seven).

<sup>27</sup> Apart from this detail, I did not uncover a lot of information about the Neighbours' Association in the 1980s. As this group structure lasted until the 2000s and the arrival of the Communal Council system, it is difficult to draw anything specific for this period from



Although the new associations were intended to be an autonomous movement, it is reported that Acción Democrática attempted to gain control of Neighbours' Associations in the 1980s in an attempt to compensate for the loss of influence and prestige of the labour movement - with which they had strong ties (Ellner 1999: 82). AD provided all "community activists" in the party a special vote in internal party elections, while any party members on the executive board of a Neighbours' Association became automatic delegates at the party's municipal conventions in an attempt to encourage the penetration of these groups by party members (ibid). In Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar, alongside the Neighbours' Associations, the youth of the barrios formed a Rescue Group to learn mountaineering. The group learnt climbing, survival skills and became involved in ecological activities and conservationism. Gerardo describes how the group had seventy eight members and would become the basis for the Moaco group in the late 1980s. This second group sought to combine sports and cultural activities with social and political concerns, and a continued emphasis on the health of local residents and the general improvement of everyday life in the two barrios. This organisation, Gerardo adds, provided "...the sorts of things that today a communal council should do." (Lopez 2009: 7).

Moaco's objective was to create a holistic solution to the barrios' problems, including by creating "unity and consciousness" between residents (ibid). In this combined social and cultural approach, the focus on youth membership, and the separation from formal political organisation such as the Neighbours' Association, Moaco provided the blueprint for some of the contemporary activities of Fundación Cayapa (see Chapter Eight). This group would have a part to play in the period of civil unrest at the end of the 1980s and would connect to the rise of the new left in Venezuela in the 1990s.

#### 4. Linking contemporary and historical community organisation in Pueblo Nuevo

Today, the site of 1973's *toma* at the southern edge of Pueblo Nuevo is fenced-off from the rest of the barrio. In the decades since the occupation, the police made use

---

the general comments of my participants, whose descriptions appeared to relate to more recent phases of the organisation.

of the space they had reclaimed from the occupying families by dumping dozens of damaged police cars. People in Pueblo Nuevo described how, during an election campaign in 2011, the area was eventually cleared and promised to be developed into a police station. Now, through the chain link fence or from the Campo Elias Bridge overhead, the bare concrete foundations and the girders that might have supported the walls of the police station share space with a row of kennels for police dogs. If the *toma* and the violent reaction from the state show the limited acceptance of Pueblo Nuevo's "migrant-invaders" by city authorities in the 1970s, the unbuilt police station seems to suggest a certain contemporary reluctance to invest in pacifying the so-called *malandros* in the barrio. As described in Chapter Six, however, an occupation to the North of Pueblo Nuevo, would have considerably more success during the Chávez era, with the construction of new tower blocks as part of the *Brisas de Alba* housing campaign.

Canel (1997: 190) describes social movements in Latin America as engaged not only in struggles over the allocation of goods and public services, but over "the production of meaning and the constitution of new collective identities". This chapter has shown how both public services and identities have been part of the history of community organising in Pueblo Nuevo, where experiences reflect the wider challenges facing community groups across Latin America in the mid-Twentieth Century. For Pueblo Nuevo, the founding of the community outside of the parameters that had previously been imagined for urban development, the co-optation and replacement of the first community groups, and finally the turn to less formal kinds of community organising are part of the development of a complex relationship between people and government in and around the barrio. This history provides us with important precedents for the analytical work undertaken in the remainder of the thesis.



### 3. Citizens, revolutionaries and *opositors*: community organising around shifting representations of the urban poor, 1989-2014

In November 2013, rumours spread around Pueblo Nuevo that the National Guard had taken over several stores in Mérida city centre, and had begun selling their stock off at dramatically lowered prices. Some people left the barrio to visit the centre, joining queues that stretched around city blocks to buy electrical goods, clothing and household appliances. People left the clutching their cut-price goods, squeezing past the young recruits with rifles who kept order over the queues. Meanwhile, new deliveries of stock arrived from warehouses and scowling shopkeepers looked on.

The national wave of enforced price-fixing came just six months after new President Nicolas Maduro's narrow electoral victory in April 2011, and just a few weeks before December's "8D" national municipal elections that had been presented by the opposition as a plebiscite on the Bolivarian project. Maduro explained the period of price-fixing as the re-appropriation of goods that had been bought with subsidised US dollars that had been awarded to importers with the intention of lessening the impact of high inflation. It was said that dramatic savings were made by importers, who were able to buy dollars at ten times less than real market value. Where these savings were not being passed on to customers, and these importers were said to be making several thousand percent profit on some items.

In Mérida, Chavistas and *opositors* queued side-by-side in the hot sun. At Kristy's clothes store, three generations of one family used the imposed store-wide discounts to buy new clothes. Alba, Morliana and Lilia explained how they saw the reductions as a necessary action in the face of increasing price speculation, and hoped that what they saw as the "real prices" would continue. At Yamil electronics store, goods arrived as fast as people could buy them as vans shuttled hoarded goods from the owners' warehouses. One shopper queuing to purchase a discounted television accused the owners of black-marketeering, and echoed Maduro's announcement by describing the involvement of the National Guard as part of "economic warfare" against Venezuela's greedy elites.

Other bargain hunters were less approving of the government action. Students Belkis and Renson saw the new scrutiny around prices as an attempt to centralise power over the retail sector. One shopkeeper said that he planned to leave the country as a result of the increased attention to his business practice, saying that "...there is no life here in Venezuela".

This period of price-fixing was intended to be an emblematic moment for the new Maduro government. The spectacle of armed National Guard members selling off the stock of "bourgeois" clothing and electronics goods importers was a good fit with the narrative of class struggle that had become a central part of the Bolivarian public narrative. For critics of the government, however, the price-fixing was simply another example of populist vote-buying, coming as it did weeks before an election. For many Chavistas, price-fixing was a necessary anti-corruption measure, but one that was long overdue. In the context of a deepening crisis of legitimacy for the PSUV, and as Maduro called repeatedly for "loyalty" from the Chavista voter base, the price-fixing seemed to be part of an attempt to reproduce the material benefits enjoyed during the Chávez era.<sup>1</sup>

### **Aims and structure of the chapter**

This chapter considers the evolution of community organising in Pueblo Nuevo during the twenty-five years leading up to the period of fieldwork. This period

---

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix Three for an article I wrote for [veenzuelanalysis.com](http://veenzuelanalysis.com) describing the period of price-fixing.

included the rise of the Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement (MBR), Chávez's fifteen years in government, and the onset of the contemporary political crisis facing Maduro's government today. The previous chapter described the founding of Pueblo Nuevo and Mérida's other barrio communities during processes of rural-urban migration in the mid-twentieth century. Different kinds of barrio organisations evolved in connection with a changing national political context that included the transition to a new democratic system. For Pueblo Nuevo, this also meant organising in the context of shifting representations of the urban poor: first as land invaders, as rightful citizens and finally as the urban criminal underclass. I argued that these representations connected with different ideas about the relationship of people and government in poor urban communities.

This analysis is continued in this chapter by again charting the evolution of organisations and services in Pueblo Nuevo alongside a history of shifting national politics and changing representations of the urban poor. The increased importance of barrio populations after the *Caracazo* riots of 1989 is connected with the rise of Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement in the 1990s, culminating in Chávez's election in 1998. I give an account of Pueblo Nuevo's experience of the pro-poor politics of the Chávez era, leading up to the fieldwork period and the contemporary economic and political crisis following the death of Chávez. This period of political change for Venezuela was also marked by new notions of political constituency, entwined with shifting representations of the urban poor: from the dangerous criminals of pre-Chavista rhetoric to the revolutionaries capable of social change, the rightful citizens in a new political era, and finally as the embattled loyal subjects in an enduring political crisis.

The chapter makes two arguments about how local experiences from Pueblo Nuevo connect with the reorientation of national politics towards the interests of the urban poor. First, I argue that new public services and institutions introduced in Pueblo Nuevo in the 2000s - including opportunities for local organising and for basic healthcare, education, housing and subsidised goods - can be usefully thought about as part of improved terms of patronage for barrio populations. Second, I show how the Bolivarian public narrative reformulates the political discourse of the pre-Chávez era, again drawing on different folk-concepts about barrio populations, and promising emancipation as well as patronage for the urban poor.

The chapter begins following the economic crisis of the late 1980s, drawing on Gerardo Lopez's (2009) account and Hernández de Padrón's (2000) city-level analysis to highlight the increased political focus of neighbourhood movements in Mérida. The politicisation of Pueblo Nuevo's Moaco youth organisation and the occupation of the disused school building in the barrio by residents' groups are located in national context, as public dissatisfaction grew and barrio populations were drawn to the new empowering identities offered by the Chavista public narrative. The chapter continues by discussing the evolution of public services and institutions in Pueblo Nuevo after the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998. This section draws on local memory and accounts of national institutional change to describe new social 'Missions' for health, food and education and the limited implementation of the Communal Council system in Pueblo Nuevo. New services and political rhetoric are connected with new, more sympathetic representations of the urban poor. Finally, I reflect on the experiences of the Bolivarian politicisation of identity for people in Pueblo Nuevo, where conceptions of *el pueblo* – the people – have developed meanings that involve both partisanship and class.

## 1. Barrio populations as the agents of social change: the reorientation of Venezuelan national politics, 1989-1998

As the economic crisis of the mid-1980s worsened,<sup>2</sup> optimism about the potential of social movements to effect social change for the urban poor had waned across Latin America. The radical social transformation predicted by the autonomist school had not come about, and community groups had not become major political actors (Ellner 1999: 76). Venezuela's growing neighbourhood movement would be increasingly divided between those who sought short-term social improvements and those who wanted to work towards a national political alternative (Hernández

---

<sup>2</sup> The 1980s saw a worsening economic crisis in Venezuela, as declining oil prices along with state mismanagement of funds, massive over-spending and corruption led to hyperinflation. The Acción Democrática (AD) government of Jaime Ramón Lusinchi (1984-1989) shifted from the country's state-based development model in search of the efficiencies needed to compete in globalised market-place, reducing expenditure on infrastructure, healthcare, education and social services leading to a growing urban segregation and deterioration in living conditions and public services (Fernandes 2010: 67).

de Padrón 2000: 198). In the early 1990s, this political alternative finally emerged as the Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement.

### **Pueblo Nuevo's Moaco group and the re-politicisation of civil society**

In Pueblo Nuevo, Gerardo Lopez's (2009: 8-11) study describes how the youth-led Moaco group shifted from organising around culture, sports and health to more overtly political activities. Then, as today, this meant connecting with groups outside of the *barrio*. The Moaco group became involved with campaigns for the leftist coalition – including the militant La Causa Roja (LCR) as Gerardo and other teenagers from the *barrio* became involved in instances of “social struggle” (ibid: 8), including instances of public disorder and the now-familiar strategy of *tomas* – occupations. The political role of the group continued with the founding of the political pamphlet *Moaco Informa*. Gerardo describes how “...we intended to give an account of our local reality...”, reporting on the increasingly violent exchanges between the state and dissenting citizens and on the new wave of violent crime as rival gangs competed for the profits from increasing levels of drug use in the community.

The growing sense of public anger at Venezuela's economic crisis and the loss of legitimacy of the political system – including attempts to dominate or co-opt community groups - spilled over into nationwide riots in 1989, with the events of the *Caracazo*. In January, Carlos Andres Perez was re-elected President following a classic populist campaign that promised an end to austerity policies and a return to the public spending of his previous term during the 1970s oil boom years - the *bonanza petrolera*. In an electoral strategy that would be echoed by Hugo Chávez ten years later, Andres Perez promised to reject the prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund and defend the living standards of the Venezuelan public (Raby 2006: 141). Following his election, however, Andres Perez announced *El Gran Viraje* – the great turn - a set of policies that reversed his electoral promises and committed to privatisation, price-deregulation, the removal of public subsidies to local industries and a reduction in social spending. In response, local manufacturers cut back production and shops began to hoard goods, leading to growing frustration among the urban poor (Fernandes 2010: 68). On February 26th, bus fares in Caracas were doubled, sparking nationwide riots and looting.



These riots affected the major cities across the country, including Mérida (Gott 2011: 43). As improvised road blockades were put up and looting continued into the night, the police and armed forces were called in to restore order, opening fire on the looters and leaving over two thousand dead, mostly from the barrios of Caracas.

Until the events of the *Caracazo*, Venezuela's politicians had treated the countries barrio communities as potential sources of votes, delivered through clientelist networks while city authorities concentrated more on containing their expansion than extending public services (Hernández de Padrón 1998). The riots – known as the day 'the hills came down' - exposed the fragility of urban segregation in Venezuela's cities and emphasised the potential of the dissatisfied urban poor to be the force for political change that had been forecast following independence (e.g. Ray 1969: 142). The *Caracazo* also signalled the importance of barrio populations to a new generation of Venezuelan political leaders, and are now held by Chavistas as the incident that marked the shift to a new revolutionary politics in Venezuela.

Following the riots, Andres Perez's continuation of austerity further discredited the Venezuelan political system (Raby 2006: 142). The events of the *Caracazo* had also reinforced the reputation of barrio population as anarchic law-breakers (Emerson 2011: 92) and increasingly repressive tactics were used across the country (Fernandes 2010: 39). These incidents would be repeated across the barrios of Mérida, as captured in the photograph below (Photo 1) and underlined the failure of *Puntofijismo* to deliver the needs of the urban poor.

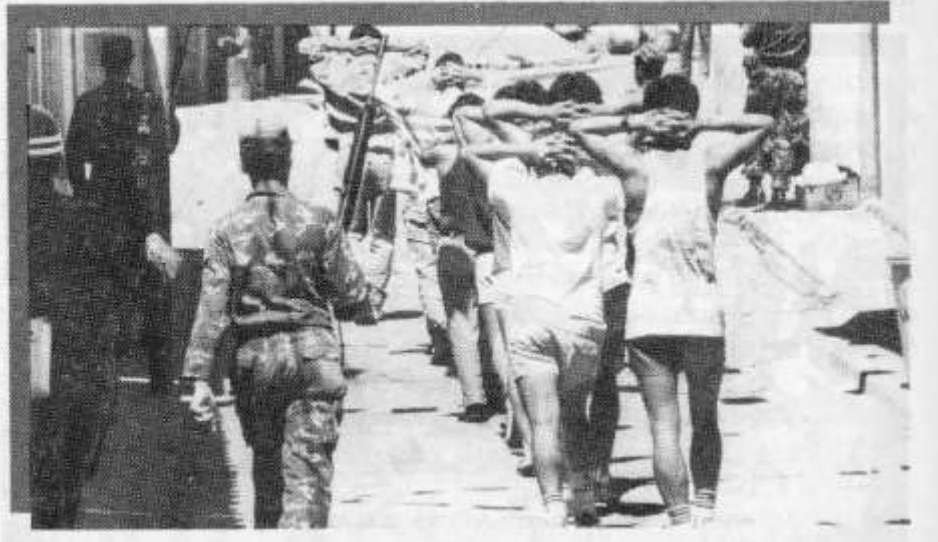


Photo 1. "State repression in Mérida", from Molina Diario Frontera, undated, in Garcia et al (1994: 118).

### **The takeover of the CEDECOL building in Pueblo Nuevo, 1991**

As notions about the capacity of barrio populations to be actors for social change spread among the future leadership of the Bolivarian Revolution, community organisations in Pueblo Nuevo would take direct action to alleviate worsening public services. One area that had particularly suffered was education, as the community's only school had already relocated to a site outside the barrio in the late 1980s, interrupting the education of a generation of students.<sup>3</sup> The school building, located at the crossroads where the two barrios of Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar meet, temporarily served as a school for the blind but would be closed altogether during the period of austerity during the Andres Perez presidency. Following its closure, a collective of local community groups took over the school building, in a move that would shape both barrio organising and services for the two communities.

The takeover was planned and executed in 1991 by an alliance between the Moaco youth activists, a food supplies cooperative known as *Salud Para Todos* and the joint Neighbours' Association for the two barrios, Avepunsimbo. The centre

---

<sup>3</sup> These students were among those who I would later teach in adult high-school classes at Fundación Cayapa.

reopened under community control as the Lyria Centre of Community Development (CEDECOL), named after the plantation that had existed in the Albarregas valley prior to the founding of Pueblo Nuevo in 1945 (interview w JW, 31.05.14, SB; see also Diaz and Freitez 2007: 6). From 1991, the three community organisations responsible for the takeover began using the facilities for a variety of activities - including workshops led by the different groups. Today, the CEDECOL building houses Fundación Cayapa, the Barrio Adentro health clinic, meetings of the Communal Council Calle Principal, a library and *Infocentro* computer room, the Radio ECOs studio and the MERCAL subsidised food store.

As with the community organisations from the 1970s and 1980s, Neighbours' Associations in the 1990s are said to have suffered from party penetration and domination (Hernández de Padrón 2000; Fernandes 2010: 56-58). For some Neighbours' Associations in Mérida in the 1990s, the reaction to clientelism and party influences was an increasing political isolationism, with Hernández de Padrón (2000: 209) describing a growing dynamic of "*comuntarismo*" where party politics were banned and where groups focused only on the internal issues of their barrios. Despite this, actions like the takeover of the CEDECOL building were reminiscent of the more independent actions like 1973's *comité de toma*, described in the previous chapter, while members of national movements were renewing the call for more political roles (Ellner 1999). During our interview, which took place in the same building, Gerardo described climbing the walls of the school to break into the building (interview w GL, 04.07.14, CD). He writes that "...before the possibility that an official body of the police of the National Guard could occupy it, the community organised and took it" (Lopez 2009: 18). This concern reflects the lesson of the 1973 *toma*, when the land intended for the building of new housing to the south of Pueblo Nuevo was taken over by the police, preventing the community from using it. The take-over also reflects a tradition from the wider region, where low-income urban communities has often looked for local alternatives to supplement public services, including by taking control of local physical resources (e.g. Arias and Rodrigues 2006; see also Fernandes 2010: 212-232).

### **The rise of pro-poor politics and the Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement (MBR), 1992-1997**

As public dissatisfaction grew in communities like Pueblo Nuevo, civilian groups in Caracas began plotting with a leftist-nationalist faction within the military known as the Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement or MBR-200. Among the members of this faction was the young Lieutenant Hugo Chávez. By this time, the clandestine MBR-200 had been radicalised by the events of the *Caracazo*.<sup>4</sup> On the 3rd of February 1992, the MBR-200 launched a military coup, with the goal of capturing President Andres Perez and his cabinet. Major Arias Cardenas seized control of the city of Maracaibo near the Colombian border, while other military groups took over Maracay and Valencia to the West of Caracas. In the capital itself, Chávez arrived with his unit in the early hours of the 4<sup>th</sup> of February, but encountered unexpected resistance after the plot was leaked (Raby 2006: 150). Chávez decided to surrender to prevent further bloodshed, asking for an opportunity to address the nation on television as his one condition. This brief speech would bring Chávez nation-wide recognition, as he called for the military units in the other major cities to lay down their arms and publicly took responsibility for the coup. In stating that the strategic objectives of the “Bolivarian movement” had not been achieved *por ahora* – “for now”, Chávez’s speech also coined a key slogan of the Revolution. For a population that had largely lost faith in AD and COPEI, this “for now” was taken as a commitment to continue the struggle to end the power-sharing agreement of *Puntofijismo*.

The failed coup of February 1992 and a second failed attempt by more senior military officers in November of the same year signalled a shift in Venezuelan politics and started a new nationwide political movement that would culminate in the election of Chávez in 1998. By accepting accountability publicly and receiving a prison sentence, Chávez had won credibility across the country, where it was widely considered that politicians failed to take responsibility for their actions (Raby 2006: 150). He would receive an amnesty from new President Rafael Caldera in 1994, who capitalised on public sympathy for the MBR-200 leadership during

---

<sup>4</sup> Several members of the MBR reflected on the riots as a turning point. One member, Major Arias Cardenas had refused to order his troops to fire on looters, while other officers are said to have facilitated peaceful looting (Raby 2006: 148). Following the massacre of 1989, Chávez was also briefly arrested under suspicion of an assassination plot against President Andres Perez, while the faction sought to build links with community groups and form a civilian-military alliance capable of taking power.

his election campaign. By his release, Chávez had been transformed into a national political figure and was able to present himself as an alternative to the delegitimised two-party system and a new potential patron for the urban poor.<sup>5</sup>

Marta Harnecker's interviews with president Chávez in 2004, show how the circumstances of the 1992 coup's failure also went some way to determining the attitudes of the emerging political leadership towards the role and organisation of civil society. Chávez (in Harnecker 2005: 35) saw members of different leftist civilian groups as having failed to join the uprising, having committed to taking part and receiving caches of arms to join the struggle. Leaders of the La Causa Roja (LCR) who had pledged their support publicly condemned the uprising following its failure (ibid, see also Gott 2000: 63-65). From this point on, Chávez would work to find new ways to consolidate civilian support, calling for public participation by connecting with revolutionary discourses from the pre-Chávez era (Zuquete 2008; Velasco 2011). Now, without the possibility of launching a military coup, the MBR 200 committed to democratic political change, but wanted a different kind of relationship with the public than the conventional and discredited political party system (Chávez in Harnecker 2005: 35-43). This strategy would also tie in with the frustrations of Venezuela's neighbourhood movement, and connect with the struggle for new political identities among the urban poor.

From 1992, the MBR 200's "mega-project" of mass political mobilisation began the work of politicising Venezuela's barrios (ibid: 42-43), including via attempts to redeem barrio residents in national political discourses. Alongside Chávez's revolutionary rhetoric, this involved more inclusive discourses of citizenship that moved on from the notions of criminality employed by President Andres Perez following the *Caracazo* of 1989. For the Venezuelan public, not least the urban poor

---

<sup>5</sup> The increased involvement of the military in politics was also supported in some sections of society. During fieldwork, one Chavista interviewee attributed this to the considerable public works achieved under General Vincente Gomez in the early twentieth century (interview w CO, 09.09.13, MC), while members of several activist groups explained how the idea of necessary violence was accepted on the Venezuelan left, with their history of clandestine military opposition of Puntofijismo and long-standing relations with the Cuban Revolution. Today, the use of the military in Mérida to end street protests in 2014, and to enforce price controls in 2013, were also supported by Chavistas, while marches and meetings often include those in military style berets after the style of 'Commandante' Chávez.

living in barrios like Pueblo Nuevo, Chávez's attempted coup connected the Bolivarian movement with the perceived politics and the militancy of the rioters. The redemption of identity offered by Chávez meant framing all Venezuelans as rightful "Bolivarian citizens" - as the *revolucionarios* capable of delivering social change - not least the urban poor (Spanakos (2008: 527). To deliver this, Chávez proposed a plan to formally rewrite longstanding inequalities in Venezuela, as the clandestine military faction transformed itself into an electoral movement proposing a national constituent assembly and a legal rewriting of Venezuelan politics. The proposed new Constitution included new citizens' rights that had been proposed by President Betancourt following independence (Emerson 2011: 90), but were seen by the supporters of the MBR-200 as having never been delivered.

The commitment to political inclusion was demonstrated through large-scale public consultation that would become a hallmark of Chavismo. In Pueblo Nuevo, the MBR 200, along with the Communist Party (PCV) and the Unified Independent Neighbours' Movement (UVI) began to organise public citizens' assemblies (Lopez 2009: 9). These political activities would continue alongside social activities, as the CEDECOL collective attempted to address both worsening public services and the increasing levels of violence in the community.<sup>6</sup> From 1995, the group began a four-year literacy project known as the New Readers Circle (CILEN) with help from FUNDACITE Mérida and including a series of discussions with professors from the University of the Andes (Lopez 2009: 13). Gerardo also writes that "The work of CILEN gave an organic balance to the different collectives in the community...". This balance that is to some extent evident today as community events and holistic services revolve around the work of the Cayapa group and the school building. Gerardo also describes how the group approached these workshops with the goal of achieving "social transformation" seeing education as a liberating process connected to the interests of the person (ibid: 14). Education would become a focus

---

<sup>6</sup> Venezuela's economic crisis continued as the Caldera government continued the shift to neoliberalism, with the effects felt most at the bottom of society. President Caldera continued the decentralisation begun by Andres Perez, but the delegation of social services to local government and NGOs was largely done with insufficient resources (Fernandes 2010: 71). Hernández de Padrón (2000: 209) describes how in Mérida, although community groups saw decentralisation as having the potential to improve democratic accountability, the shift in some ways reinforced the position of old elites from political parties and among the offices of the Governor and the Mayor, and local party concejales.

for the collective, as they began to see work with children and young people as a strategy through which to improve life in the barrio.

As CEDECOL focused on achieving local “transformation” in Pueblo Nuevo (ibid), attempts to achieve national political transformation would shape barrio services and organising. In their new political activities, Pueblo Nuevo’s organisations were part of a neighbourhood movement of increasing political relevance. In part this was prompted by the surge in urban poverty. By 1998 the number of Venezuelans living in poverty was 81%, with 48% in extreme poverty, up from 10% in 1978 (Roberts 2003). The majority of these populations lived in Venezuela’s a cities, where most were informally employed (ibid). With few legal opportunities for employment, some people in barrio communities like Pueblo Nuevo turned to criminal activities like the drug trade to sustain their families (Fernandes 2010: 75). The needs of this new majority of the population were increasingly reflected in the MBR-200’s campaigning, which focused on the rights to better living standards, employment and personal security for the urban poor (Chávez in Harnecker 2005: 42).

### **The election of Chávez confirms the reorientation to pro-poor politics**

By the presidential elections of 1998, the MBR 200 had grown into a mass movement with a new political narrative built around the personality of Chávez, nationalism, and a broadly conceived Venezuelan class identity. In the confrontational Chavista rhetoric, promises of political emancipation and a shift to more “protagonistic” democracy shared space with the demonization of both Venezuelan elites and the United States (Spanakos 2008: 536). This “agonistic” political narrative (ibid) achieved multi-class support for Chávez, who framed the elections as a contest between the “pole of national destruction” of the old political parties and the “patriotic pole” of his re-branded Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) (Chávez 1997 in Gott 2000: 143).<sup>7</sup> The movement promised a new beginning for the country – including a national constituent assembly, a new, active role for its citizens and a charismatic patron to resolve the economic crisis and address social marginalisation. The campaign slogan *con Chávez manda el pueblo* – “with Chávez,

---

<sup>7</sup> Venezuela had undergone four distinct ‘republics’ since independence, with the fourth lasting from 1830 to 1998.

the people rule” - encapsulated this dual appeal, simultaneously implying both direct democracy and the subordination of popular sovereignty to executive power (Cameron and Major 2001).<sup>8</sup>

Chávez won the 1998 Presidential elections with 56.2% of the vote and with a majority in seventeen out of twenty three states, including Mérida State. His victory brought about an end to the power-sharing of Puntofijismo and confirmed the path to a national constituent assembly. His victory has divided academics. More sympathetic commentators present Chávez as the embodiment of a national class sentiment (Raby 2006; Dominguez 2011) while others attempt to unpack the complex message and strategy of Chávez’s political discourse (Zuquete 2008; Spanakos 2008; Emerson 2011).<sup>9</sup> In different ways, both perspectives attribute this victory to the successful “politicisation of class” and including a renewed identity for the urban poor as active citizens in a new national democratic process (Heath 2009: 185). These different interpretations also share an emphasis on Chávez’s ability to position himself as a patron for the neglected urban poor, while the combative Bolivarian class narrative is evidence of the increased importance of barrio populations and the working class in Venezuelan politics.

## 2. The new patronage of the Bolivarian Revolution: improved barrio services and another national system for community organising, 1998-2012

Chávez’s campaign had promised emancipation for the urban poor, but the first improvements to conditions in barrio communities would come from above. After his election in 1998, Chávez began the ‘Plan Bolívar 2000’ program of public works using the military “in cooperation with local communities” to repair roads, schools and community centres and providing basic healthcare and other services in

---

<sup>8</sup> Vivas (in Cameron and Maor 2001: 72) explains the success of Chávez’s confrontational style, describing the essence of his message as: “You Venezuelans are not to blame; you and I know who is to blame for what has happened to us; I am going to get rid of these people around us, don’t doubt it; and, what’s more, I will solve all your problems”.

<sup>9</sup> Hellinger (2005) highlights Chávez’s support among the unemployed urban and rural poor, with less votes among “working” working class Venezuelans. Despite the movement’s polarising class narrative, Canache (2002) also emphasises the role “ambivalent” voters played in Chávez’s victory. Evidence from Pueblo Nuevo today, where partisanship is typically understated and allegiances are mixed, supports this messy picture of support from 1998.



poorest areas (Raby 2006: 160; see also Harnecker 2005: 74-82). Plan Bolívar 2000, and later the government response to the Vargas landslides crisis in 1999 gave an immediate demonstration of Chávez's status as a new patron of the poor and vulnerable. The constitutional assembly of 1999 would also signal his commitment to public consultation. As well as separate national referendums to convene the assembly, elect its deputies, and ratify the new constitution, regional assemblies were held to canvass proposals and to delegations from mass movements were also consulted (Raby 2006: 162-163). Gerardo Lopez recalled how the process allowed active members of Pueblo Nuevo to apply what they had learned in community participation inside the barrio, conducting *mesas de trabajo* - round table discussion groups - to propose community development projects for the Libertador Municipality. The text of the constitution (1999 in Spanakos 2008: 528) also contained a commitment to continue this direct role for the Venezuelan public by launching a system of "participatory and protagonistic democracy".

The new constitution was ratified with 71% of the national vote, renaming the country as the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and creating a strengthened and recallable Presidency, a new unicameral National Assembly, Supreme Court, National Electoral Council and new ombudsmen to tackle political corruption. Renaming the country was an indication that the *revolucionarios* had succeeded, while the new statutes established a broad set of social and human rights and responsibilities, including the right to health and education and women's rights, including banning gender discrimination and formally recognising motherhood as a form of labour. These new legal rights, founded in a process of public consultation, would also establish the constitution as a symbol of public morality and political legitimacy for Chavistas. During fieldwork, the constitution was frequently referenced in Chavista meetings to argue for rights to basic services and political freedoms, and as an example and a foundation for collective action. The 'little blue book' containing the statutes was also held aloft by participants on marches and in particular at the mass rally I attended in Caracas in January 2013, when Chavistas flooded the streets of the capital to defend Chávez against an anticipated coup attempt on the date of his re-inauguration. That this book -containing the citizens' rights delivered by Chávez via popular consultation - has become such an

important political symbol, is illustrative of the ways that the public recognises and feels ownership of the rights delivered by the Bolivarian process.

Under the new electoral system, Chávez was re-elected in July 2000, setting a trend for frequent national elections and consolidating the new political order. Aside from the localised efforts of Plan Bolívar 2000, however, barrio communities like Pueblo Nuevo would not see significant changes to their institutions or services until after the Chávez government until after the short-lived military coup of April 2002, when Chávez was briefly removed from office following violent clashes between his supporters and striking oil sector workers. His reinstatement by military forces occurred as barrio populations again took to the streets of Caracas in support of Chávez. As protesters demanded the return of “our president” to finish the Presidential term they had elected him for, this is seen by Chavistas as having further reinforced Chávez’s association with this long-overlooked section of the Venezuelan public. During fieldwork, one Chavista activist described this event as being the consolidation of Chávez’s relationship with normal Venezuelans, as citizens fulfilled their new political roles and protected the new citizens’ rights they had voted for (interview w DV, 12.04.14, MC).

### **Pueblo Nuevo’s experience of the Bolivarian Social Missions**

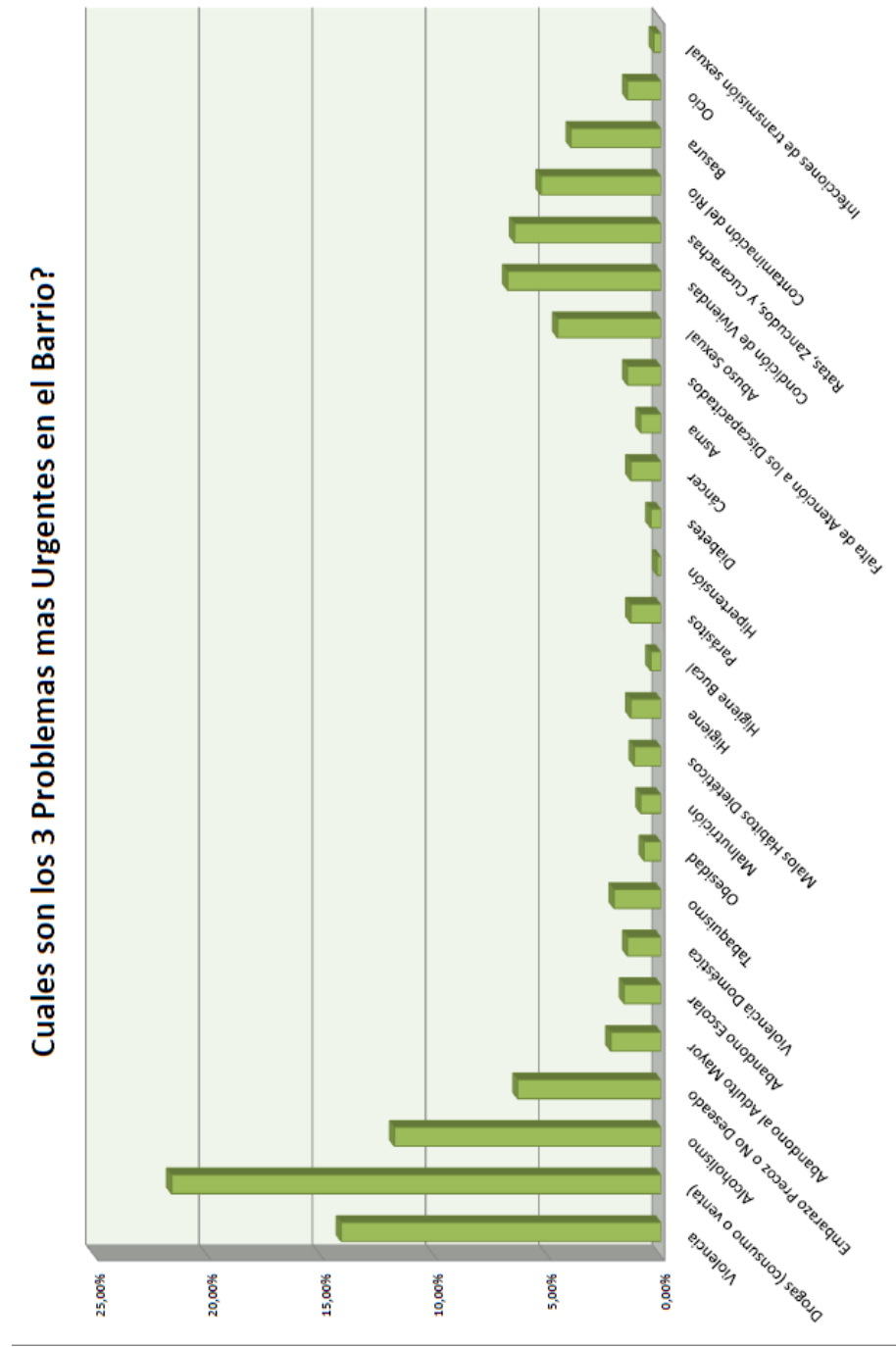
Until 2002, this new era had yet to provide improved public services for Venezuela’s urban and rural poor. Barrios like Pueblo Nuevo were still recovering from the effects of the economic crises of the 1980s and 1990s. Briggs et al. (2009) describe how, at first, change was frustrated by the Venezuelan bureaucracy, for example where proposed improvements to health services had been hampered by the top-down organisation of the service and the alignment of the Venezuelan Medical Federation with AD and COPEI, now in opposition. The events of April 2002, however, had not only reinforced Chávez’s messianic public persona, but is seen as having reinforced his connection to the urban poor - who had now elected him twice and taken to the streets to reinstate him following the coup. After resisting a second national strike and a further “lock-out” of PDVSA in 2002, Chávez had also strengthened his control of Venezuela’s oil revenues. In 2003 he announced a national program of public works known as the Bolivarian Missions that would reshape services for the urban poor across the country.

In Pueblo Nuevo, a health clinic was set up in part of the occupied CEDECOL school building as part of the government's new health Mission, Barrio Adentro – or “inside the barrio”. From 2003, the clinic, which has two rooms and a storage area, was staffed by Cuban doctors as part of deal between Chávez and Fidel Castro to exchange Cuban medical personal for Venezuelan oil, with Venezuelan and Bolivian staff and one American doctor joining the team in later years. While at first these doctors were visitors to the barrio, a living area would later be negotiated with the CEDECOL collective to enable the doctors to live full-time in Pueblo Nuevo. This step, one that was taken in barrio communities across the country, was intended to integrate the medical staff with different communities. The Mission is an example of Latin American Social Medicine (LASM) (Briggs et al. 2009), in line with the commitment to “decentralised and participative” healthcare in Article 84 of the 1999 Constitution. Part of the idea of Barrio Adentro's “integrated medicine” strategy is preventative: doctors reportedly establish close links with their host communities, learning the specific local causes of health problems and working to provide solutions that address these causes (interview w MP, 23.07.14, CD).<sup>10</sup>

In line with the LASM ethos and the stipulations of the of 1999 Constitution, Barrio Adentro is intended to operate with community participation. In this way, Chávez was able to frame the Mission to reflect his dual promise to the Venezuelan public, as both a new service delivered by the President to his supporters, and as an example of empowering communities to determine their own needs and design their own solutions. The political symbolism of Barrio Adentro, however, also effects its use and attitudes within Pueblo Nuevo. Some opposition supporters who didn't use the service repeated the criticism of the often made by opponents of the government, describing the Cuban doctors as “just hygienists”, and preferring to visit the hospital outside of the barrio. Despite the association of community medicine with Chávez, community health services existed in the barrio in the 1980s and 1990s, with a committee on the Neighbour's Association and a clinic run by members of the Moaco group.

As part of this new health strategy, house visits and a comprehensive household survey in 2011 (Correa and Wilson 2011) were undertaken in Pueblo Nuevo, as

part of this integrated strategy (interviews w MP, 23.07.14, PN; GS, 20.04.14, MC; and JW 31.5.14, SB). This included a question about the “three most urgent problems” facing Pueblo Nuevo and neighbouring Simon Bolivar.



Graph 1. “What are the three most urgent problems in the barrio?” (Correa and Wilson 2011)<sup>11</sup>

The specific problems identified by the clinic staff, meanwhile, are associated with the lifestyles and living conditions in the barrio. Dr Maria Perez also highlighted the danger of water-borne parasites due to the poor sanitation and frequent flooding; injuries from domestic violence; diet-related problems including diabetes; alcoholism and drug addiction; and problems relating the mismanagement of pregnancy and to pregnancy among very young girls (Interview w MP, 23.07.14, PN). Dr Joshua Wilson also reported dealing with injuries including gun-shot wounds during the periods of heightened gang violence in the late 2000s (Interview w JW, 31.5.14, SB). During fieldwork, attitudes among the community towards the work Barrio Adentro were very positive,<sup>12</sup> with particular praise for the free medicine and the lack of queues for patients compared with the local hospital (interview w JN, 06.05.14, PN), the expertise of the doctors (interview w GV, 14.04.14, MC) and the home visits for patients with mobility problems.

To supplement this new health strategy, and as part of the food and nutrition Mission, a small store selling subsidised groceries and basic household goods was set up in the occupied CEDECOL building in 2003. The store is part of a national network of more than 16,600 outlets and sells generic-branded goods at a fraction of their retail value, with prices controlled by the state-run company Mercados de

---

<sup>11</sup> The 2012 survey is better thought about as an indication of perceived problems. The question format in this survey is slightly problematic in that it asks respondents for only their top three “problems”, and as it is limited to certain health-oriented categories, for example neglecting problems related to low income or from the wage inconsistencies associated with informal employment. The survey results also give no indication of respondents’ personal experience of these problems. As such there are some possible irregularities – for example, the breakdown of results in the document shows “drugs” scores higher in Pueblo Nuevo than in Simon Bolivar, although the latter is well-known locally to be the barrio more commonly associated with both addiction and the sale of drugs. We can also see that abandoning school – lower scoring than tobacco use, for example - is not seen as a problem, despite 76% non-completion of secondary education among the two barrios. Unemployment is discussed elsewhere in the report and is recorded as 8% for men and 3% for women, with 39% of women listed as housewives (Venezuela was the first country to formally recognise *ama de casa* or “housewife” as an occupation. Informal employment is 21% for men and 15% for women. Responses about hours worked per week or income which might give us a better understanding of economic problems were not sought.

<sup>12</sup> From twenty five participants asked about the service, among those who had used the service there were no negative accounts, the only criticisms came from two people who had not used the clinic.

Alimentos (MERCAL). The store also employs one local resident, Miguel Parra, who has worked there since taking over from his brother in 2005. Miguel, who grew up in Pueblo Nuevo, is in his 50s is a visible part of community life, participating in different community activities, and studying with Cayapa on the Bachillerato course that I taught in 2014. Miguel described the Mission as a response to the specific problems of the community: "...it's not that there weren't resources or food, it's just that they weren't reaching all of the parts, for example Pueblo Nuevo and other barrios in the city" (Interview w MP, 16.4.14, PN). As well as selling goods, Miguel and volunteers from the community are part of a network of *mercalitos* who organise together to deliver to communities across the state, including communities who do not have their own MERCAL stores. This includes some of the harder to reach rural Andean communities and the poorest barrios in Mérida City, including Los Curros and Santa Elena.

In 2003, this idea of passing on savings from the collective purchasing power to the poorest, was politicised by Chávez. After the PDVSA lock-out and the national strike, some food companies ceased production in what is said to have been in the hope of destabilising the government. Chávez then connected the issue of nutrition to national sovereignty and domestic class struggle. From this time, Chávez would begin to associate himself with the provision of food, and increasingly blame the opposition for shortages, a practice that Maduro has continued with throughout economic crisis of 2013-2015. In Pueblo Nuevo, during the chronic shortages of the economic crisis of 2013, a one-off delivery of food and other supplies were also made using a flat-bed truck. Goods were distributed from the back of a flat-bed truck by volunteers with red-PSUV t-shirts and baseball caps and accompanied by loud pro-Chávez music, including the anthem *Chávez, Corazon de Todos* - "Chávez, Heart for Everyone". At the time, people queuing for goods in the sun did not seem to share the enthusiasm of the *mercalitos*. The mother of the family where I stayed, Marleny, who was an opposition supporter, watched the event from her gate, despite the fact that her own cupboards were was nearly empty.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Although MERCAL is firmly associated with the Chávez government, Pueblo Nuevo also has its own history of collective purchasing. The *Salud Para Todos* collective offered subsidised goods in Pueblo Nuevo in the late 1980s and 1990s, taking part in the CEDECOL takeover in 1991 (Lopez 2009: 12).

Although Miguel is a Chavista, he sees the work of MERCAL as “humanitarian”, emphasising the “psychological” and emotional effects of having access to affordable goods. Miguel also accepts that the organisation has party-political associations for many people, with some even attending in false beards and wigs. He insists, however, that the supplies are intended and available for all residents, regardless of their politics:

“But MERCAL is of the people. It’s an initiative of the government but it’s for the people. It’s not just for people who are socialists or Chavistas, it’s for everyone. Everyone who is in Venezuela in the moment that they are giving this service. There are Colombians, Ecuadorians, there are gringos, there are *amigos!*”

Like Barrio Adentro, MERCAL has its political associations. Also like the health service, the food Mission fits with the dual rhetoric of Chávez as a service that is both participative and is provided by a benevolent patron (see Spanakos 2008: 529).

The other Missions launched in 2003 included three free adult education programs, teaching basic reading, writing, and arithmetic (Mission Robinson), higher education courses (Mission Sucre) and remedial high school level classes to Venezuelan high school dropouts (Mission Ribas), where students were also paid a small stipend. While there is no information about how many people from Pueblo Nuevo attended these courses, one teacher from Mérida, Charlie Otiz, said that the classes were mostly attended by residents of the cities barrios (Interview w CO, 09.09.13, MC). Again, these programs were politicised, with government presenting education a tool for the empowerment of their support base (Torres 2011). Charlie was critical of the party involvement in the recruitment and promotions processes. He also observed that the course reading materials were frequently ‘revolutionary’ texts, such as the writing of Che Guevara, meaning that students who were opposed to the Chávez government rarely completed the courses. In 2011 in Pueblo Nuevo, 76% of adults were recorded in the Barrio Adentro survey as not having completed high-school (Correa and Wilson 2011) in part because the desire for adult learning is often frustrated by responsibilities of childcare and work commitments.

While the services delivered through the Social Missions may have been uneven, the new initiatives also contributed to the shift around the self-identities of the urban poor. Those illegitimate “migrant invaders” of the mid twentieth century, the disappointed new citizens of democratic transition, the criminal underclass of *malandros* blamed for the *Caracazo*, all now had a potential patron and a new, empowering political narrative. New public services delivered *inside* barrios like Pueblo Nuevo signalled to the people in the barrios that they were now seen as deserving food, health and education (Spanakos 2008). Now, residents felt that they were the triumphant *revolucionarios* celebrating a political victory - the citizens whose rights were being delivered in their own communities.

Included in Chávez’s promise for political inclusion were different groups in Venezuela who had not been well-represented, including women and ethnic minorities. In 2008, Chávez described the centrality of a shift in gender relations to his vision of social change:

“There would not be a true and authentic Bolivarian Revolution without the Venezuelan women making their revolution.” And emphasising high-level roles given to women (Chávez 2008 in Lallander 2016: 159)

Chávez also deployed his own mixed-heritage to ally himself with the *mestizo* and black Venezuelans, many of who lived in the country’s barrio communities. Chávez presented racism as both imperialist and capitalist (Chávez quoted in Cannon 2008: 741), calling on the historically-marginalised sections of society to be the protagonists in a new, inclusive era.

### **Escalation of *malandro* violence in the mid-2000s**

While the new social Missions offered improvements in living standards in Pueblo Nuevo in the mid-2000s, life in the community in this period was increasingly shaped by increasing violence as rival gangs competed for the control of the drug trade. Both the use and sale of drugs is said to have increased in Mérida’s barrios since the late 1980s (Jugo Burguera 2004, Hernández de Padrón 2000). During fieldwork, however, people talked about the period of around 2003 to 2007 as the most dangerous period in recent memory, as a war between rival gangs divided



Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar. Dr Joshua Wilson's description of the violence in 2006 suggests the seriousness of the situation:

“When I moved to the barrio there were shootouts on average three to four times a week and in those shootouts someone would get killed maybe once every month and before that it was worse. Ten years ago (2003-2004) it was really bad and it got to the point where the police occupied certain spots in the barrio continually- there was always police with shotguns all down the road and that was to try and separate the two barrios... People before weren't allowed to move between the two barrios, because if the people from Pueblo Nuevo went to Simon Bolivar, the people from Simon Bolivar would get really nervous that they were being spied on by the people from Pueblo Nuevo, in case they would see someone in Simon Bolivar and report back 'this guy is sitting out in front of his house' and they would go up there and shoot him. People in the gangs in Simon Bolivar and in Pueblo Nuevo pressured the people in both communities to not cross that boundary.” (Interview with J.W. 31.05.14, SB)

By the time I arrived in Pueblo Nuevo in 2013, the shootouts Joshua described had largely ceased, but the reputation of the barrio as among the worsts “red zones” in Mérida remained, and even in the barrio most residents did not leave their homes after around nine o'clock. The shootouts Joshua describes during this period, however, were still talked about by various community members. None of my participants said that they had been active gang members during this period, but different participants reported seeing the dead bodies of gang members in the streets and said that passers-by had also been hit by stray bullets. Some participants had family members who had been killed, with young men the most targeted. Teachers at Cayapa also said that some of the young students had witnessed extreme gang-related violence in their homes, including the murder of family members.

The separation between the two communities described by Joshua above was also remembered by many people in the barrio. During a focus group with residents of both Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar, people described not being able to pass

between the two communities during this era without fear of attack (Focus Group 1 22.4.14, PN). Other residents continued to avoid the other barrio, including my host family, the Angulo Quinteros, who avoided the Simon Bolivar and even Northern part of Pueblo Nuevo entirely. This period of violence between the two barrios has precedents in the literature. For Wilde's (2014: 134) study in El Camoruco in Valencia, the timeline of escalated violence and the descriptions of the violence between the two barrios match with what people had said in Pueblo Nuevo.<sup>14</sup>

The constant police presence Joshua describes, however, was not reflected in other reports from residents who had been in Pueblo Nuevo at this time. One resident, Martín, described how no policemen would ever dare to enter the barrio at night or to respond to reports of violence (Interview with MM, 11.04.16, Pueblo Nuevo). Although he said he had on occasion been stopped and searched along with other young men in the barrio, he said that the police would only go into Pueblo Nuevo to make arrests on rare occasions. Other residents accused the police of having ties to the gangs and of contributing to the violence by releasing gang members when they were arrested. Again, this reflects Wilde's account of El Camoruco (2014: 134) where barrio residents viewed police as simply another gang because they were believed to be corrupt and to supply weapons and drugs to the *malandros*.

This rise in violence in Venezuela's barrio communities was also politicised. While his critics drew attention to the failure of the government to address the problem, Chávez sought to frame the problem as a symptom of the neoliberalism of the 1980s and 1990s – blaming the past government, where his predecessor had blamed the *malandro* barrio culture. Chávez's policies were proving unpopular, meanwhile, and the opposition parties would attempt to remove Chávez from office again in 2004 - this time by legal means with an unsuccessful Presidential recall referendum in 2004. Chávez won Presidential elections again in 2006, before reforming his party as the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) and launching

---

<sup>14</sup> In El Camoruco a gang war with neighbouring barrio José Felix Ribas broke out during the mid-2000s, with Wilde describing the segregation of the neighbourhoods as a result of blood feuds and revenge attacks by criminal gangs (Wilde 2014: 101).

new institutions for participation, via a transition to a system of local *Consejos Comunales* – the Communal Councils.

### **The introduction of the Communal Council system, 2006**

From 2007, Chávez, like successive AD and COPEI governments in the 1960s-1980s (Hernández de Padrón 1998, see previous chapter) developed his own vision for community organising. The Law of the Communal Councils, passed in April 2006, introduced a system of new institutions organisations that represented smaller catchment areas – in line with a sentiment that had been voiced within the neighbourhood movement in the 1990s (Ellner 1999: 79). Under the new system, an initial fixed amount of 3,000 Bolivares fund was made available on a community-by-community basis (interview w NG, 06.06.14, OF). This encouraged the proliferation of groups, and by 2007, the Minister for Participation and Social Development reported the creation of 19,500 councils (Ultimas Noticias 2007). This rejuvenation of the neighbourhood movement from the 1980s and 1990s was also accompanied by rhetoric that set out a new system for the “communal state”, that he said would give a new generation of Bolivarian citizens” increased control over their communities (Spanakos 2008: 42).

In Pueblo Nuevo, the community divided into four catchment areas to prepare for council elections, corresponding to the main streets in the barrio. Running central and parallel to the Albarregas River, the Communal Council Calle Principal contains the CEDECOL building, the main street and most of the bodegas in the community. La Cuesta, to the East, includes the bakery and the steep road out of the barrio towards the Ambulatorio Venezuela and would be where I would live with the Angel-Quintero family during my fieldwork in 2013 and 2014. To the North West, Las Casitas includes the houses bordering the undeveloped area and leading to Las Americas Avenue, while El Campito to the south included the area beneath the Campo Elias Bridge. A single council was planned for Simon Bolivar, to the North East.

With the exception of the council at Calle Principal (discussion to follow in Chapter Six), these new councils completed elections and began activities. At La Cuesta, these were reported to include funding repairs to local houses and contributing to a new entrance at the South-East edge of the barrio, while in El Campito the council

were said to have achieved additional funding to improve the local sports facilities (Interview w TR, 30.04.14, PN). Another key function for these councils was the distribution of basic white goods to homes in the community at rates subsidised by the government. The scheme - known locally as *La Linea Blanca* - included the sale of refrigerators, washing machines, boilers and ovens to homes without them.

The role of these councils would be short lived in Pueblo Nuevo. By the time fieldwork commenced in 2013, Councils in Las Casitas and El Campito were reported to be inactive, while the Council in La Cuesta was described as being “in elections” by one local *vocero*, Nico Huero (Interview w NH, 30.04.14, PN). These elections, however had not yet been advertised in the community, and the necessary residents’ census had not been undertaken. This short period of activity was criticised by residents some who accused the spokesmen of stealing funds for their own families. One resident in the La Cuesta said that people locally believed that only friends and family of the spokesmen had benefitted from the money the council had received, commenting that “A lot of families could have eaten here for the cost of the work that they had done” (interview w TB, 14.5.13, PN). Judging the specific achievements of these inactive councils is particularly difficult in Pueblo Nuevo, due to the fact that many community members many of whom said that they did not understand procedures for the council or know about their activities. One particular example of the difficulty in assessing these councils was the project to improve the South-Eastern entrance. In this case, I uncovered at least four different versions that attributed the works to different groups and funding sources.

While Pueblo Nuevo is just one example of the limited effectiveness of the council system, a considerable literature had grown up that seeks to assess the role that these institutions might have played in fulfilling Chávez’s visions both of Participatory Democracy, and of a nation of participating revolutionary citizens (Lerner 2007; Araujo 2010; Gill 2012; Wilde 2014; 2016). Similarities between the frustrations with the council system and those that arose around the historical barrio institutions – the *Juntas*, *comités*, cultural centres and neighbourhood organisations – will be discussed in Chapter Six.

### 3. Living with new barrio identities: polarising narratives and the call for political loyalty, 2013-2014

By the time I first arrived in Venezuela in December 2012, Chávez was in hospital in Cuba battling cancer. After winning a new Presidential term in November 2012, Chávez was absent for his inauguration in January 2013, leading to questions about his ability to hold office. As they had in response to the coup attempt of 2004, Chávez's supporters took to the streets in their hundreds of thousands to listen to speeches by Evo Morales, leading Chavistas and Vice President Nicolas Maduro who took Chávez's place on the stage set up in front of Miraflores Palace.

I attended the rally with a friend and former student leader, Roque Ferrandíz, who somewhat indulgently agreed to keep me company, grumbling about the exuberant Chavistas around us. Oscar had talked at length about his initial enthusiasm for Chavismo and his eventual disillusionment with the Chavista project. His frustrations came from his personal experience of struggling with public authorities as one of the representatives of the student body. Beyond this, Oscar felt frustrated by the political narratives that he thought held no place for him. As a student on a low income, living with an aunt in a modest downtown apartment, Oscar seemed caught between the two warring sides from the Bolivarian public narrative. On the one hand, Oscar was not a part of the urban poor, didn't live in a barrio community and had been regularly robbed by *malandros* in the centre of Caracas. On the other hand, Oscar was not wealthy, held broadly left wing views, and found that some wealthier middle class Venezuelans saw his mixed heritage as a sign that he was from a different class. Oscar's difficulty in positioning himself with relation to the Bolivarian narrative was an early indication of the kinds of tensions that I would encounter when I moved to Pueblo Nuevo, some six months later.

By March 2013, two months on, Nicolas Maduro would again take centre stage. Those same Caracas streets were lined with people once again - this time with mourners queueing for days to visit Chávez's body as he lay in state following his death from cancer. These debates would be conducted in somewhat essentialist terms, as commentators sought to neatly sum up the complexity of Chávez's legacy

for the Venezuelan people, among them the residents of barrios like Pueblo Nuevo and disillusioned ex-Chavistas like Oscar.

**“We are not with *el proceso*”**

Arriving in Pueblo Nuevo on my return to Venezuela in July 2013, my host family gave me an immediate opportunity to talk to people who felt that they did not fit with the Bolivarian public narrative. Jose-Luís and Marleny Angulo Quintero are residents of Pueblo Nuevo and identify themselves as being “*opositors*” (interviews w MA, 19.04.14, PN; and JA, 19.04.14, PN). Marleny was born in the community and has raised a family there, despite the draw of leaving the barrio. She and her husband, Jose-Luís had married and decided to stay close to Marleny’s family and their community. They have lived together in the barrio for more than thirty years and have raised a daughter and two sons. Jose-Luís works for the postal service, sorting parcels, often working twelve hour days by picking up any over-time that he can. They share their house with their oldest daughter, her husband and their two children. As a household they make ice cream and pastries to sell at the front gate of their house, and spend evenings knitting hats and scarves to sell on a friend’s market stall. They eat at home and save money to visit their two sons who have since left the community - due in large part to fears of violent crime in the neighbourhood (interview w Marco, 21.9.13, PN).

Both Marleny and Jose-Luís talked about the feeling of hope they had around Chávez’s first election, but say that the experience of his government has been “the opposite.” They both said that they felt “excluded” from the processes of participation in the barrio, in particular from their local Communal Council. They also talked about examples where they felt that they had been discriminated against, including the refusal of a pre-school place for their granddaughter and the denial of subsidised white goods as part of the government initiative known locally simply as *la línea blanca*. In the second case, they were told that a census had been completed that showed who was eligible, a census that they said had never arrived. I later asked the *vocero* about the process for claiming subsidised goods and was told that no census had been necessary:

“No, we don’t go to their houses. In reality, one knows the needs of every one, you understand? One knows the type of life that a person is living... I spent all my life here.” (Interview w NH, 30.04.14, PN).

Marleny and Jose-Luís attributed this perceived discrimination to the fact that they are known to be “against the government.” Jose-Luís says:

“We don’t know them. They have never come to the house... They think that we have a lot of money. We feel excluded from their group. They did this because we’re not with the process... It’s because we don’t play with the party from the left. They have this bad custom here that anyone not with the party gets frozen out.”

As with Oscar, Jose-Luís and Marleny feel that they are excluded due to assumptions about their wealth and their politics, but also due to a certain sense of separateness from Pueblo Nuevo as a community. Both Marleny and Jose-Luís are among the more openly fearful residents that I come across in Pueblo Nuevo, even preferring not to walk up the street to the CEDECOL building. In general they do not engage in community events, and their social group is largely family-based. Although they are working class and live in a barrio, the family are relatively wealthy for Pueblo Nuevo. Benefitting from Jose-Luís’s stable employment and their additional economic activities, they have a car and do not live in over-crowded conditions like many other families. Since the rise of Chavismo, their identities and sense of well-being are formed in the context of the Bolivarian discourse of class-conflict that places them firmly with the bourgeoisie.

It is likely that the exclusion felt by non-Chavista barrio residents like Marleny and Jose-Luís was not helped by the limited success and accessibility of the Communal Councils. Marleny and Jose felt that their application for subsidised goods was prejudiced by their political affiliation, and that they would not be welcome in meetings, even preferring to ask me to approach their local council spokesmen in their place. They also attributed the refusal to give their granddaughter a place at a local school to their politics, and had a much more negative view of barrio services like MERCAL and Barrio Adentro, both of which they refused to use.

As Chavismo continues in the deepening political crisis since Chávez death and the country's economic collapse, it is likely that the sense of exclusion felt by barrio residents like Marleny and Jose-Luís is feeding into growing public discontent.

### **Participatory democracy for some**

If Marleny and Jose-Luís feel “frozen out” from *el proceso* - the Bolivarian process - this connects with inconsistent notions about who the Bolivarian Revolution is for. In the Chavista public discourse, a constrained notion of constituency for Bolivarianism is built around the use and interpretation of the notion of “the people”. Hugo Chávez's frequent references to *el pueblo* and the use of the term by his party and their supporters are an important part of the public narrative of Bolivarianism. In 2002, Chávez explained how:

“Back in '93 we were saying that the people were the fuel for the machinery of history. We also said that to have a people, from the sociological, socio-political perspective, it isn't enough to have twenty or forty million people in a certain area. To have a people there must be a common sense of identity. A historian once talked about drinking from the collective fountain, or having a project in common, a common dream; to have a common thread that unites the great majority of citizens in that area.

For a long time the Venezuelan people did not have a consciousness, they were divided, they did not have a common project; they were a people without hope, without direction. More than being a people, were a collection of human beings, but then, as a result of the historical process that our country has undergone over the last few decades, a people has been formed. We are talking about awakening a giant.

Now, that awakening was not enough. It was crucial that the people organize themselves; it was crucial that the unprecedented popular force be unified and strengthened so instead of moving forwards along thousands of individual paths, it found a common direction. We needed to give the people direction so that they could increase their level of organisation, ideology, and capacity for combat. At that time we had a



national leadership that had come together in prison, but we did not want it to become an extreme hierarchy where a few of us decided everything, without paying attention to anyone else. We sought out organising models to convert the popular movement into a bottom-up avalanche.” (in Harnecker 2003: 157-158)

Here, Chávez talks about ‘el pueblo’ as a fuel, as a shared identity and common goals, as a majority, and as a group of people who are united behind a common direction. He marks a clear break from the interpretation of the term as simply meaning a territorial population, emphasising a common social experience and ambitions for increased unity via a common project. In talking about a people being ‘formed’, he also implies a temporal quality: that a people can change, develop and unite. Chávez talks about the people in two fundamental senses: one as a numerical ‘majority’ who share latent interests and identity but are divided, and one as an organised force for social change.<sup>15</sup>

In his book *We Created Chávez*, Ciccariello-Maher (2013: 8) reflects on the use of the Spanish *el pueblo* to designate the population of a specific territory, in the first instance, or as meaning “the common and the poor” in the second. Ciccariello-Maher comments (ibid) that the term has been “...taken up as a banner by precisely those same ‘common and poor’ whilst being deployed simultaneously by governments, populist and non-populist alike, in an effort to maintain the status quo.” He notes, after Dussel, that the idea of ‘the people’ itself is “an instance of struggle”, a category “of rupture” where the oppressed within the prevailing political order seek to transform it. For both, it is fundamentally about ‘fracture’; a moment where “...a victimised *part* of a system speaks for and tries to radically transform the *whole*.” Ciccariello-Maher and Dussel make a useful point about the

---

<sup>15</sup> It is clear from elsewhere that Chávez did not originally see ‘el pueblo’ as simply referring to his supporters. He describes the survey of 100,000 people undertaken by the Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement (MBR) between 1996 and 1997 to find out if ‘the people’ supported his candidacy for President (Chávez sin Harnecker 2003: 43-44). During this process the MBR “sought to integrate people who were not from the movement in order to maintain objectivity”. Of the results - where seventy percent supported his candidacy and fifty seven percent said they would vote for him - Chávez said “that result was totally clear: the people wanted me to run for president”. In this case, it was the majority opinion among a group of supporters and non-supporters that is taken as the ‘will’ of the people. Here what mattered for Chávez, was having wider appeal.

importance of the term with reference both to Venezuela to Latin America more broadly. For all their talk of ‘rupture’, however, their interpretations may be too quick in accepting a stable meaning. These definitions follow Chávez in presenting ‘the oppressed’ as an identifiable, unified fraction within a whole population. Here ‘the people’ are agents of change with a shared experience of oppression and a “common identity” (ibid).

This common identity is not felt by *opositors* like Marleny and Jose- Luis, and since Chávez’s death, seems to be reflected less at the polling stations. Even with Chávez’s clear endorsement of Maduro as his successor, Maduro’s victory in the Presidential elections of April 2013 was won with a majority of 1.7%, a significant drop from the 10.8% margin with which Chávez won only six months earlier. Maduro’s result, coming so soon after the electoral victory of 2013, underlines the importance of the personality of Chávez for electoral success. Since the election, this trend of declining approval has continued.<sup>16</sup>

The shift in votes and attitudes tells us something about the instability of Chavista and *opositor* political identities. The existence of swing voters undermines the Chavista narrative that describes an “irreconcilable political bipolarity” written around class lines (Uzcategui 2010: 1). By undermining the idea that politics and class are inextricably linked in Venezuela, these results also challenge the Chavista claim to claim to represent the entirety of *el pueblo*. In this context, Maduro increasingly calls of *lealtad* – “loyalty” – from supporters.

During fieldwork, this call for loyalty was heeded in different ways by different people in Mérida. Among the city-level collective I joined, the Frente de Vanguardia de Hugo Chávez, criticism of the PSUV was mixed with a fierce desire to defend the legacy of Chávez against the “destabilisation” attempts by what they saw as the US-backed bourgeoisie protesting in the city’s streets in the spring of 2014. For these committed socialists, often seen marching with their militant green t-shirts and the occasional Che Guevara beret, the failures of the ruling party are a small setback on the path towards deepened social transformation. In their language and in their

---

<sup>16</sup> Surveys by Venezuelan consultancy firms Hinterlaces, Consultores 21 and Datanalisis show that between two thirds and fourth fifths of the public feel the country is “heading in a bad direction”. This sentiment, they report, is reflected among the lowest income groups (Robertson, August 5th, 2014).

attempts to encourage support among the city's barrios, they embody the combative, revolutionary identities produced during the rise of Chavismo. In Pueblo Nuevo, the teaching staff at Fundación Cayapa and the residents who participate in Barrio Adentro and MERCAL talked much less often about Venezuela's contemporary economic and political crisis. These people seemed to be occupied with the day-to-day work of improving the community by fulfilling some the citizens' rights established over the last sixteen years of the Bolivarian Revolution. In each case, however, participating members represent a small proportion of the wider community, while the example of Marleny and Jose-Luís shows the limits both to the appeal of Chavismo and to the ability of these politicised representations to reflect the different experiences and aims of different sections of the Venezuelan public.

#### 4. Conclusion: improved patronage and redeemed identities for some

This chapter has explained the contemporary institutional landscape in Pueblo Nuevo in the context of changing terms of patronage with the Venezuelan State and new representations of the urban poor. The pro-poor politics of the new Chávez era responded to the increased importance of barrio populations following the *Caracazo* riots, delivering improvements to education, healthcare and basic services. Alongside these improved terms of patronage, the Bolivarian Revolution also brought new opportunities for political participation and offered redeemed social identities with a shift from discourses of criminality to the promise of a role at the centre of social transformation. The particular politicisation of these services and identities, however, also meant that some people in Pueblo Nuevo felt excluded from the opportunities offered by Chavismo, where a singular conception of the public good arguably sets limits to the sorts of emancipation on offer.

The history of organising and services in Pueblo Nuevo also provides us with a sense of the continuity in the community's relationship with the rest of Mérida. While access to healthcare and basic goods have improved in the barrio due to new Chavista initiatives, none of the groups and institutions described here address the wider social exclusion of the community. Although the insulation of Pueblo Nuevo is not total, the feeling of public ownership over the political process which Chávez fostered with the 1999 constitution, mass-movement, and class-based rhetoric,

have not translated into greater social inclusion for Pueblo Nuevo's residents. Many families continue to have informal employment, levels of high-school completion remain low, and the near-total absence of the police all set the barrio apart from higher-income communities in the city.

This chapter has begun to show important continuities in the relationship between people and government in Pueblo Nuevo - in partisan community institutions, patronage politics and in certain representations of barrio populations. This discussion of the Chávez era supports the analytical work of the thesis by providing the background to some of the tensions uncovered during fieldwork, when these areas of continuity contributed of a deepening political crisis in Venezuela.

## 4. Democracy, community and the Bolivarian Narrative: three literatures for explaining politics in Pueblo Nuevo

Our headlights catch on rubble strewn across the road and the four-by-four I'm riding in screeches to a halt. The highway is blocked by large chunks of concrete hewn from the roadside. From the shadows step masked gunmen, their eyes narrowed over the scarves that hide their features. Brandishing pistols, they spread out to surround us. They crowd nearer and aim their weapons into the car. Our driver starts shouting. We all have our hands up near the roof of the car. The other passengers' eyes widen with panic.

*"Él vive allí! - He lives here!"*

Jonathan opens the passenger door, arms still raised. The pistols track him as he stumbles reluctantly out of the car. Gone from his face is the smile that had grown all day, as he serenaded Andry and Carlos and they danced the tango up and down Pueblo Nuevo's main street. Jonathan is a young Chavista activist. He is on the other side, in theory, from the young men and women surrounding us. Together we have spent the day at a peace event in Pueblo Nuevo, playing dominos with the residents and putting on street theatre and dance. Jonathan also lives in the flats that are part of the occupied area of Mérida and, fortunately, it seems he is known to the gunmen. If they know his politics, I think, this ends badly.

Suddenly satisfied, the *guarimberos* – the road blockers - wave us on. Our tyres scabble on the debris as we pull a hasty U-turn and speed off into the night. Our driver, Antonio, wonders aloud what would have happened if the radio had still been playing the Chavista songs we had listened to for the whole journey. As I peer through the rear window, Jonathan hunches his shoulders and slinks sheepishly into the darkness, flanked by the militia.

I wake the next morning to a cock crowing somewhere. Its call is cut short by a curse and what sounds like a thrown shoe. As I roll out of bed, Marleny is already selling ice-cream at our front gate. Business is booming these days. Since Las Americas Avenue has been blocked by the *guarimba* road blocks, a long line of commuter traffic winds down into the barrio every morning. Where the streets narrow to single-file, some of the more entrepreneurial kids from the neighbourhood have begun implementing an informal toll. They dodge moto-taxis to lean into cars windows, jumping down with fists full of *Bolivares*, then signalling the traffic round the blind, single-file corner at the foot of La Cuesta. The drivers – nervous eyes hidden by sunglasses - all pay up, perhaps thinking it is better to deal with these skinny kids than with their older brothers. After rush hour the kids go home, full of ice cream after their morning's work.

I squeeze past Marleny, and knock on a neighbouring door. Gabriel's head appears from inside and beams at me through the iron bars on the window. He invites me inside for coffee we continue our interview from the day before. Gabriel is eighteen years old. He has just finished high-school and has lived in the barrio all his life. He is also one of the protesters who has joined the armed barricades on Las Americas Avenue, described above.

Over the year that I knew Gabriel and his family, I often thought about them as an example that didn't fit with the narrative of class warfare that casts barrio residents as unquestioning supporters of the Chavista project. I knew that Gabriel's politics did not match those of the Chavista groups that I participated with, and Gabriel knew that I was part of those groups. What surprised me during our interview, however, was his positive reflections on Hugo Chávez:

“Yes, they did many things! The government of Chávez, of course they did. When they arrived and got their mandate, they did the most

fundamental things. They animated all of the poor people. Because they emphasised poor people above all else. People in the community say Chávez was the President who left his palace and went to the streets. Poor with poor, house by house. And he won the love of the people, the poor more than anyone.” (interview w GM, 09.04.14, PN)

At the time of this conversation with Gabriel, coming a few weeks into my second fieldwork period, I saw his example as unusual. First, he was a barrio resident taking part in the protests of the so-called “parasitic bourgeoisie”. Second, Gabriel was someone who had joined up with the violent anti-government protests, and yet articulately reproduced the Bolivarian narrative about how Chávez had “awoken” the Venezuelan poor. In seeing these tensions as unusual, however, I was succumbing in part to the political categories reproduced in Chavista discourses and folk wisdom about Venezuelan political culture. With time, I would realise that – far from being unusual – Gabriel was just one more person making their way through the rich ideological landscape of Pueblo Nuevo. The complicated nature of Gabriel’s position is difficult to find in the schematic literature on Chávez’s Venezuela, where many writers seek national-level generalised “answers” to what is happening there.

Different kinds of information are needed to explain examples like those of Gabriel and his neighbours in Pueblo Nuevo – to make sense of the people and events that do not fit with simplified notions about class politics. Some of the precedents for this analytical work are contained in the different bodies of literature that have developed around barrio politics and around Bolivarianism. This scholarship also forms part of the wider regional literature that seeks to explain and conceptualise the relationship between government and people in Latin America.

### **Aims and structure of the chapter**

Following the introduction of barrio Pueblo Nuevo and its history in the thesis so far, this chapter outlines the three main bodies of literature that are used throughout the rest of the thesis to make sense of the events and attitudes that make up the political landscape in and around Pueblo Nuevo today. I describe the ways that information from these different bodies of literature are used to support the analysis in the remainder of the thesis. This scholarship does this by providing

reference points for thinking about the different kinds of information collected in interviews and during observations of community participation, and by connecting with the history of Pueblo Nuevo as described in the thesis so far. I show how these different areas of literature in turn connect with different parts of the writing on populism, democracy and citizenship in Latin America.

The chapter begins by discussing the body of research that deconstructs the populist symbolism and politics of Bolivarianism and the “cult” of Hugo Chávez (Harnecker 2005: 79). This literature examines government and media representations as a means of understanding political support. There is less work, however, that explores how these political ideas are reproduced and deployed day-to-day by people in Venezuelan communities. I explain how analyses of the Bolivarian public narrative will be used in the thesis to build a nuanced understanding of the intellectual landscape in Pueblo Nuevo, where this discourse forms part of the political culture and where notions of citizenship, government and people arose in conversation and at community meetings.

The chapter continues by reviewing the body of literature that considers the evolution of the institutions and processes of democracy in Venezuela – including new forms of community organisations. I show how the evolution of national processes and institutions connects with debates about populism and democracy in Latin America, and discuss the suitability of liberal-democratic principles for explaining the relationship between people and government in Venezuela. The third part of the chapter discusses the community-level studies that explore experiences of life, politics and community participation in Venezuela’s barrios. This literature is mainly concerned with the day-to-day experiences of activists and community organisations, and the “everyday wars of position” (Fernandes 2010: 23-24) of barrio residents. I describe how these studies will be used in the thesis to provide precedents for using different kinds of evidence from Pueblo Nuevo.

The chapter concludes by connecting these bodies of literature to make sense of political behaviours and attitudes like Gabriel’s to demonstrate how these precedents can inform the analytical work of this thesis. I suggest that there is a need for more research that connects writing about the Bolivarian public narrative, institutional changes and community-level experiences to make sense of the



complexities of political experiences from barrios like Pueblo Nuevo. I also argue that, in each approach, those studies which provide historical context are especially useful for explaining the particular political moment considered in this thesis.

## 1. Chávez, Chavistas and *opositors*: using literature on the Bolivarian public narrative to understand the intellectual landscape in Pueblo Nuevo

From Hugo Chávez's election in 1998, a body of literature has grown that examines his public discourse and ideology and unpacks "the 'Bolivarian' narrative" (Emerson 2011: 97). This writing is useful because it shows how some important formulations of the folk concepts around the urban poor and the role of government are being reproduced and give us a language to talk about the intellectual landscape in and around Pueblo Nuevo. It is this narrative that talks about the populations of communities like Pueblo Nuevo, setting them against the Venezuelan oligarchs and middle classes and drawing on and feeding into existing folk concepts about the capacity and role of the urban poor. The analysis done by these scholars therefore helps us to see the formulations of politics that Mérida's anti-government protesters feel excluded from, the pro-Chávez discourse that Gabriel repeats, and the accepted political story of Chavista barrio dwellers that his personal example clashes with.

This scholarship in turn connects with the wider scholarship on populism and neo-populism in Latin America, where scholars have paid particular attention to the ways that governments in the twentieth century targeted their campaigns to "the atomised poor" (Boas 2005). For Roberts (2000: 127), the defining feature of populist governments on both the left and the right in Latin America has been "the political mobilisation of mass constituencies by personalistic leaders who challenge established elites". This literature has developed to include neo-populist governments that seek to build on the mobilisation of working classes "to win mass support primarily from unorganized people in the informal sector, while (...) attacking the "political class." (Weyland 1996). For Knight (1996), this is about "a particular political style, characteristically involving a proclaimed rapport with 'the people". Analysis of the Bolivarian public narrative continues this analysis.

## **Mission and missionaries: analyses of Chavista discourse**

Much of the research in this area is written with the intention of “...understanding Chávez’s hold on power” (Zuquete 2008:93). At first, following Chávez’s election in 1998 which ended fifty years of alternating between COPEI and AD, this writing was concerned with explaining Chávez’s appeal among the voter base and the growth of the Chavista mass-movement. As Chávez continued to win elections and moved towards pro-poor policies and the rhetoric of regional socialism, the continued electoral phenomenon of Chavismo drew attention. A large part of this work is concerned with representations of Hugo Chávez himself. David Smilde (2004), Pablo Zuquete (2008) and Javier Garcia (2008) all emphasise the religious symbolism in Chávez’s discourse. This symbolism is seen as being constructed through behaviours as well as texts, with researchers paying attention to Chávez’s dress, mannerisms and his construction of a public persona via his weekly *Alo Presidente* television show.<sup>1</sup>

As well as discussing representations of Chávez, this scholarship also unpacks representations of the political process of Venezuela’s Bolivarian political project. Alberto Garrido’s (2000) *La historia secreta de la Revolución Bolivariana* emphasises the design of Bolivarianism using nationalist, militaristic, anti-oligarchic, and populist ideas drawn from Simon Bolivar, Simon Rodriguez, and Ezequiel Zamora as a means of appealing to progressive elements in the armed forces. Emerson (2011) paints one of the fullest pictures of what he calls the “Bolivarian’ narrative” and particular its reformulation of identity politics. His 2011 article *A Bolivarian People: Identity politics in Hugo Chávez’s Venezuela* highlights many of the discursive constructions – of the folk concepts - that were uncovered during fieldwork for this thesis. Of particular relevance for my thesis (see Chapter Six) is Emerson’s discussion of the segregation of the Venezuelan population into distinct and antagonistic groupings in Chavista representations. This representation of antagonistic social groupings is also noted by Vivas (1999 in

---

<sup>1</sup> The approach of documenting Chávez’s “verbal and non-verbal discourses” (Zuquete 2008:92), often begins with the content of his speeches (ibid, Smilde 2004; Ochs 2014) and the attached symbolism of his personality and behaviours. This extends in some cases to the redeployment of historical discourse like the national anthem (Emerson 2011, see also Ciccariello-Maher 2013), or to analysis of new political slogans (e.g. Cameron and Major 2001: 262).

Cameron and Major 2001), Roberts (2012: 136) and Zuquete (2008: 92) who describes Chávez's "missionary politics" as:

"...a characteristic form of political religion that has at its centre a charismatic leader who leads a chosen people gathered into a moral community struggling against all-powerful and conspiratorial enemies, and engaged in a mission toward redemption and salvation."

Here, Zuquete identifies what he calls the discursive "frames" of Bolivarianism as a means of constructing a communicable explanation of Venezuelan politics and a "social religion" of Bolivarianism. For this thesis, unpacking these representations helps to inform analysis of political attitudes in and around Pueblo Nuevo, where examples like Gabriel show a limitation to the political polarisation that is accepted in some of the more institutional literature (e.g. Ellner 2011).

These writers also help to understand the Bolivarian reformulations of theories of social emancipation introduced in Chapter One. Within the "agonistic" Chavista narrative of poor vs. rich, Spanakos (2008: 527) looks at Chávez's construction of his followers, including via a new notion of "Bolivarian citizenship" and the discourse around barrio *revolucionarios*. Specifically, Spanakos identifies three key characteristics for citizenship arising from the Bolivarian narrative: i) active engagement in politics, ii) inclusion in the market and iii) production and solidarity between groups. In Chavista rhetoric, then, the Venezuelan public – including those in barrios like Pueblo Nuevo – have an invitation to engage directly in politics as part of processes of radical political, social and economic processes of change. This analysis of the Bolivarian discourse around citizenship separates Spanakos from those writers that accept a Bolivarian notion of citizenship as an abstract ideal (e.g. García-Guadilla and Pilar 2010). His writing connects the public discourse of the government with local forms of participation by considering how the notion opens up and constrains possibilities for Venezuelans. He concludes that "in shaping not only what is discussed but how it is discussed, Chávez has changed the way that citizens interact with and dissect a concept of politics..." (Spanakos 2008: 527).

In exploring the social connotations of meaning in this way - especially with relation to community participation – Smilde's (2004) work is also useful for

beginning to think about the tensions within Bolivarian politics. If Chávez is represented as messiah and protector, then representing the people as empowered agents of change – as Bolivarian citizens – arguably suggests some conflict between notions of identity and governance. This tension is discussed in practical terms in Uzcategui's *Revolution as Spectacle*, where the empowering rhetoric of Bolivarianism is contrasted with its public record in government. This study connects in particular with the arguments made in chapters six, seven and eight in this thesis, where the limits to participatory politics are shown in the processes for the administration and control of community organisations. Tracing these tensions from the pre-Chávez era is part of the main contribution of this study.

This scholarship also provides useful material for continuing the analysis of Chavista talk and politics in and around Pueblo Nuevo. In Marta Harnecker's book of interviews with Chávez, she asks the late President directly about the "cult of Chávez" (Harnecker 2005: 79) and challenges him to explain certain statements and parts of his political narrative. As Chávez responds and clarifies certain elements of his ideology, he builds notions of people, party and state, fitted into a temporal, narrative account of his rise to power, his record in government and his future goals. An earlier related work is Mufioz's 1999 book *Habla El Comandante*, based on interviews with Chávez in the years leading up to his election in 1998. Mufioz (1999: 89-97) attempts a closer analysis than Harnecker, including highlighting the absence of any conception of citizenship in Chávez's ideology at that time.

Only a few studies make more progress in connecting government discourses to the local – an aim of this thesis. Garcia (2014) discusses the reproduction of symbols in street graffiti, while both Smilde (2004) and Spanakos (2008) use the content of Chávez's speeches as a reference point for their studies with barrio residents. These studies that connect Bolivarian discourses to grassroots accounts provide important precedents for studying the reproduction of narratives and identities in Pueblo Nuevo. Smilde also draws on interviews with evangelical Christians, seeking particularly to understand how they bridge the potential incompatibility between Chávez's violent past and their faith. This evidence begins to show that how Chavistas deploy Bolivarian notions at different times, correlating them with other ideas as part of broad and intersecting sets of folk concepts.

### **Connecting analyses of Bolivarianism with the day-to-day**

This scholarship also shows us something of the challenge of writing and thinking about Bolivarianism. Like the literature on communities and institutions, much of this literature on the Bolivarian narrative seems to accept the exceptionalism of Chavismo. In seeking to explain what is seen as the curiosity of Chávez's electoral success, there is a tacit acceptance that some kind of systemic change has taken place in Venezuela. The idea that Bolivarian sensationalised rhetoric has been used to somehow sell a radical political alternative to a naïve population also connects with some of the marginality thinking about the urban poor discussed in Chapter One. In contrast, those scholars that connect components of the narrative to previous political sentiments drawn on by past governments are able to show continuities in national political discourses (see especially Emerson 2011 and Garrido 2000).

Part of this emphasis on Bolivarian discourses seems to assume the power of these texts over individual behaviours on a mass scale. Accordingly, there is a neglect of the concrete local factors behind voting that may have little to do with Chávez's rhetoric. Added to this, there is a failure to connect to non-voting behaviours, including community participation. This focus on voting also means that there is no examination of the extent to which elements of this Bolivarian narrative exist in the language of people who identify as members of the opposition - especially values such as democracy, nationalism, and grassroots empowerment that pre-date Chávez. What is still to be drawn out in much of this literature is an examination of non-voting behaviours, including how these narrative elements are differently altered and deployed locally. In this thesis, I ask how these ideas are used not to sell a different and unusual kind of politics, but to explain and mask continuity.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> An additional but related shortcoming of this literature is the extent to which this literature focuses on Hugo Chávez both as a political symbol and as master story-teller. The political representations of different groups of Venezuelan people - for example barrio populations - has received little attention. In the second sense, the focus on Chávez as producer of discourse neglects the other personalities and influences within the broad, mass-movement of Bolivarianism (one exception is Garrido 2000). Focusing to this extent on "Chávez's notion of citizenship" (Spanakos 2008), for example, seems to buy into a strategic over-simplification of Venezuelan politics.

Ironically, the representation of Bolivarianism is a systemic political alternative, the over-emphasis on the personality of Chávez, and the neglect of local-level differences are all features of the Chavista discourse itself. This work could be built on, therefore, by giving more attention to the local reformulation, deployment and functions of these narratives. Given that the electoral phenomenon of Chavismo is made up of public (i.e. voter) behaviours, a purely discursive approach can only infer a connection between these behaviours and political rhetoric. An expanded conception of discourse as something that not is formed of and constituted by behaviours, processes and institutions (see Laclau 2005: 68) may also offer a fuller explanation of contemporary Venezuelan political discourses and their results. In this respect, this body of literature will benefit from a greater connection both with the ethnographic research on grassroots politics in Venezuela.

The body of literature around the Bolivarian narrative is an important foundation for my research because this narrative forms part of the political culture and discursive context for barrio Pueblo Nuevo. People used the language of Chavismo throughout fieldwork, during interviews, in conversation and at community meetings. The reproduction of these discourses and their specific deployment and alteration is an important focus. I will argue during the thesis that both participants and non-participants work within and around these new conceptions of citizenship, and different ideas about the urban poor. Analysis of the Bolivarian narrative is useful for analysis of Pueblo Nuevo because it is an identifiable set of ideas, which can be assumed to be familiar to all community members, and that - via this literature - have well-mapped out historical antecedents. For an outsider, part of the challenge is separating 'Chavista talk' from the connected sentiments of nationalism, indigenusness and the principles of fairness and democracy. This is possible in part through the use of some of these notions by non-Chavistas, including from the interview with Gabriel.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Another useful contribution of this literature for my thesis is the fact that it brings together a set of concepts and their attached theory for explaining the connection of meaning and the material. This involves drawing on diverse bodies of literature including work on social narratives (for example Connolly in Emerson 2011: 97-98), Durkheim's theory of a secular religion as a means of explaining national identity (in Zuquete 2008: 92) and Laclau's

These analyses of the Bolivarian narrative literature also helps us to connect Chávez-era Venezuelan political narratives with those of other Latin American populist governments, both past and present. Particular similarities can be identified where other populist governments have worked to develop a “‘them-and-us’ mentality” to divide their populations (Knight 1998). For Doyle (2011), the success of these combative narratives is due to varying levels of public trust in the traditional political institutions of liberal democracy across the region – meaning voters are attracted to candidates who portray themselves as radical “outsiders,” crusading against the established political order. These low levels of public trust are an important characteristic in Latin America, where democracies have often failed to establish legal equality for their citizens, and where horizontal accountability has often been seen as weak (Tesdesco 2004: 32). This also connects with the use of “crisis” by populist Latin American populist governments, as identified by Knight (1998), Weyland (1996) and Cammack (2000). It was these elements – the divisiveness, the sensationalism, the constant sense of crisis – that seemed to be part of a wider fatigue with Chavista politics that characterised Mérida at the moment of fieldwork.

## 2. Institutions, elections and organising: using the literature around different kinds of political participation

The growing literature on community organising and participatory politics in the Chávez era is part of a wider, ongoing debate about the role for civil society actors in Latin America. In the immediate pre-Chávez era, examples of participatory politics including the residents associations of Cuba (Alfonso and Nunez 1997), the participative budgeting of Porto Alegre (Baiocchi 2001) or Costa Rica’s social committees (Lara and Molina 1997) among others were seen by some as evidence

---

(2005: 68) understanding of discourse. The literature on Chávez’s public discourse in particular provides a useful set of terminology to choose from, expressing representations of meaning variously as rhetoric, frames, notions, narrative, symbolism, myth, culture and aesthetics to unpack different functions (see conceptual framework chapter). Among these examples, however, those that use specific social concepts to bridge the gap between meaning and experience, notably citizenship (Spanakos 2008) and identity (ibid, Emerson 2011) may offer the best connection with the analytical language of the ethnographies considered in section three.

of a new, empowering context where the rules and norms of political relations were being defined by new actors (Kaufman 1997: 7). Running against this, writers like Petras (1997: 13) argued that new, decentralised roles for civil society actors in the 1990s were part of the “de-neoliberalisation” of Latin America, where narratives of participatory politics are designed to “divide classes and pacify small groups for a limited time”. For Petras, participation and inclusion in some cases supports rather than challenges the maintenance of existing power hierarchies, while securing a new arena for powerful social groups to exert informal influence and continue historical processes of clientelism (see also García-Guadilla and Pilar 2002: 92).

In the context of this debate, a body of literature concerned with theorising institutional and policy changes connected with Bolivarianism has developed around the task of finding new ways to explain the relationship between people and government under the Bolivarian Revolution. This scholarship includes some writers who have described Chávez-era government in Venezuela as a new type of democracy – more ‘participatory’, ‘direct’ or ‘protagonistic’ (see Raby 2006; Ellner 2009, 2011; Buxton 2011). This scholarship includes the discussion of changes to public services and institutions for participatory politics, including the Communal Council system introduced in the previous chapter. This literature also includes analysis of elections that contributes to our understanding of the Venezuelan population’s voting and participation behaviours and for understanding some of the policies that anti-government protesters like Gabriel are responding to – and especially whether political conditions and local reactions can be said to be different to those of the pre-Chávez era.

### **Theorising institutional change: new democracy or old populism?**

Many of these political commentaries seek to make sense of Chávez’s record in government, including debating to what sorts of changes to the democratic system have taken place. Kirk Hawkins locates the Bolivarian system among the complex history of populist governments in Latin America. His book (2010a: 193) *Venezuela’s Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective* describes local activist associations as suffering from “weak institutionalisation” and “social movement-style” organisation. Hawkins (ibid: 193) is also critical of the “direct relationship” of local groups with Chávez, as well as identifying “disdain for existing



institutions of representative democracy such as parties” and “a high level of insularity from other components of civil society”. In his institutional critique, Hawkins draws on liberal democratic norms and principles, emphasising the potential for the framework to serve either new or relocated interests or to suffer from problems of inefficiency and uneven application.

Hawkins builds on this institutional analysis with a discussion of “who mobilises?” (2010b). Here he uses survey data to examine the demographics of participating Venezuelans, finding that participants include the poor, women and the less educated, but that participation is often by narrow groups of activists and that these are disproportionately Chávez supporters. Although this research is useful context for understanding trends of participation, Hawkins’ explanations - he attributes this trend to “self-screening” by Chavistas - are tentative and would benefit from consideration alongside more qualitative data about participant motivation.

The historian Richard Gott - known for his work on guerrilla movements in Latin America the 1960s - seeks to describe Chávez’s Bolivarian project in historical and regional context. His book *In the shadow of the liberator: Hugo Chávez and the transformation of Venezuela* (2000) considers Chávez in the context of regional populism and military regimes (Torrijos in Panama and Juan Velasco Alvarado in Peru) and also traces his political development to 19th century Venezuelan figures, including Bolivar, and the Venezuelan communist dissidents dating back to the 1940s. Revisiting the theme in 2005 (and updated in 2011) in *Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution* Gott develops a defence of Chávez, engaging with some of the media criticisms of Chávez’s political record and the centralisation of power in Venezuela. Gott (2008: 479) argues that Venezuelan socialism “has been defined more by what it is not than by what it might hope to be”, accepting the “originality” of the Chávez government’s programme as an alternative to global capitalism.

Venezuela-based historian and political scientist Steve Ellner also provides a long-term commentary of institutional and political change. From his 1988 book tracing what would become the roots of Bolivarian socialism “...from guerrilla defeat to innovative politics”, to responses to the ideology behind the failed Chávez coup (1993), Chávez’s rise to power and throughout the first decade of the Bolivarian

Revolution (2009, 2011), Ellner's analysis follows the evolution Chavista politics. Within this commentary, democracy and participatory institutions and Bolivarian policies around popular power are traced from their pre-Chávez antecedents - including an assessment of the obstacles to the neighbourhood movement ahead of the 1998 election (1999), an evaluation of the Bolivarian "social-based democratic model" (2009 and 2011) and a particular focus on the incorporation of labour movements.

Ellner's assessment of new participatory institutions and their policy framework recognises the problems with inefficacy and politicisation of structures like the Communal Councils, but identifies an institutional "transformation" in the "incorporation of marginalized sectors in the political and economic life of the nation" (2009: 4). Ellner therefore directs much of his writing at addressing the populist label attached to the Bolivarian project. Although he accepts the government's failure to develop intermediary institutions, Ellner contests those critics writing in what he calls the "simplified framework of those writing in the Germani tradition" (Ellner 2011: 447; see also Germani 1962). Instead, Ellner sees the Chávez-masses connection as replacing the construction of effective intermediary institutions. However, when Ellner (2011: 447) argues that Venezuela's social-based democracy "represents a model that is distinct from both really existing socialism and welfare-state politics" due to the number of people enrolling in social programmes and mobilising politically, the privileging of poor groups over elites, and the levels of political polarisation, he founds his argument in what seem like surface level-details, rather than the detail of changes in local experiences.

David Raby's (2006) book seeks to put the institutional development of the Bolivarian Revolution in the context of different regional "anti-capitalist alternatives". Like Gott and Ellner, Raby traces the origins of Chávez from the development of a political movement in the 1990s through the 1998 elections and the assembly in 1999 to draft a new national constitution, to the creation of new participatory institutions during the 2000s. In identifying a "revolutionary transformation" oriented around the principle of popular constituent power, Raby identifies a reorientation of party politics to reflect the interests of the poor, and a change in the party role from that of monopolising power to simply mobilising for

elections (ibid: 186-187). For Raby, constituent power is enshrined through the formal incorporation of grassroots institutions, including urban land committees, water committees and through the new community-focused health service Barrio Adentro.

While much of Raby's contribution is in documenting the legal steps taken to "empower" the grassroots, his account is also rare in that it is much more accepting of the role of strong leadership. Raby sees Chávez's personal power and continued leadership as essential to the development of a culture of collective political engagement and the institution-building needed for a more popular democracy. In this respect, he predicts the eventual decay of traditional, representative institutions of constitutive power. In this prediction, and due to his fieldwork with grassroots networks in Venezuela, Raby's work is also evidence of specific political hopes of Chavistas as they are articulated within the movement that he studies.

Julia Buxton is another writer whose work progresses from criticism of the Venezuela's pre-Chávez "degenerative democracy" (1999), to discussion of the development and evolution of the Bolivarian project. Buxton (2011: ix) argues that Venezuela's current government should not be considered as a liberal democracy, or via econometric and institutional-focused analyses that do not capture the actions of the popular sectors. Instead, she argues, Venezuela's "state-sponsored participatory democracy" (ibid: xii) should be considered in a way that accepts new meanings of democracy, citizenship and identity. For her, the connection between the studies of community, meaning and institutions offers a means of understanding the particular political scenario of Bolivarianism.

Barry Cannon (2009) also uses the populist label but - like Raby - seeks to recapture the phrase from its negative connotations and renovate what he describes as a complex and useful concept for understanding Bolivarianism. Cannon sets out to examine Chávez's political project in the context of both processes of modernisation and globalisation. Here, Cannon describes populism as being not in opposition but in "an intimate relationship with democracy".

### **Explaining voting and participation: a divided society?**

While much of the literature on both narratives and institutions described above also considers Venezuela's frequent national elections, several dedicated studies are worth highlighting. These studies are useful for researching community participation in Venezuela because they tell us about political attitudes and support - both are also considered to have an important connection with other forms of democratic participation (Ellner 2009; Gill 2010; Hawkins 2010a, 2010b; Wilde 2014).

Daniel Hellinger (2005, 2011) looks at electoral politics at a national scale. He theorises about the class polarisation as a means of explaining voter mobilisation, identifying the political and economic conditions that explain Chávez's electoral success. Like Ellner (2003), Hellinger sees urban poor classes as surest supporters of Chávez and explains the fall of the pre-Chávez era - known as *Puntofijismo* - through a lens of class conflict. These studies on elections are particularly useful for gaining some sense of the scale of supporter trends for Chavismo. Usefully, Hellinger's (2005) work helps to distinguish between the unemployed urban and rural poor and the less supportive working classes.

Some of this work is particularly important for providing the context to begin to disrupt elements of the Bolivarian public narrative. One example is Canache (2002), who in seeking to explain Chávez's early success, emphasises the role "ambivalent" voters played. This finding, based on national-level survey data, challenges the idea that electoral success is evidence of mass public support for Chavismo. Empirical detail like this shows the need for a more nuanced understanding of political attitudes. Another example is the McCoy and Myers (2006) collection, which considers voter behaviours of Venezuela's different political groups, but focuses on how the population is seen to have reacted to public policy. Cameron and Major (2001) also provide a useful review of early responses to Chávez's rise to power.

Commentaries that seek to capture the character of institutional change have the challenge of representing a particularly decentralised institutional landscape. Due to the proliferation of Venezuela's new grassroots institutions and the lack of detailed national-level data, evidencing statements about their characteristics at a national scale is difficult. At times, this can result in unsupported descriptions that

do not fit well with the messy detail of local experiences. Gott (2008: 481), for example, describes how

“The jurisdiction of the councils usually covers a recognisable geographic unit and might involve perhaps 400 families. Some 20 people are usually actively involved, of whom a high proportion are women. Nearly 20,000 councils had been created all over the country by 2007.”

Here, Gott does not evidence these details of “usual” practice. Evidence from Mérida suggests that the registration figures for Communal Councils likely misrepresent the numbers of active councils (see Chapter Five and Chapter Six). Added to this, participation trends over time may be highly variable in many communities (see, for example Gill 2012). Studies like Hawkins’ (2010b) that do attempt a quantitative analysis of participation trends, in assessing participation and non-participation as an either-or binary, do not capture the complexity of behaviours and membership at a local level.

Neither are these studies well-placed to make claims about the impact of new participatory institutions. Ellner (2011: 448) claims that “participation in social movements and programmes and party activity has affected the lives of a large number of underprivileged Venezuelans, but the results have been mixed”. This statement – unevidenced in the text and not expanded upon – is an example of how this literature fails at times to explain what these mixed results might be like. A further characteristic of work at this level is the generalisation of diverse attitudes and experiences. Ellner (*ibid*), for example, consistently treats what he calls “rank and file Chavistas” as a homogenous group, attributing them shared beliefs and attitudes that are out-of-step with the diversity of attitudes shown in ethnographic research (e.g. Wilde 2014). Here Ellner reproduces a tendency of government discourses to generalise about “the people” that I will argue in this thesis is a discursive strategy both to mobilise support and create the impression of political legitimacy.

For some writers, the acceptance of the exceptionalism of Venezuela’s democracy and institutions may be connected to a personal sympathy for elements of the Bolivarian ideology (Harnecker 2005, 2009; Raby 2006; Gott 2008; Dominguez

2011) – and in some cases a personal connection to President Chávez. A desire to promote Bolivarianism can result in a lack of interrogation, for example, of the intentions behind institutional changes. Gott (2008: 481) describes how “the councils were supposed to be an exercise in decentralisation, the government was obliged to establish a ministry in Caracas to oversee their funding and operation”. Here, further consideration of the different possible intentions of the government is needed (i.e. electioneering, mobilisation etc.).

In another example, Raby (2006: 191) argues that “...Chávez responds positively and unequivocally to pressures or grievances expressed by the popular movements.” Again, this is a statement that, without comprehensive evidencing, appears to be a political rather than academic assessment. Likewise, generalised conclusions like Ellner’s, that “President Chávez’s centralization of power severed the links between traditional organizations and the state and in the process has broken with Venezuela’s corporatist tradition” (Ellner 2009: 6), appear political and do not match with the corporatist behaviours uncovered in some ethnographic accounts (e.g. Gill 2012; Wilde 2014).

Other writers seem at times to write from within the Bolivarian narrative as they seek to describe the relationship of people and government in Venezuela. García-Guadilla and Pilar (2010), for example, promote a new understanding of citizenship as “the engine of development” in Venezuela. Their writing can be contrasted with that of Spanakos (2008, discussion to follow), who seeks to uncover a new conception of citizenship from texts and local accounts. There are two related approaches to citizenship here: i) to posit a new conception of citizenship as a desired ideal and a useful concept for shaping Venezuelan political culture (i.e. García-Guadilla and Pilar 2010) or ii) to explore what citizenship means through an examination of behaviours and texts (i.e. Spanakos 2008). Both are useful as reference points for my study into local ideas about citizenship.

Another example of the acceptance of government discourse is arguably the assumption that the Bolivarian Revolution is a significant institutional step-change from the kind of democracy practised in the pre-Chávez, Punto-Fijista years between 1958 and 1998. Cameron and Major (2001: 255), for example, ask “Has

Chávez saved Venezuela from the decadence of the *Pacto de Punto Fijo*,<sup>4</sup> or has he undermined the very foundations of Venezuelan democracy?” In this thesis I make the case that these commentators may be too quick to accept the idea of system change.<sup>5</sup> Part of the task of describing the practice and representation of participation, citizenship and politics is gaining a sense of what *hasn't changed*. I argue in this thesis that the institutions, behaviours and processes in Mérida are in some senses better described as having continued from the pre-Chávez era.

### 3. Building on ethnographic and other community studies on Venezuela's barrios

A limited number of Chávez-era ethnographic studies on Venezuela's barrios exist, with the vast majority of research on participation in Venezuela focusing on institutional change or using shorter-term qualitative approaches (e.g. Harnecker 2009). This may be due to the time-consuming nature of ethnographic work or to the perceived risks posed to the researcher in these communities. It is particularly notable that the longer term community-based studies I found were all written by English-speaking foreigners – in each case as part of PhD theses.<sup>6</sup>

These studies in turn connect with a wider tradition of ethnographic research in Latin America. This is particularly the case with examples of longer-term community-based studies from the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Scheper-Hughes (1992), Goldstein (2013), Perlman (1979, 2007), and Ireland (2011) have all produced work that challenges how people think about poor urban communities and their complex relationships with government and other political actors. A particular strength of this body of literature is the development of an

---

<sup>4</sup> This was the power sharing agreement that characterised the interchange of AD and COPEI governments throughout the pre-Chávez era.

<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere, sympathetic predictions concerning the institutional evolution of the Revolution can now be evaluated in light of the passing of time in Venezuela. Raby (2006: 182), for example, predicted a reduction in the role of the state to that of simply protecting participatory processes and ensuring the “dialectical” foundation of the Revolution. I will argue in this thesis that, nearly ten years after Raby's forecast, evidence from Mérida suggest that this institutional change has not occurred, and the conventional institutions of liberal democracy – with some new and renamed additions – retain their power and function.

<sup>6</sup> Chapter Five will discuss my own positionality as an English-speaking foreigner and the ways that this outsider status has an influence on data collection and analysis.

understanding of gender as part of social and political identity. In Argentina, Auyero (2000, 2001) in particular has developed an explanation of the different political roles of different community members and the different discourses that are reproduced to explain how politics happens locally both from above and from below (see especially Chapter Six).

In this thesis, I take precedents from this work from Venezuela, along with other examples from Latin America, to provide context for my description of barrio Pueblo Nuevo. This section of the chapter will highlight some important examples of ethnographies and introduce some relevant shorter-term community-based qualitative research.

### **Important ethnographic studies**

Sujatha Fernandes' (2010) book *Who Can Stop the Drums?* is an especially useful contribution to the study both of barrio culture and Chávez-era community participation. The book focuses on urban social movements and especially on the Caracas barrios of San Agustín, 23 de Enero and La Vega. Fernandes describes diverse experiences of grassroots political organising across several neighbouring low-income communities, emphasising the challenges of parochialism and the encounter with Venezuela's 'post-neoliberal hybrid state'. Fernandes uses a variety of data sources including cultural artefacts and interviews with their producers. Her nuanced observations and detailed personal accounts are situated in expansive political histories, connecting lived experiences with their ideological and policy contexts. Along with her book, Fernandes' other publications on gender identities within these communities are among the most-cited studies on barrio culture. Fernandes' (2007) describes the limited subversion of gender status in her field-site, documenting the redistribution of women's tasks and a reduction in machismo and chauvinism and the beginnings of reoriented gender identities. She observes Moser's (1986 in Fernandes 2007: 119) 'triple burden' of productive, reproductive and community managing work acting as a restriction on women's time for thinking about social issues, and for mobilising.

In her work, Fernandes (2010: 23-24) draws on Gramscian theories of hegemony and the Foucauldian concept of governmentality to explain what she describes as people's "everyday wars of position" in Venezuela's barrios. She uses these



principles to unpack the “complex dynamics of power and contestation as urban social movements clash with the instrumental rationalities of the post-neoliberal state” (ibid: 24). In this way, Fernandes connects individual stories of the challenges of life in Venezuela’s barrios, with the changing structure of Venezuelan institutional politics. This approach was a key influence on my own research, in that I continue this task of explaining how people negotiate their positions in around Pueblo Nuevo both in their political behaviours and how they talk about these behaviours.

Maura Duffy’s recent (2012) doctoral thesis draws on ethnographic fieldwork from 2009 and 2010 in various barrios of Caracas, including Catia and Petare. Duffy asks whether social change in Venezuela has contributed to new forms of political awareness and popular agency if it is possible to identify a transformation of relations and structures of power. Her particular focus on the Bolivarian education missions means that her analysis deals with groups of students and their learning environments as well as other forms of community participation, rather than an ethnography focused on a single community. Duffy ultimately concludes that the new Bolivarian institutions do promote the political and economic incorporation of marginalised sectors (ibid: 253). These conclusions, draw heavily on the literature, along with her data, to make claims about institutional change. In this respect, the voices of the participants that she introduces are primarily used to evidence “feelings” of empowerment she has uncovered (ibid: 256). In this thesis, I echo this approach by connecting local accounts with the national political processes discussed in the literature.

Matt Wilde (2014, 2015) is another UK-based ethnographer working on participation in Venezuela. His work is rare in that his fieldwork was not based in Caracas, drawing instead on fieldwork carried out between 2009 and 2010 in El Camoruco, in the south of Valencia, Venezuela’s third largest city. Wilde (2014: 3) assesses the impact of local Communal Councils in El Camoruco, examining what he calls “every day political practice” and focusing on “new social actors”, the problems that they encounter and conflicts between community leaders, council participants and local residents. Wilde links these findings to what he calls structural and ideological tensions “between bureaucratism and self-government, liberalism and socialism” within the Bolivarian project (ibid: 22). He argues that

Communal Councils not only produce new opportunities, but bring “new burdens” for local residents. As well as identifying limits to the ability and willingness of residents to participate, he describes how “barrio residents could be admonished, often by their own neighbours, for failing to live up to Chavista aspirations of participation” (ibid 22, emphasis in the original). This he argues, is resisted to some extent by accusations of corruption and self-interest as part of attempts to create a culture of accountability around the councils. Wilde’s rare inclusion of non-activist accounts in particular supports his analysis about the complex dynamics of participation.

Adam Gill’s (2012) doctoral thesis is based on fieldwork conducted in Mérida City between 2008 and 2009. His study uses case-studies from two anonymous communities, focusing on their Communal Councils and on local attitudes towards them. Gill argues that the “state-managed” councils are part of “a ‘dual government’ structure” based on the principles of Socialism of the twenty-first century, as promoted by the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). In this respect, he challenges the idea that popular power is separate to state power. His account describes the party-politicisation of the councils and uncovers different corruption allegations regarding the distribution of state resources. In describing the council meetings and their mixed results, low participation and the weak legitimacy of the council structure, Gill’s research contributes empirical detail to debates about local experiences of Participatory Democracy.

Jonathan Leary’s (2009) extended essay on the politics of representation in contemporary Venezuelan journalism uses an ethnographic approach to explore the evolution of a community news station in Catia barrio in Caracas. He describes the history, organisational structure and institutional context of Catia TVE, contrasting the participatory approach of “*chavista* radicalism” and what he describes as “liberal” attempts to present a civil society spin on private media (ibid: 26). Leary connects the news station to the history of the barrio and the political changes in Venezuela. This approach – of embedding the history of a participatory group in the local political culture – is useful because it connects changing ideas about citizenship to their specific community contexts. In contrast to the focus on councils found in Wilde and Gill, Leary’s study offers insight into a group with a less formal and differently contested relationship with the state.

Finally, Naomi Schiller's "critically engaged anthropology" (2011, 2011a) is another example of long-term grassroots research in Caracas's barrios. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Catia between 2003 and 2007, Schiller, like Leary, examines the participatory production of media representations through Catia TVe. Notably, Schiller describes herself as an "observant participant" (2011b: 256). Her research approach involved accompanying the various media producers during their work and training, while her publications focus on linking media representations with the political function of participatory media. This was an approach I would echo in my work for Fundación Cayapa.

### **Arguments and contribution: identity, struggle and the state**

Between them, these accounts provide a detailed history of collective action in Venezuela, from the history of social movements in the barrios from guerrilla insurgency of the 1950s and 1960s, through the experiences of liberation theology-led cultural resistance of the 1970s to the 1980s debt crisis and the genealogy and implementation of the Bolivarian Revolution (see especially Fernandes 2010). Charting the grassroots antecedents of the Bolivarian Revolution connects the evolution of contemporary forms of community participation back to the decades of popular action in the capital and the growing public dissatisfaction that culminated in the 1989 *Caracazo* riots. In focusing less on party politics and national changes and more on the experiences from specific low-income urban communities, this history is important for understanding the priorities and characteristics of contemporary forms of collective action.

This body of literature is also a rich source of primary data on Chávez-era grassroots participation in barrio communities. As well as providing useful precedents for my research, the interview excerpts and the descriptions of events and processes based on observations provide a complimentary series of data with which to examine my own primary data. Gill's study in Mérida is in the same city, while the group histories in Schiller, Leary and Fernandes fit with the timeline for the historical development of participatory groups in Pueblo Nuevo described in the previous two chapters. Lallander's (2016) recent study into the effects of participation both as an example of and as contributing to shifting gender and race

politics is another useful reference point for the discussion of the role of identity within participatory politics.<sup>7</sup>

This body of literature also makes important contributions to debates about where Venezuela fits with regional patterns of democracy and populism, not least through attempts to describe the Venezuelan state and reconceptualise contemporary Venezuelan democracy. Part of the challenge with representing this transition is conceptualising democracy for the contemporary Venezuelan experience. Duffy (2012: 39) uses a Gramscian model of ‘democratic socialism’, arguing that the Chávez Government’s use of participative mechanisms to complement traditional representative democracy requires a redefinition of terms, employing Gandin and Apple’s (2002) distinction between “thin” and “thick” democracy, with the latter emphasising participative mechanisms and “a concern with political literacy, critical engagement and political action” (ibid: 40). Fernandes (2010: 234) similarly underlines the incompatibility of the language of ‘procedural democracy’ with the Venezuelan experience while Schiller (2011b: 36) reflects on a “crisis of categories” with reference to the Bolivarian project. The work of all three authors focuses on relating new, grassroots understandings of democracy with their corresponding “concrete struggles” (ibid) - the complex realities of participation in Venezuela and their evasive definitions.

The idea of a fundamental change in the characteristics of Venezuelan democracy also needs exploring, however. When Gill, for example, identifies a “stark contrast” between historical and contemporary exclusion in Venezuela, he appears to accept rather than investigate this contrast. I will argue in this thesis that analysis that connects with the studies on Mérida’s barrios (Hernández de Padrón 1998, 1999; Jugo Burguera 1976) reveals important areas of continuity in the present day.<sup>8</sup> Wilde does question Bolivarian narratives of dramatic change in Venezuelan democratic experiences, observing in particular the constraints on Communal

---

<sup>7</sup> The discussion of race, however, did not become part of the discussion of this thesis. This is due in part to the shared *mestizo* heritage of the population in Pueblo Nuevo, to the lack of references to race in the interviews I collected and finally to the lack of analysis of race in the historical studies of Mérida’s barrios.

<sup>8</sup> Again, it is Fernandes’ (2010) depiction of the “post-neoliberal state” that offers a more critical analysis of revolutionary governance. This is her central thesis: that a “hybrid” state has emerged that challenges the location of power in society and prioritises the protection of its poorest citizens, but that is ultimately subject to the constraints of global capital.

Councils deriving from the Bolivarian political-legal framework. In identifying a tensions between practice and rhetoric, Wilde provides the context to refine the binary in Bolivarian discourses between constituted-representative-liberal and constituent-participative-socialist democracy. As this binary is accepted in much of the academic literature (e.g. Azzellini 2010; 2013, Ciccariello-Maher 2013), Wilde's contribution shows the value of community studies for disturbing commonly accepted ideas about the political landscape in Venezuela.

To add to these studies, this thesis connects different kinds of evidence from Pueblo Nuevo with the historical material available, to identify not only inconsistencies in the practice and discourse of Chavista politics, but the continuity of some of the characteristics of the relationship between people and government from the pre-Chávez era. These continuities are not emphasised in the ethnographic studies described above, which largely accept the distinctiveness of the current period. Part of this work is about describing a community setting during a particularly interesting political moment, at a time when Chavistas and opositors in neighbouring communities were clashing in the streets and making international headlines, and Mérida City became a battleground for the debate over national politics. Pueblo Nuevo, therefore, where Chavistas and opositors work together for community change, and where local Chavistas are pragmatic in their strategies for securing support in a complex political environment, embodies some of the contradictions of Bolivarianism and some of the limits to the Chavista public narrative. This thesis discusses draws out these inconsistencies and continuities in part by connecting with analyses of the Bolivarian narrative that unpack thinking about political radicalism alongside thinking about marginality.

#### 4. Conclusion: precedents for thinking about the relationship of people and government in Pueblo Nuevo

During fieldwork, participatory politics sometimes meant mass rallies for the government, and at other times meant street shootouts between Chavistas and opposition vigilantes. Public services included the door-to-door, community-focused medical practice and the free cancer-treatment offered by Barrio Adentro, but also the under-funded and corrupt police system that has done little to stop escalating violent crime. Political rhetoric from the government included new

positive and empowering representations of barrio populations, and heavy-handed, essentialising representations of political adversaries. As Chavismo reaches middle age after fifteen years of the Bolivarian Revolution, understanding how the people like Gabriel experience the complex political culture in and around Pueblo Nuevo means drawing on precedents from the different kinds of literature that describe the relationship between people and government in Venezuela.

Throughout this thesis I try to describe those details which expose some of the contradictions and complexities of both community organising and day-to-day life in Pueblo Nuevo, including some that are not reflected in the existing literature on community organising in Venezuela. In making sense of these details, however, I draw on the three kinds of existing research into the politics of the Bolivarian Revolution described in this chapter. The analyses of the Bolivarian Public narrative provide a framework for mapping the intellectual landscape that is part of the political culture in and around Pueblo Nuevo. Whether or not, as Spanakos suggests (2008: 527), “in shaping not only what is discussed but how it is discussed, Chávez has changed the way that citizens interact with and dissect a concept of politics...”, this literature helps to make sense of the different accounts drawn on for the remainder of the thesis. An understanding of changes to Venezuela’s public institutions and to voting and other behaviours among the population also help to connect experiences from Pueblo Nuevo with the different ways that processes of Participatory Democracy have been discussed in the existing scholarship. In particular, it is the attempts to describe national experiences – including the idea of Venezuela political exceptionalism under Chávez - that provide the context for the study of one particular community in greater detail. Finally, the other ethnographic and community-based studies described above provide the sorts of details that help locate experiences and discourses from Pueblo Nuevo with similar experiences and discourse from barrio communities elsewhere in the country. These three bodies of literature together provide a framework for making sense of the different sorts of information collected during fieldwork.

These three literatures also help us to locate experiences of community organising from the Bolivarian Revolution among the political experiences and trajectories of poor urban communities from across Latin America. In each set of scholarship, it is the connection with different details from the pre-Chávez era that is especially

useful for understanding where Pueblo Nuevo fits in evolving processes of political change. There is a need for more studies that provide detailed, multi-level descriptions of contexts where participatory politics is thought to be happening differently, and where either new or reproduced discourses propose an alternative relationship between people and government.

## 5. Building belonging and negotiating positionality: a methodology for living and researching in Pueblo Nuevo

Gerardo frees the line from where it has snagged on a branch and tosses the good machete as far as he can up the cliff face towards us. He starts to climb hand over hand and I brace my feet against a tree root and take his weight on the wet rope. All four of us are covered in sweat now - not just the two *gringos*. The August sun is high overhead and the dappled shade of the giant tree we have set out to fell no longer offers any protection as it leans out over the edge of Pueblo Nuevo. Gerardo makes quick progress up the steep bank, his trainers scrabbling in the loose earth. Beyond him, the barrio drops away into the Albarregas valley: endless rows of tin roofs and in the distance the community radio aerial we have set out to clear a path for. The sound of a moto revving its way up Calle Principal cuts through the afternoon. From up here on the ridge it seems far, far away.

As he nears the top Gerardo motions to me with his head.

“It’s OK,” he says, looking up at me. “You can let go.”

Without thinking, I let go.

Gerardo’s shoulders shoot backwards *fast* and the rope runs around the tree trunk before I can grab it. He tumbles backwards down the hillside trailing the rope, performing at least two complete revolutions and disappearing from sight into a



chicken coup. He does not call out. The three of us share a worried look and Roberto begins to untie himself from his rope harness high up in the branches. It is my third day in Pueblo Nuevo.

Just now, I think, the barrio doesn't seem like such a good choice for a fieldwork site.

After what must have been only a moment, Gerardo appears from the chicken coup. He is dazed and sore, but apparently without any major injury to either him or the chickens. Joshua, the North American Barrio Adentro doctor, scrambles down the bank and gives Gerardo – and the chicken coup – a quick once over. I cling to a branch and look on, feeling helpless. Gerardo shrugs, brushes himself off and the four of us get back to work. Not long after we give up for the day, making some hasty repairs to the chicken coup and make our way, sore and tired, down the bank to the barrio. We drink milk together in the backroom that makes for a school library and reflect on our adventure.

Two long days working in the trees – dodging swinging sections of trunk and hauling bundles of branches – gave me a chance to build four relationships with four people who would become key participants for my study. On the hillside that day was Gerardo Lopez, the community activist who has participated in community politics in Pueblo Nuevo since his childhood in the 1970s. Gerardo gave me with not only a critical insight into the activities of the Communal Council Calle Principal, but also shared his carefully prepared history of barrio organising in the 1980s and early 1990s. Also there was Joshua Wilson, the community doctor; Roberto a local resident; and Miguel Parra, the local *mercalito*<sup>1</sup> and the joker in the adult high-school class I taught.

Taking part in these improvised *cayapas*<sup>2</sup> and building relationships with barrio residents like Gerardo and the others gave me the opportunity to build the relationships needed to be a temporary part of the community in Pueblo Nuevo. Along with my teaching work at the school and the simple act of moving to live in

---

<sup>1</sup> *Mercalitos* work in the 'MERCAL' subsidised food stores, selling goods and coordinating deliveries to hard-to-reach communities.

<sup>2</sup> The Guajiro word for collective action – *cayapa* – is used in Venezuela to describe examples of community collaboration, including in the name for Pueblo Nuevo's education collective, Fundación Cayapa.

the barrio, making a small contribution to community life would help build my barrio credibility, help me with the continuing process of negotiating access, and help build the friendships and networks to keep me safe there. These friendships, my involvement as a resident and participant in Pueblo Nuevo, and my identity and my personal politics also raise important questions about my research positionality.

### **Aims and structure of the chapter**

This chapter explains how the methodology used during fieldwork supports the analytical work of this thesis by building a detailed picture of community organising in and around Pueblo Nuevo. I discuss how this methodology feeds into and from my research positionality – as a non-Latin American outsider to Pueblo Nuevo, as a participant in various community groups, and as someone who is broadly sympathetic to the Bolivarian goals and ideology.

I begin by describing the process of negotiating research access to Pueblo Nuevo. I describe the challenges of living and researching in the community - including the need to adapt to 'barrio Spanish', negotiating the threat of violent crime, and working around my status as a foreign outsider. I describe how building the relationships and sense of belonging needed live and work in Pueblo Nuevo gave me the opportunity to build a detailed picture of community life as a counter-point to some of the essentialising narratives about Venezuela's urban poor. The chapter continues by discussing my role as a participant, connecting with debates about activist and scholarly forms of research (Schiller 2011a) and the idea of "militant ethnography" (Juris 2007). I explain how the use of a dialogical interview strategy (Ritchie & Lewis 2003:140 in Bell 2013) helped to some extent to give my research participants the opportunity to contest my changing reading of Pueblo Nuevo. Finally, I describe the particular political moment of research, providing a timeline for national and local events as my fieldwork and analysis unfolded. I reflect on the potential for political bias as a result of my sympathy for Bolivarianism, and describe how historical information is used in the thesis to ground my observations in the longer-term trajectory of community development.

## 1. Into the barrio: access, belonging and overcoming social separateness

There is a tradition of urban ethnographic research in Latin America that seeks to disturb essentialising notions about low-income urban communities by building detailed pictures of community life. By showing the complexities of local life, these studies move beyond folk concepts about the urban poor, using of thick description, personal histories and capturing the moments that disturb generalised expectations of poor urban life. Important examples include Scheper-Hughes (1992) and Goldstein's (2013) portraits of community life in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. These studies take up the urban ethnographer's task as described by Englund (2000) as being about documenting local knowledge practices as a reference points for understanding different local configurations of modernity. In this way, Auyero (2000) assesses the distinct political roles of local cultural representations in Villa Paraiso, Buenos Aires, while Perlman (1979) explores local culture as a means to challenge outside ideas about the *Myth of Marginality*. For Venezuela, this tradition has been continued during the Chávez era, with studies by Fernandes (2007, 2010), Schiller (2011, 2011a, 2011b) and most recently Wilde (2014, 2016). Each of these researchers made a temporary home in the country's barrio communities. In each case, activists' accounts are woven together with observations of everyday life to challenge assumptions about community participation. For my research, this access was about understanding how the day-to-day processes of community organising in Pueblo Nuevo connect with representations of barrio residents as *malandros*, revolutionaries and the other overlapping identities of the urban poor discussed in the thesis so far.

A challenge with this research approach is in gaining safe access to the sorts of communities that outsiders usually fear to visit. In gaining this access, in being accepted, these researchers tread the line between witness and participant, between researcher and friend. Intertwined with this involving research process is a complex analytical task - to coordinate the use of different kinds of information from the wealth of rich material of people's lives. These were the challenges in living and doing research in Pueblo Nuevo.

### **Choosing and being chosen: negotiating access to Pueblo Nuevo**

For this ethnographic approach, choosing a community is a defining moment in the research process. I visited Venezuela in December 2012 for a month's scoping trip with the hope of identifying a suitable field site. Chávez was in hospital in Cuba, fighting the last weeks of his battle with cancer. After landing in Caracas I took the night bus to Mérida to meet the British journalist and political activist Paul Dobson and to observe the Governor's elections with a political insider. Arriving in the city, I was struck by the way campaign slogans competed for space, not least what seemed like particularly ironic promises from the Chavista candidate, Alexis Ramirez, to "clean up Mérida" - written in six-foot high graffiti letters. I would learn that much of the pro-Venezuelan Communist Party (PCV) graffiti had been painted by Paul and his comrades - supporters of Florencio Porras and the "revolution within the Revolution" from Venezuela's traditional communist party. I also learned that Mérida was one of only a handful of states where a PCV competitor was put forward against the PUSV candidate. It was clear that this was a city where the simplified narrative of Bolivarianism - of Chavista against *opositor* - had another level of complexity.<sup>3</sup>

The city, with its mix of middle class neighbourhoods and poorer areas, also provides a site for the encounter of two kinds of urban populations. I remember very clearly walking with a new Venezuelan friend over the Campo Elias Bridge one evening that first week. I was called to by a group of young men hanging out on the street corner: "Hey blondie, come talk to us". The fearful reaction from my friend, Victoria, shocked me, as she quickened her pace and crossed the four-lane highway to avoid the group, not slowing down until we were safely home. "You don't understand," she said. "They come from *down there*. From the barrio under the bridge. There is no law down there. They are killers." I didn't know it at the time, but down there, under the Albarregas Bridge, the road winds down to the southern entrance of Pueblo Nuevo.

---

<sup>3</sup> Florencio Porras, a former PSUV Governor of Mérida State lost this election, giving an emotive concession speech to a small packed with his supporters. I watched from the back of the hall, getting my first taste of impassioned Venezuelan-style political rhetoric. Despite his loss, in running against the Chavista candidate, Porras gave voice to the dissatisfaction that was already growing on the left of the Chavista party coalition, the Grand Patriotic Pole.

From that moment, the notorious community under the bridge that scared my friend so much had my attention. During this scoping trip, I had become concerned about the difficulty of gaining access to Venezuela's barrios. Chavistas I had met boasted about the political radicalism of barrio communities, but the fear of these communities was tangible. Although I had made contacts who were involved in community organising in one way or another, all rarely ventured into the barrio communities. Already I was seeing how the fear of the barrios was a barrier not only for researchers but for any outsider to understand what life was like in Venezuela's poorer urban communities.

Back in the UK, I began to look for local organisations that were already working in barrio communities as a means of finding gatekeepers to cross the divide. I came across the video *La Escuelita: barrio Pueblo Nuevo's Alternative School* on YouTube (see Appendix Two).<sup>4</sup> This grainy video also was my first introduction to several people who would become my colleagues, friends and the key research participants for the next year and a half. Looking back now, they are almost all there in that video – Gerardo, Janeath, Joshua, Lisbeide, Pichi, Tamara, Myriam and many of the young people I worked with at La Escuelita. This group, with a few new additions, would form the start of my network in Pueblo Nuevo.

In July 2013, I arrived in Venezuela to begin fieldwork with a hunch that Pueblo Nuevo would be my field site. By then, Chávez was dead and Nicolas Maduro had been elected President. I headed to Mérida and again relied on Paul Dobson – this time to make contact with Tamara Pearson, a journalist for Venezuela Analysis who also volunteered with Fundación Cayapa. At my first meeting with the teaching staff at Fundación Cayapa I described my project and asked for access to the school as a research site. This initial conversation would become the blueprint for how I would describe my project to each new person or group I accessed throughout fieldwork. In as simple words as I could, I said that I had come to Venezuela because I had

---

<sup>4</sup> This video explains the work of the barrio's famous "little school" – *la Escuelita* – run by Fundación Cayapa, in barrios across the country. It describes the challenges the school's students face in adjusting to the educational culture outside of the barrio. A second video, *El Sabado de la Basura* – "The Saturday of the Refuse" – takes the camera outside the school. It shows the barrio during a moment of spontaneous collective action, when residents came together to organise refuse collection when city authorities. Both provide an excellent sense of the community.

heard that many communities were making progress in new forms of participation. In my explanation, I sought to distance myself from the sorts of research that look for solutions to local problems, saying that instead that I had come to learn about forms of community-led development from groups like Cayapa.<sup>5</sup> As with each time I described my research, I made sure to explain that in telling the story of the barrio and its organisations, I would talk about both “the good and the bad”. On the advice of Tamara and Joshua, I also described my work history and voluntary experiences and offered to contribute to the project in various ways, including teaching music and English language classes.

At that first meeting, the teaching staff at Cayapa were very positive in their response to my research itself. I didn’t know at the time, but Gerardo Lopez was already involved in documenting the history of organising in Pueblo Nuevo.<sup>6</sup> I also didn’t know that in that first meeting, half of the people I was speaking to were outsiders themselves – several were students from outside of Pueblo Nuevo, who had had this same experience as me, in some cases only recently. The teaching staff mentioned several ongoing projects, including the work of the council to address local flooding. Despite this receptiveness to my research on its own terms, it was the commitment I made to help with the work of the school that would shape my research approach. After Chacko (2004: 60) I had come to see my own contribution to Pueblo Nuevo as a means not just of ‘giving back’ to the population at my field site, but of empowering my participants within the researcher-participant relationship.<sup>7</sup> While in retrospect this seems like an overly transactional way think about data collection, it would be this work in the community that would help me build belonging and trust among the residents and to some extent achieve the status of what Sherif (2001) describes as a “partial insider”.

### **Moving to the barrio: earning trust and building belonging**

---

<sup>5</sup> It is possible that presenting my work like this may have made the people I spoke to eager to show the best things about their work, but this is something that was already the case, and is the case to some extent with all of the voluntary and charitable organisations I have worked with over the years, regardless of my relationship with them.

<sup>6</sup> Gerardo completed this study as part of an academic assignment. It forms part of my history of the barrio in Chapter Three.

<sup>7</sup> Chacko (2004: 60) writes about the importance of “fostering mutually rewarding relationships” as part of disrupting researcher-participant power dynamics.

Within the week I had moved to the barrio to live with my new Venezuelan family - Marleny, Jose-Luís and Marco Angelo-Quintero. The four of us made a tiny household by the over-crowded standards of Pueblo Nuevo, where some buildings of the same size house several families. This was evidence of a scale of wealth and privilege in the community, ranging down to the hastily-constructed lean-tos clinging to the hillside above Simon Bolívar. Living with the Angelo-Quinteros would provide me with a different perspective from most of my research participants - many of whom were connected with either the school or the various community organisations in and around the barrio. My host family were a different source of gossip from around the community, while their political views helped me to develop an idea of the complexity of political perspective in Pueblo Nuevo, and eventually to begin to challenge notions about the political radicalism of barrio residents (see discussion in Chapter Six).

Soon after moving into the barrio, I began volunteer work with the staff and the other volunteers at La Escuelita. I started out helping with arts and music workshops that took the place of the regular school sessions during the break between semesters,<sup>8</sup> and continued by helping - or more accurately hindering - our expedition described at the start of the chapter, to fell the trees that blocked the signal for the community radio signal. This minor role gave me access to Cayapa's weekly planning meetings, which I would diligently record to much hilarity among the staff, who would make jokes for the benefit of my Dictaphone which I would only appreciate on listening back on my return to the UK. In the coming months, my role would develop, and I would contribute more at meetings, take on more responsibilities with the young people, and eventually design and teach research skills sessions for the new adult high school class.

More importantly, this growing role at the school gave me a certain status in the community. For the students, and eventually for their friends and neighbours, I was now known simply as *profe* - or "teacher". I was now another of the strange group of students from outside the barrio who had moved into Pueblo Nuevo to work at La Escuelita. This status allowed me to tap into the respect for teachers that exists

---

<sup>8</sup> These sessions were hosted by two Argentinean volunteers who were touring community projects across the continent. Like Joshua, they gave me both an example of how to integrate and were able to offer some frank advice about staying safe in the community.

across Latin America, where education is highly valued. Most importantly, it aligned me with Joshua and Tamara, other non-Latin American outsiders whose reputations had been built over time. It also distinguished me from the only other foreigners who visited the community - the occasional few who came looking to buy drugs.<sup>9</sup>

Along with living in the barrio and participating in the life of the community, this association with the school was my passport to living safely in Pueblo Nuevo. Although the period of heightened gang violence and nightly street shootouts had now passed (see Chapter Five), the barrio is still considered to be a “red zone” - off-limits to most non-residents. Police were never seen in Pueblo Nuevo. Even the political graffiti that covers every wall in the city stops at the edge of the barrio. During the anti-government protests, neighbourhood kids turned a profit letting commuter traffic use the cut-through to get across the Albarregas valley to the city centre from the richer suburbs to the West of the city – but even the right-wing militia were unwilling to extend their *guarimba* roadblocks into the barrio.

Representations of Pueblo Nuevo as a dangerous place were not only made by people outside of the barrio. Fears about the activities of the groups of so-called *malandros* could be seen in the self-imposed curfews and in the advice that I was regularly given about keeping safe. People in the community also talked about the deaths that had happened in recent years, and most people knew a relative or neighbour who had been caught up in the gang violence. Scores of people were said to have been killed during the worst of the violence, although only one murder happened near my house in the time that I lived there. Staff at the Ambulatorio reported treating the wounds from other shootings in Pueblo Nuevo during the same period, but local rumours of street shootouts during fieldwork were always vague and uncorroborated.

My strategy to stay safe in Pueblo Nuevo was based on increasing my familiarity among people in the community. I worked at the school, stayed strictly to the areas that I became known in and made sure to greet as many people publicly as possible. I made sure to spend time in the barrio walking with the young people I knew,

---

<sup>9</sup> I heard this, although I never saw any.



chatting publicly with the community leaders, always taking care to be seen shaking hands with the residents who sat out in front of their houses on my way to teach class. I became part of in-jokes. I was a regular climbing frame for some children, while others would sit on their shoes to hide them and ask for money to buy new ones. I was someone to share a sly slug of rum with on a street corner or the visiting 'German' who might take residents back to Europe in his suitcase. Gradually, I found I was known to council members and parents, to the adult students I taught, to my various participants and to residents I have never spoken to by sight and reputation. I sheltered with Goyo when the street flooded and he was stranded in his wheelchair on Calle Principal, sold the famous Angulo-Quintero ice creams from our front gate, and was deloused with oil and vinegar in solidarity with the children who were infested with head lice.

On the few occasions I was mistaken for a complete outsider, I was met with hostility. On these occasions I would simply say "I live *there* on La Cuesta, I work *there* at the school, teaching the children." At this, straight way I was "*profe*" again and thanked for my contribution. Slightly trickier were those occasions where participating in the social rituals of the community meant compromising the identify I was constructing - for example choosing between swigging rum with the old men on the street and maintaining a professional, child-friendly persona.

### **Partial Outsider: social exclusion turned inside-out**

Even with this network and strategy, I nevertheless felt extremely limited in my movement around the barrio. My colleagues assured me that, whilst I was known to be part of the La Escuelita, I would be safe. They warned me, however, not to visit Simon Bolivar alone, and I took this to count for the back streets of Pueblo Nuevo too - the streets where I had never been seen before, and did not know who to . For reason, my zone of movement - if alone - was basically around the cross streets, La Cuesta, where I lived and Calle Principal, where I worked, and those streets that joined these streets to the different entrances to the barrio. This area takes in the majority of the barrio, and is a good deal further than the Angulo-Quinteros would venture - into the firing line for Simon Bolivar, from where long-range pot shots would be taken down into Pueblo Nuevo at least as recently ago as 2010 (interview w JW, 31.05.14, SB). I thought about my sphere of movement in terms of who I

trusted to know the community best – picking up clues here and there about where I might be safe.

Of course, I was still told by anyone I met outside the barrio that I would be killed by the local *malandros* sooner or later. This constant reminder felt disempowering, especially when I broke my own rules by venturing out at night for community meetings or to meet activist friends in the bars they drank at in the city centre. On these occasions, I would ask taxi drivers to drive me home, and more often they would speed off as soon as I mentioned the address.<sup>10</sup> On these occasions I would walk home cursing my poor judgment. How much any risk to my personal safety was a figment of my imagination I will never know. Certainly, I was not the only community member who was worried about violent crime at night, when and my friends at the CCCP would encourage me to “hurry home” from meetings. These fears, it is now clear, were probably disproportionate - a hangover from more dangerous days, remembered by the people had lived through or heard about them. Like Wilde (2016, personal communication), however, security concerns did present a practical limit to my data collection.

I developed a certain bravado about living in a red zone, and came to enjoy the reactions from *Merideños* who had never set foot in Pueblo Nuevo when I told them where I lived. I also began to work these powerful feelings – of fear and bravado – into my understanding of the social separateness of the community. It seems clear that my struggle with the mythology of fear that exists around Pueblo Nuevo was something I was able to overcome by drawing on different kinds of social capital that are not available to all Venezuelans. I could afford to rent a room in one of the nicer homes in the barrio, I had the social skills and the network to connect with Fundación Cayapa, and I had a story and a persona that fitted with the other successful immigrants to the barrio, Joshua and Tamara. I began to think, therefore, in terms that turned social exclusion on its head. Although many residents of Pueblo Nuevo rarely left the community, they do visit the centre of Mérida on occasion, while my middle class friends from the city would never set foot in Pueblo Nuevo. In this respect, ideas about the “defensible space” – understood as the

---

<sup>10</sup> During the heightened street violence in 2014 (see Chapter Six) when walking the streets was particularly dangerous, I remember asking as many as ten – I later learned that the rumour that a taxi driver had been beheaded in Pueblo Nuevo was the problem here.

protection offered by the built environment and gated communities (Tijerino 1998) – can be to some extent turned on their head. Pueblo Nuevo’s reputation offers a kind of defence against the supposedly more “civilised” (ibid) outsiders from the city centre. It is this difficulty in even setting foot in the barrio that in part explains the prevalence of the sorts of preconceptions discussed in the thesis so far.

Despite becoming a familiar part of the community, my different identity characteristics also limited my interactions with some community members. It was unusual simply that I had not lived in Pueblo Nuevo my whole life – while some residents grow up and leave the community, far fewer arrive. In my case, I was not only not from Pueblo Nuevo, but I was white, foreign, educated, and wealthy. Language was a particular challenge. It took time to adjust to the heavy accent and vernacular of ‘barrio Spanish’. This meant missing parts of conversations and bluffing my way through some exchanges or sitting, confused at the edges of meetings. I off-set this by using a Dictaphone and by following up on group conversations with one-to-one conversations, where I was able to control the pace of communication.

It was also a curiosity that I was single and without children at thirty years old. Again, I was able to off-set this to some extent with my behaviours. For example, it was particularly important that I lived in the barrio and with a Venezuelan family, rather than in the centre with other foreigners or students. These sets of characteristics and behaviours made me a contradictory character: the naïve gringo idealist who instead of enjoying his privilege with a young family in Europe had displaced himself to live in Pueblo Nuevo, single and in danger. I was associated with the Venezuelan white upper class, European colonialism and, mistakenly, with United States neo-imperialism. While I was able to disrupt this in part, for example by sharing my politics and taking on the difficult work at La Escuelita, I am sure that I was always seen as privileged and different.

This sense of being different would shape my research. I found my relationships with participating community members much easier to foster as familiarity was built through shared work experiences. I found that my social network began to mirror those of my colleagues. My social network was also gendered, as men were much more comfortable to talk in the street or spend time alone together.

For all of my familiarity and my growing network of people who knew me as a colleague and friend, I also felt a certain sense of unease throughout my time living in Pueblo Nuevo. It puzzled me for a long time how much it still “cost me” - as Venezuelans say - to live in the barrio. I gradually became aware of the profound way that the threat of violence shaped my reality, but also my research. This unease was offset in important ways by the sense of belonging I nurtured with the Angulo-Quintero family that I lived with, the warmth with which I was accepted by my various friends in the barrio and above all with the staff and students at Cayapa. By working in the collective, I felt that I saw a side to the community that many residents did not. I gained close personal friendships, overcame difficulties, made mistakes and rectified some of them and learned community development strategies from a group of teachers who are brave and humble and always learning themselves. Above all, it was the differences between the various, complex people I came to know in Pueblo Nuevo that helped shape my analysis of the limited ways that barrio populations are represented in Venezuela.

## 2. Participation, politics and dialogue: managing different types of interactions in and around Pueblo Nuevo

As an outsider to Pueblo Nuevo, I also brought with me my assumptions about the barrio and the people who lived there – assumptions that connected with narratives of both emancipation and marginality. Two connected parts of my methodology helped to uncover the sorts of information that would enable me to disturb these assumptions. These were i) my own participation in community life and organising, and ii) the use of a dialogical interview strategy.

### **Participation and observation: activist or scholarly research?**

My roles as a resident and a teacher in Pueblo Nuevo gave me the opportunity to use participant observation to take detailed notes about day-to-day community life, community events, Communal Council meetings, and the different projects carried out at La Escuelita and in the CEDECOL community development centre. These occasions also provided the opportunity to hear the ways that these different groups or events were talked about by participants, both during meetings and more often in informal conversations at the edges of meetings. By participating in this

way, I became aware of some of the tensions around community organising in and around Pueblo Nuevo. Through planning meetings at Cayapa, I was able to observe the sense of autonomy enjoyed by the teaching staff, and collect information for the case study of their community-centred approach undertaken in Chapter Eight. I was also able to observe the participation of members of more notorious crime families, and the subtle ways teaching staff were able to build trust and offer support. Through attending meetings of the Communal Council Calle Principal, I was able to document decreasing participation, and observe the limits to group activity described in Chapter Six. By participating in thirty city-level meetings, I was able to observe limits to their membership and their consultation practices, as described in Chapter Seven.

My role as a teacher and participant also meant that I would act on my field site. My role as a teacher at Cayapa meant bringing new, external knowledge and experiences to share with members of the community. This included sharing specialist knowledge by teaching classes that touched on social science research skills, world history, basic nutrition and music. These classes were all participative and focused on using existing student ideas and knowledge as a base for collective learning. In planning meetings, I sought to contribute from drawing on my own experience working within different organisations in the UK and by sharing some broad insights from my early research observations during meetings and in private. This was welcomed by my co-workers and in most spaces was an informal condition for my access.

An important decision early on was whether to share information about different opportunities for participation. The Spinetti Dini Parochial Assembly began in October 2014. As a collective planning meeting for around twenty five Communal Councils, it was an opportunity to propose new projects as part of a system of public consultation. On finding that local groups in Pueblo Nuevo were not aware of the opportunity I considered how in sharing this information I would *change* the way information was shared and bias one of my key research interests. Following consultation with my department I finally shared the information, finding in this case that the act did not shape participation as other barriers to participation, including certain attitudes about and within the space, held out. On sharing the information, and after only a few weeks in the community, my colleagues suggested

that, as opposed to attending themselves, “you go and propose a project - you know what our needs are”. I attended the ‘working table’ sessions and made proposals for building repairs that were never followed up. This first dilemma, therefore, was important for the progression of my thinking by exposing how barriers to participation that were not only about information sharing. It also allowed me to reflect on the efficacy of the Parochial Assembly and on my own role within Cayapa. In turn, this gave me an opportunity to experience the ongoing efforts to negotiate the needs of Cayapa by other means - in part to ‘live the story’ (Connelly and Clandinin 1990) of participation in Pueblo Nuevo.

This active role connects with a debate from the literature on participation in Venezuela. In reflecting on her own ethnographic work in Venezuela’s barrios, Schiller (2011: 256) distinguishes “scholarly and activist categories of analysis and practice”. In the ‘activist’ camp, Schiller (2001: 257) includes those researchers who are sympathetic to the revolutionary process in Venezuela, observing that their work is often typified by shift of focus away from the top-down tendencies of the Bolivarian system to the successes of community participation. Along with Fernandes, Duffy and Wilde, her work contains the normative undertones and employs the kind of “politically engaged and collaborative form of participant observation” that for Juris (2007: 164) constitutes a ‘militant ethnography’. Following Juris, I hope that my presence and questioning has contributed to activist “(self-) reflection regarding movement goals, tactics, strategies, and organizational forms” (Juris 2007: 165). I share Juris’s (*ibid*: 165) view of the need for researchers “to build long-term relationships of mutual commitment and trust, become entangled with complex relations of power, and live the emotions associated with direct action”. Most notably during fieldwork, this happened with Cayapa, where I was able to in some ways share in the emotional highs and lows of community work.

Despite these similarities with activist research, identifying these competing ‘camps’ feels like a limiting response to the important question of positionality. It implies stable roles that don’t fit with the dynamic, changing roles of a researcher who is immersed in a field site; an immersion that is differently experienced from moment to moment, and where the contribution I was able to make to discussions and activities was usually accompanied by a certain scholarly reflection. During

fieldwork, however, it was not only my role as participant or researcher that was in tension, but also my personal politics – especially in the highly-charged political environment during the period of anti-government protests in the Spring of 2014. In some cases, the public discussion of my political position was a condition of my access. At both the *Sala de Batalla* and *Frente Vanguardia* meetings, for example, I presented myself formally to the groups and fielded direct questions about my project. This included addressing concerns about my links to potentially hostile government organisations and specifically the CIA. These were questions that drew on assumptions about my identity and that came out of a particularly tense period of what some Chavistas feared was “US-backed destabilisation” in the city. In this respect, my political views were more exposed than they might have in a field site that was less sensitive to party-political preferences. Again, this experience was shared, as related suspicions were also applied to other new members.

This commitment to greater openness, however, does not mean to say that my self-presentation was always consistent. Like other participants in these spaces, I was involved in a process of managing my self-image to gain access and acceptance. This included often emphasising the fact that I lived and worked in Pueblo Nuevo. As a resident, I was technically a constituent for territorially-based groups like the Parochial Assembly, while association with a barrio that was believed to be both dangerous and politically radical attracted a lot of respect among Chavistas.<sup>11</sup> This also drew my attention to some of the folk concepts that had evolved around Pueblo Nuevo. A more distanced approach where I had attempted to avoid sharing anything about my personal politics would certainly have hindered my access. Trust and solidarity are powerful currencies among Chavista groups which are alert to what they see as the risk of “infiltration” by non-Chavistas and which use word-of-mouth to communicate activities and meeting dates and times. In addition to showing broad support for Bolivarian socialism, at other times voicing honest criticism of the government seemed important for establishing myself as somebody who had a sense of what was happening in Venezuela.

### **Reflecting on my shifting politics**

---

<sup>11</sup> This strategy was reflected in the self-presentation of others, including the Director for Comunas who emphasised his childhood in Caracas’s famous *23 de Enero* barrio during our interview.

Like many of the researchers studying participatory politics in Venezuela's barrios during the Chávez era, I became interested in the Bolivarian Revolution because of my personal politics. I came to focus on participatory approaches that propose an alternative to so-called "top-down", mainstream development. For me, the Bolivarian ideology of participatory democracy talked about the sort of pro-poor social transformation – giving local people the opportunity to challenge the status quo, reintroducing the politics. This sympathy with the romantic Chavista narrative is a potential barrier to reflecting on the narrative of Bolivarianism. As discussed in Chapter Two, work that is written from a solidarity perspective can offer a limited analysis –including those commentaries written from within the narrative of Bolivarianism, rather than analysing it. At an early stage I decided, rather than to deny my political subjectivity, it would be better to engage with it and share this openly when explaining my research to my participants and in my writing.

Before I began fieldwork, I tried to reflect honestly about how my politics might influence my research:

“(I)t would satisfy me personally to find evidence of equitable and fairer social functioning, of tangible results delivered by collaborative action, and of a shift in attitudes towards solidarity and collective benefit (...) This bias has the potential to arise as a preference for accounts that are sympathetic to the revolutionary process, either through my sampling, questioning or analysis. By looking specifically at different experiences and excluded voices, however, I set out to encounter those that contradict my own perspective and that challenge my assumptions.”<sup>12</sup>

Before fieldwork, I was optimistic about uncovering evidence of the kind of ‘social transformation’ Chávez talked about, towards more participatory kind of politics. Each time I returned from Venezuela, I felt that my idealism had been confronted by what I had seen in and around Pueblo Nuevo. I had begun to question the PSUV's commitment to constructing rival poles of democratic authority, and had a growing concern with the manipulation of ‘the popular’ as an ill-defined source of legitimacy

---

<sup>12</sup> This paragraph is an extract from my procedural upgrade paper, written in 2013.



for party and government. I was also concerned that the narrative of class conflict had potential not only to include those at the bottom of society, but to stoke antagonism and to exclude people from all classes who didn't share the Chavista perspective. In the end, the bias I felt coming through was not a sense of rose-tinting community participation, but more a desire to call out those centralising or top-down tendencies that I was observing.

In some ways this shift facilitated the development of the analytical work of the thesis. It was as my observations confronted my assumptions about Bolivarianism, I began to think more critically about the intellectual landscape of Bolivarianism and consider the role of folk concepts about the urban poor. This also meant a shift in my own analytical language. In describing local processes I moved away from the sort of highly normative labels that I had been echoing from within Bolivarian discourses that boast of 'dialogical' 'inclusive' 'collective' 'protagonistic' or 'constituent' forms of democracy. Instead, I began moving towards a common sense description of the specific situations that I was observing. Again, this echoes Englund and Leach's (2000) challenge to avoid "abstractions" that seek to conflate local experiences within wider social processes. This emphasis also meant finding reference points for my analysis less in the contemporary analyses of the Revolution, and more in the historical literature about community organising in Pueblo Nuevo and Mérida's other barrios (see especially Ray 1969, Burguera 1974 and Hernández de Padrón 1998 and 1999, Buxton 1999, see especially Chapters Four and Five).

My shifting subjectivities were also an ethical consideration during fieldwork. Many of my Chavista friends and participants quickly categorised me as a 'political ally'. During this process of self-presentation, I was also conscious of the risk of misleading my participants by framing my research as a solidarity activity. For this reason, I tried to expose my political preferences by talking about my own experiences and attitudes with reference to politics in the UK or international questions of social justice, rather than only with reference to contemporary Venezuela. In this way I was able to present more informed, considered and stable opinions and find a way of sharing without committing to any fixed local political ideal. I also took care to assure my participants that I would write about 'the bad things too' when I introduced my work at meetings or before interviews. In

response, I was often encouraged simply to “describe how it really is”. Despite this reassurance. I saw the fairest strategy as using one that would include the voices of my participants and give them the opportunity to respond to some of my early analysis.

### **Interview and dialogue: towards more collaborative story-telling**

Living in Pueblo Nuevo also meant continuing observations outside of participatory spaces, recording events, feelings and snippets of conversations in a field diary and rarely moving fully outside of the researcher role. This process gives opportunities to encounter the texture and detail of life that more temporally-constrained methods may miss. By living with the Angulo-Quinteros, by playing chess in the street with Jesús, by visiting the church with Mani, I was able to observe the parts of life that go on away from the processes of community participation – and separate to the narrative of embattled Chavismo. In this way, both participating and simply living in Pueblo Nuevo also gave me the opportunity to collect a range of interviews within which to reflect on what I was observing in Pueblo Nuevo.

During fieldwork, I collected around sixty unstructured interviews and hundreds of informal conversations with residents of Pueblo Nuevo and other communities in Mérida, and with participants from groups in and around the barrio. Together, different accounts from these interviews contribute to what I hope approaches what Reissman (2002: 218) describes as a process of interwoven, collaborative storytelling.

These interviews provided opportunities for people to describe their experiences in and around Pueblo Nuevo in their own words. I tried to treat each participant as an expert in some facet of community life – although I planned questions for each participant, I allowed interview topics to shift as I gained a better understanding of what a participant had particular knowledge of, or where they held views that I found interesting. In this way, the spokesmen at the Communal Council Calle Principal, offered their theories for low attendance at meetings. Teachers at Cayapa described the challenges of working with the Education Board, or compared their work to that of the new Bolivarian schools. Officials in the various government departments I visited gave accounts of the challenges of overcoming grassroots infighting. As these participants sought to theorise their experiences, they often

reproduced the different folk concepts outlined in the thesis so far - although their accounts of their lived experiences often served to challenge these same notions.

In eliciting these views and accounts, I used a dialogical interview style. According to Ritchie & Lewis (2003:140 in Bell 2013:115-116), this is where:

“... the researcher feels free to step outside the formal role of the neutral asker of questions, expressing their own feelings and giving information about themselves ...”

I employed this principle during private conversations, meetings and at work and during formal interviews as a means of building trust and acceptance and as a means of exposing my thinking to my participants so that my interpretations could be contested. This was also part of a desire to make exchanges fairer through reciprocal sharing of ideas and to subvert something of my researcher power (see also Chacko 2004: 60).

This also meant sharing my own early analysis as it developed. In particular, this meant exploring sensationalised ideas about *malandros*, *revolucionarios* and other folk concepts where they arose in conversation. A particular focus was in asking participants to explain their notions of “*el pueblo*”. Different people made use of the term “the people”, in describing groups and processes. From these different accounts, and by raising the notion as a topic for discussion, it was possible to uncover the broad range of conceptions discussed in Chapter Five, unpacking shifting ideas about the class, wealth, nationality and of what I came to see as a hypothetical constituent group for the Bolivarian Revolution that connects with different folk concepts about the urban poor.

Like Bell (2013), therefore, I found that the responses and subsequent exchanges from a dialogical approach “led to important insights”. A specific example was during my interview with Gabriella Verón (interview w GV, 14.04.14, MC). This was an interview that started off as a fairly closed discussion of her experiences with the evangelical church, the *Iglesia Jeruslen*. When we first met in the church itself, Gabriella knew very little about my attitudes to religion. Early in the interview Gabriella asked me about my own experiences with religion, and my unplanned response indicated my concerns about spiritual authority. It is from this point, however, that Gabriella opened up, giving a rich account of her own historic

problems with authority within the church that also emphasises the humility and openness of the current leadership. The sequence of our accounts presents a challenge for analysis: is her account a 'response' to my own? Is it designed to convince me or to 'match' with my story?

It is not entirely possible to resolve these questions. The part of Gabriella's interview that concerns her personal experience is full of concrete details and fits with reflections of other congregation members. Beyond this, I am committed to the idea of openness with my participants. If a participant prefers to shape their story in line with their immediate social interests (during the interview) or around a certain ideology, this is a process that I would prefer to be informed by more accurate rather than assumed information about my own response. In Gabriella's case, I was left with a rich account that can be considered in the context of these details. These moments of honesty and openness - of dialogue that was less guarded and information sharing that was reciprocal - were essential to building rapport with people and to improving my understanding of the subjectivities of their accounts.

This process was helped by developing familiarity between myself and my research participants over time. The majority of my formal interviews were conducted in the last three months of data collection. This strategy was designed to give me the maximum insight possible into my participants and to use this insight to shape my questioning and my understanding of their subjectivities as well as provide context of their accounts and responses. By the time of my final interviews I had known some of my participants for as long as a year and a half. With some, this meant working with them regularly, overcoming professional challenges, knowing family and personal histories and debating my key research interests informally on many occasions.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> In terms of sequencing my research period, delaying interviews in this way was a risk. It was unnerving to wait and develop a relationship but potentially miss out on an interview. As I left and returned to Pueblo Nuevo three times, this increased trust and familiarity but also meant losing touch with some participants and even spaces as the environment changed over time. One example of this was the Sala de Batalla, which ceased activities during the period of unrest throughout the spring of 2014 due to concerns about potential attacks from opposition protesters.

This familiarity enabled me to prepare interview questions that moved quickly beyond surface detail. I would typically start with open-ended personal history questions to help the participant feel at ease and to access detail that had not come up in everyday or work conversations. From here I would work through a series of questions tailored around what I knew of the person's attitudes and experiences already, often returning to themes I had been planning to discuss for some months or that has been discussed in depth on previous occasions. I tried to let interviews follow a 'natural' course, most often using discussions around a shared space to encourage more personal reactions and reflections to concrete examples of organisation functioning.

This process meant establishing emotional connections with participants that means they are friend first and interviewee second. In this context 'researcher' and 'research participant' were roles we were fulfilling on a temporary basis, although this sort of social integration means the edges between research and social life were thoroughly blurred.

### 3. Using historical evidence to reflect on a particular political moment

In December 2013, following the end of my first stint of fieldwork in Pueblo Nuevo, I arrived by moto-taxi at one of the grandest hotels in Caracas. I was wearing the thick beard I had been growing in the barrio and carrying my beaten-up backpack that had accompanied me overland from Ushuaia to Cartagena back in 2006. The other hotel guests were arriving in expensive cars, dressed in suits or dresses. Around fifty of us made up a delegation of international observers - guests of the National Electoral Commission (CNE) at the "8 D" national municipal elections.

Following Chávez's final victory in the Presidential Elections of November 2012, nationwide State elections in December 2012 and Nicolas Maduro's narrow win in April 2013, our hosts were well drilled for the fourth series of national elections in a little over twelve months. For the next week, we were treated like diplomats. With senior officials from election ministries across the continent and as far afield as South Africa, and human rights lawyers from the United States, we took breakfast by the pool in the spacious grounds, the sun shining on the steep hillsides in the

distance where houses competed for space in the capital's many barrios. After Pueblo Nuevo, the luxury was surreal – from the air-conditioned hallways and the expensive dinners, to the helipad outside my room window.<sup>14</sup>

A visit to polling stations in the city's barrios brought these two worlds together. On the day of the election, our delegation swept across the capital in our coach, headed for the famous barrio 23 de Enero. I had heard the name of the community throughout my reading on Venezuelan popular politics and Chavismo where it is famous for having the most militant sorts of grassroots politics in both the pre-Chávez era and during the Bolivarian Revolution (see Ciccariello-Maher 2013: 22-28). For our visit, we were accompanied by secret service agents with earpieces and flanked by a 'flying V' of military outriders who carved apart the thick Caracas traffic. Cars screeched to a halt and our bus forced its way down the highways that span the city. We inched up the steeper roads to the famous barrio, the neighbourhoods we might not dare to visit rolling past behind the tinted glass. At the polling station we were watched with curiosity by the voters, chatted with local officials for the television cameras, and whisked away to our next location.<sup>15</sup>

Part of the analytical work of this thesis is in seeing past the "spectacle" of national politics in Venezuela (Uzcategui 2010), to improve on the fleeting glimpses of Venezuela's unseen barrios and the politicised representations of communities like 23 de Enero and Pueblo Nuevo. This meant two tasks: i) developing a critical understanding of the particular political moment of the fieldwork period, and ii) developing an appreciation of the barrio's history to be able to reflect analytically on Bolivarian claim that a social transformation has taken place under Chavismo.

### **Connecting with national politics**

Connecting studies of participatory politics with national processes is commonplace in the regional literature, as changes in government have led to changes in how community organising is practised and thought about. For this

---

<sup>14</sup> Our days were filled with activities designed to provide us with the evidence to prove the fairness of the electoral system – a priority for both Chávez and now Maduro, who seem to see an electoral system beyond repute as part of their armoury against foreign intervention.

<sup>15</sup> Back in Pueblo Nuevo, I was briefly famous, having been glimpsed on TV, meeting Tibisay Lucena, the head of the CNE.

thesis, national political events overlapping with the fieldwork period between late 2012 and 2014 helped to show how national politics is and isn't important for residents of Pueblo Nuevo. The timeline below shows how national events progressed during fieldwork.

National Events	2012	Research Progress
Chávez wins a 4th Presidential Term with 55.07% of the vote	November	Initial reading, making contact with solidarity groups, met with Venezuela Solidarity Campaign in London and Diana Raby in Norwich.
Nationwide Municipal Elections – another victory for Chavismo, but Chávez returns to Cuba for cancer treatment	December	Scoping trip to Venezuela, including observing the municipal election period in Mérida
<b>2013</b>		
Chávez misses his Presidential inauguration, solidarity march in Caracas	January	I attend the march (description in Chapter Five).
Chávez's death is announced on the 5 <sup>th</sup> of March. Chavistas mourn while the Opposition call for immediate presidential elections	March	I continue to participate with the VSC, including stewarding at a candle-lit vigil for Chávez in London
Nicolas Maduro defeats MUD candidate Henrique Capriles by 1.7%	April	I record endorsements with Jeremy Corbyn and Ken Livingstone in London for use on Venezuelan television.
Capriles alleges fraud and calls for an official recount	May - August	I arrive in Venezuela in July, move to Pueblo Nuevo and begin work at La Escuelita and attending community meetings.

After a student, Juan Carlos Davilla Barrios, is murdered in Pueblo Nuevo, protests in Mérida make national headlines	September	I begin teaching adult high school classes for the new school semester at la Escuelita
Maduro launches the Street Government – an initiative aimed at consulting public opinion and reforming the PSUV	October	I investigate the story of the Communal Council and attend meetings of the Sala de Batalla and Parochial Assembly
National price-fixing initiative ahead of national elections	November	I interview people queuing for goods in Mérida and publish my first article for Venezuelanalysis.com (see description in Chapter Five)
Chavistas hold their ground in Nationwide Municipal Elections	December	I visit Caracas as an international observer with the CNE, before returning to the UK
<b>2014</b>		
Following a shooting at an opposition march in Caracas Anti-government protests begin across the country	February	I prepare to return to Venezuela
The protests continue, with a series of <i>Guarimba</i> occupations, including several in Mérida City	March	I arrive in Venezuela for the third time. Discussion around safety of fieldwork site.
Gradually across the country the protest occupations come to an end	April - May	I begin to participate with Frente de Vanguardia de Hugo Chávez and begin teaching research skills classes at La Escuelita



The PSUV attempts to shore up support and launches a project of mass public consultation, receiving 20,000 submissions for grassroots groups	June	Events in Mérida include the Street Government, a local group discussions of the PSUV consultation request, and a PSUV consultation conference (see Chapter Seven)
The PSUV continues attempts to shore up support	July	On my last day in Venezuela, a march through the barrio brings members of the Frente Vanguardia and other groups into Pueblo Nuevo for the first time
2015		
The opposition win control of the National Assembly	December	After fieldwork

The national story of Chavismo during the period of this research is one of a deepening political crisis. While Chávez's victory in November 2012 offered a brief respite from the uncertainty brought on by his illness, the following year and half would see his death, the narrow electoral victory of his successor Nicolas Maduro, allegations of electoral fraud and a vote recount, and a sustained period of anti-government protests. These different events happened against a backdrop of economic decline, shortages of goods, and various unsuccessful attempts by the PSUV to suggest that the party was being capable of reform, and to recapture the support of the Venezuelan public. This decline in support ultimately culminated in the National Assembly victory of 2015, seen by some commentators within the process as spelling the end for Chavismo (e.g. Denis 2015).

During fieldwork, this national story acted as a prompt for local events to happen and be interacted with and talked about by my local participants. The anti-government protest movement was felt directly in Mérida, where the first student protests during fieldwork were in response to the murder of a student at the entrance to the barrio. The *guarimba* protests also served as an appropriate

analogy for the sentiments in the city - with frustration and a sense of embattled determination on both political sides. The fact that these protests were at least in part about sections of the population who feel alienated from the public narrative of Chavismo, and have growing support among popular sectors, fits with the sentiment of discontent expressed by different local people during fieldwork (see especially chapters six and seven).

The declining legitimacy of the PSUV also connects with the analytical narrative of this thesis. As in the 1980s, a general sense of public dissatisfaction has grown in Venezuela, in part due to some of the continuities with the pre-Chávez era discussed in the remainder of the thesis. This can be seen in the grumblings of Chavista activists, who sought to connect with the legend of Chávez, but mount a sustained criticism of the PSUV (see Chapter Seven). It can also be seen in the grand gestures of the PSUV to try and address this shift in support - in the Street Government initiative that visited Mérida City (see Chapter Seven), and in the price-fixing initiative (see Chapter Five). In return, these gestures were reflected by local responses: the march through the barrio described in the introduction to the thesis, and the participation in the underwhelming public consultation initiative described in Chapter Seven.

### **Relating local experiences with wider national processes**

Part of connecting with national politics meant identifying research arenas where the Pueblo Nuevo bridged with the rest of the city of Mérida. In practice, this meant observing those spaces where people from the barrio and people from the rest of Mérida participated. Fundación Cayapa was the main example from inside the barrio. Chapter Eight describes how part of the achievements both of Fundación Cayapa and of the semi-independent barrio organisations in Pueblo Nuevo during the pre-Chávez era is to bring outsiders to the community, including student activists and teachers.

Outside the barrio, more often this meant attending spaces that residents of Pueblo Nuevo could have attended, but did not. The reasons for the absence of residents from Pueblo Nuevo at the Sala de Batalla, Frente de Vanguardia de Hugo Chávez, Street Government and the Parochial Assembly are discussed in Chapter Seven. Using information from these meetings also fits with what Fernandes (2010: 30

states – that where organisations and networks bridge community boundaries, an ethnographer who is interested in activism and participation in urban settings must move beyond thinking about a single, bounded community. For this reason, existing studies into participatory politics in Venezuela tend to focus either on groups (Leary 2009; Fernandes 2010; Schiller 2011b) or institutions (Gill 2012; Duffy 2012) that are part of a network of spaces that connect to a certain central community where these researchers based themselves. In some cases, however, this may limit the scope of analysis. Investigating the “democratisation of knowledge” (Leary 2009), for example, by focusing on how representations are produced, may miss important silent accounts that might be unearthed through a community, rather than organisation-based study. A more extreme example is where, by anonymising the communities involved in his thesis, Gill (2012) limits the options for considering how historical social and cultural factors have affected the emergence of new participatory practices. In contrast, by focusing on the wider community, Wilde (2014, 2015) is able to reflect the variety of experiences and the diversity of attitudes within his field-site.

Attempting to understand the differences between these different groups also meant spreading myself quite thin, as it was important to try and capture different sentiments and experiences from a politically interesting moment for the city, and for collecting ideas about barrio populations. This analysis is also limited in that these observations included only those meetings which I was aware of and was able to attend. Gaining access to these meetings was a part of my efforts to become part of the network of community activists – a process I describe in more detail in Chapter Four. In every case I heard about events by personal communication – either in person or by group text messages from activist contacts, or in some cases due to information received from public officials. At all meetings I made myself known to the organisers and asked for permission to observe and record audio. At the meetings I attended more regularly, the *Sala de Batalla* and the Frente de Vanguardia, I was invited to discuss my research and answer questions about my credentials.

As my credibility and my network grew, I gained access to different meetings and institutions – giving me the opportunity to collect the evidence used to compare different city-level groups) and to interview different officials and to attend some

of their “closed” meetings where the strategy for participatory politics for Mérida was discussed (see especially Chapter Seven). Working at these different levels is about continuing the task of existing studies of community organising in Venezuela by Hernández de Padrón, Fernandes, Wilde and Gill as they connect those unseen barrio communities with the political spectacle of the Bolivarian Revolution. These tasks require a varied set of research methods suitable for moving between local detail and thick description, and the sorts of observations that can be made at those places and moments where these different political worlds overlap. In part, this is also about providing a record of a particular and interesting political moment. As the Bolivarian Revolution enters a new phase without Chávez, and during a sustained crisis of political legitimacy for the PSUV, part of the work of this thesis is about describing the shifting connection between people and state as it is conceptualised at different times by the different people mentioned in this thesis.

### **Grounding information in historical context**

Participating in day-to-day life and organising in Pueblo Nuevo, collecting accounts from different people and from different political spaces, and arriving with my own assumptions and politics at an especially dramatic political moment for Venezuela – these factors shape this thesis and had the potential to produce the sorts of analysis “from within Bolivarianism” discussed in the previous chapter. In an environment where the political violence in Mérida during the anti-government protest in particular appeared to support the sensationalised class-warfare narrative of Bolivarianism, an important part of the analytical work of this thesis was also to think about Pueblo Nuevo without reproducing Chavista versions of political processes or deploying the folk concepts about the Venezuelan urban poor expressed by my participants. This meant studying the barrio in the context of its seventy year history. This meant challenging the prevailing conception that is used to describe the Bolivarian Revolution among both its supporters and detractors – the idea that a profound political transformation has taken place since Chávez’s election in 1998.

In the thesis so far – in chapters two and three – I made use of several studies into politics in the community and Mérida’s other barrios to build a picture of Pueblo Nuevo’s history before fieldwork, and particularly before 1998. These included

Jugo Burguera's decade of studies into Mérida's barrios from the perspective a town planner (completed in 1970s, published online as 2014a, 2014b, 2014c), Hernández de Padrón's two studies into barrio organising in Mérida (1998 and 1999), Prato Vicuna's (2013) article in Mérida's residents' movements and various studies. These Mérida-focused studies – all of which I found after fieldwork was completed – have proven essential in developing the analysis of this thesis. This is particularly the case as local accounts of pre-Chávez organising were vague and generalised. In part, this was due to my questioning – it was difficult to ask about a period for which I knew very little.<sup>16</sup> The exception was Gerardo Lopez's study into the history of barrio organising during his childhood and adult life in Pueblo Nuevo.

Following my return from Venezuela, however, these articles and Gerardo's study together provided me with the material to write the history of Pueblo Nuevo spread over Chapter Two and Chapter Three, setting up the discussion of areas of continuity and change in the remainder of the thesis. Jugo Burguera's studies over several years provide statistical data on the population growth for Mérida's barrios, city plans, a map of Pueblo Nuevo (Chapter Two) and an eye witness account of a local conflict over electing spokesmen (see discussion in Chapter Six). Hernández de Padrón's two articles give an overview of the development of barrio organisations in Mérida, explaining how national changes of government led to successive attempts to establish partisan organisations –and the resistance of these attempts by semi-independent groups.

Making use of these studies has meant connecting primary contemporary information with secondary historical information. I have done this by seeking out commonalities between these accounts and my own observation, most often regarding the relationship between city authorities, political parties and local groups. Because Pueblo Nuevo was the city's first barrio settlement, the detail in these accounts is enough to begin to draw the comparisons with the experience of the contemporary *Brisas de Alba* housing campaign (see Chapter Six) and the role

---

<sup>16</sup> Revisiting some of the accounts in this historical literature, therefore, is a possible future continuation of this study.

of city authorities including the FUNDACOMUN (Chapter Seven) and the semi-independent organising of Fundación Cayapa (Chapter Eight).<sup>17</sup>

These studies from the pre-Chávez era also provide examples of different kinds of thinking about barrio populations. Jugo Burguera, Hernández de Padrón and Ray all describe barrio settlements as “land invasions” – reproducing the notions about belonging discussed in Chapters Two and Three. However, there is also a sense of different sympathies from these different writers. In Jugo Burguera’s writing, his background as an architect and city planner seem to inform his concerns about – for example - the risks of poorly-built barrio housing or the lack of suitable social spaces. His writing also presents barrio problems to some extent as concerns that might be best met by state solutions. In contrast, Hernández de Padrón emphasised the ways that barrio groups in Mérida were frustrated by city authorities and by political parties’ attempts to establish dependent community organisations. She appears to celebrate the examples where barrio populations from Pueblo Nuevo and elsewhere succeeded in resisting this.

These studies from the pre-Chávez era, therefore, help to ground the analytical work of this study and locate contemporary experiences and representations of community organising in Pueblo Nuevo in historical context. This in turn supports the major contribution of this study – that of presenting evidence of important continuities between pre-Chávez era and the period of fieldwork. Presenting contemporary experiences as part of a longer-term trajectory of community development helps not only to challenging notions about the exceptionalism of Chavismo, but to better understand the character of community organising by exposing some of the inherited tensions around participatory politics – including where they draw on folk concepts about the urban poor.

---

<sup>17</sup> The studies by Jugo Burguera and Hernández de Padrón, along with Gerardo’s study from Pueblo Nuevo, also connect with national accounts. This includes work by Ellner and Buxton on barrio organisations in the pre-Chávez era, and contemporary work by Fernandes (2010) and Wilde (2016) and Ciccariello-Maher (2013) that use historical evidence to discuss Venezuela’s contemporary social movements.

#### 4. Conclusion: intersecting researcher roles and subjectivities

This chapter has described a methodology for gaining access to and collecting different kinds of information i) about processes of community organising in and around Pueblo Nuevo and ii) about how these processes are thought about by different people in Mérida. Navigating these different kinds of evidence and the complex context of both a particular political moment and a local history seen through secondary sources is a challenging analytical task. These different sorts of information and the challenges of living and doing research in Pueblo Nuevo have shaped this thesis – a process that has happened in relation with my own complex research positionality. As a non-Latin American, many of the reference points for my thinking have come from my own country, and my own experiences working with poor urban communities in East London and Bristol. Coming from the UK, with our well-established ideas about liberal democracy, I am perhaps especially conscious of the tensions between liberalism and socialism that are being lived out in Venezuela’s complex experience of Twenty First Century Socialism. I am also especially conscious that being white and male has made issues of race and gender stand out less in the accounts of my participants than, for example, ideas about criminality or political radicalism – the two themes that were always associated in my mind with Venezuela’s *barrio* communities.

Part of the contribution of this study, therefore, is about developing a detailed picture of life and politics in and around a particularly interesting community – of a community where people live with their reputation as a notorious, inaccessible *barrio* but where day-to-day life feels normal to its residents when compared with the spectacle of politics going in Mérida during fieldwork. Pueblo Nuevo is a place with a rich history of community organising, where some of the tensions of Chávez-era politics are still being played out. In this context, and in the context of sensationalising narratives about both *barrio* populations and about participatory politics, finding a way to have a multi-faceted research experience and collect a rich set of different kinds of information was important to telling the story of Pueblo Nuevo. For this, playing an active role, building genuine relationships and finding opportunities to have dialogue about my own assumptions and those of the people around me was essential to my research participants the opportunity to contest my

changing reading of community politics. Finally, it is an appreciation of the history both of barrio experiences with community organising and with national discourses about the relationship between people and government that reveals what has changed and what hasn't changed for the present era.

Like Stacey (1988: 21), I am concerned about the possibilities for "exploitation, betrayal and abandonment" by ethnographic researchers. She emphasises the ease with which a researcher can detach themselves from their research context and networks and the ultimate ownership of their research products that they enjoy versus their participants. I hope, therefore, that the methodology described in this chapter provides a framework for encountering Pueblo Nuevo in a meaningful way, for accessing the spaces and building the trust to give me an opportunity to represent some of the accounts of the people I met in Venezuela, and for using an awareness of both contemporary politics and recent history to overcome some of my assumptions and conduct the analysis in the remainder of the thesis.



## 6. Epic strugglers and grateful clients: inherited tensions and strategies for organising in and around barrio Pueblo Nuevo

In August 2013, the first weekly meeting of the Communal Council Calle Principal that I observed was energetic and well-attended. Chairs spilled out across Pueblo Nuevo's main street outside the CEDECOL school building, forming a rough semi-circle around the table where an amplifier broadcast proceedings out across the barrio. From the mural on the wall the giant faces of Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro saluted the session. As dusk fell and the street lights flickered on, residents arrived in ones and twos, calling out to friends watching from front windows or perched on the bonnets of parked cars. Passing motorbikes wound in amongst the bodies, dodging children or stopping to share gossip. By the time the meeting began, around twenty-five people were seated on the school chairs in the middle of the street, with another twenty watching from bedroom windows or various vantage points just outside the circle. The spokesmen took turns speaking into the microphone, saying that "everyone is welcome" as "we are all citizens".

It was the last meeting that would take place in the street. From the following week the sessions moved into the cramped entrance hall of the school building. Regular attendance declined to around seven or eight. By the summer of 2014, the council

had retreated further, moving upstairs to the disused radio station above the school building, to a meeting room that fits only a handful of people. Numbers reduced further still, and one regular participant who is unable to climb the stairs was left in his wheelchair in the courtyard below. This decline was coupled with the frustration of council projects and underpinned by the refusal of formal registration by the Chavista city authorities.

In contrast, just up the street above barrio Simon Bolivar, regular meetings of the *Brisas de Alba* “dignified housing” movement remained well-attended throughout this period. More significant, however, was the building progress, as three apartment blocks sprang up from occupied wasteland as part of the national social housing project *Mission Vivienda*. The *Brisas* group, made up mainly of mothers and their families from the two neighbouring barrios, had mounted a constant vigil over the territory they had occupied. Their overtly Chavista campaign had then been acknowledged by the government, who built three large apartment blocks on the land, eventually handing over keys to the first 135 completed apartments to the group in June 2014.

In the spring of 2014 – after that first communal council but before the keys were handed over for the *Brisas de Alba* development – a different type of construction was going on in the area surrounding Pueblo Nuevo. In the middle-class *urbanizaciones* to the east of the barrio, in the north and south of the city, and cutting-off the main thoroughfare of Las Americas Avenue, the anti-government protest movement built barricades to stop traffic and create a zone where government authority was no longer recognised. Makeshift roadblocks appeared in January. They were soon reinforced with metal panels and slabs of concrete hauled from roadside verges and manned by armed vigilantes. These protests – known as *guarimbas* - sprang up at flashpoints across the country, claiming the lives of forty people. They would last longest in the middle-class Altamira neighbourhood in Caracas and in Mérida, along the main avenue that runs north to south at the western edge of Pueblo Nuevo.

These different contemporary examples of community organising are also linked by the nature of their relationships with broader political processes. In each cases these relationships are defined by how the participants are able to position

themselves with relation to ideas about who Bolivarian popular politics is for. In doing so, they also seek to fit around the political identities emphasised in the thesis so far - as empowered citizens, as the deserving poor, and in the case of the protesters as a revolutionaries with a different kind of politics. While the three groups described here have important differences, the strategies of each group and their attempts to locate themselves with relation to the political discourses all continue characteristics of community organising from the pre-Chávez era.

### **Aims and structure of the chapter**

The previous chapter described the rise of Bolivarianism as a mass movement that courted Venezuela's barrio populations by presenting Chávez as both the patron and the emancipator of the urban poor. I demonstrated how these two interpretations of populism connect with different folk concepts about barrio populations and their capacity for participating in politics. This emancipation, Chávez (in interview in Harnecker 2003: 157-158) said, would come as the leadership had "...sought out organising models to convert the popular movement into a bottom-up avalanche." This proposed shift towards bottom-up processes was in part a response to the alienation of the urban poor, and to their dissatisfaction with the clientelistic practices that characterised community organising during the pre-Chávez era.

In the thesis so far I have argued that there are two tensions in the Bolivarian narrative of popular emancipation. The first is the tension between the notions of emancipation and patronage - two political promises with bases in different conceptions of populism and democracy, and with different folk concepts about the urban poor. The second related tension arises around the Chavista notion of "popular will" - a conception of the public good as a singular, identifiable set of interests that can be known and satisfied. In this respect, Chávez talked about the Venezuelan people as an "unprecedented popular force", which he called on to "...be unified and strengthened so instead of moving forwards along thousands of individual paths, it found a common direction" (ibid). This notion of a common direction is developed alongside the "agonistic" Bolivarian public narrative of class politics (Emerson 2011), that sets constraints around who Chavista popular politics is for.

This chapter uses different kinds of information from in and round Pueblo Nuevo to connect analyses of the Bolivarian public narrative with the literature on the evolution of participatory politics in Venezuela. The experiences of the Communal Council Calle Principal, the housing collective *Brisas de Alba*, and the *guarimba* anti-government protest movement of 2014 are each used to identify two areas of continuity from the pre-Chávez era. First, I demonstrate the continuation of experiences of community organisations that are shaped by either dependent or combative relationships with the Venezuelan state and ruling party. Second, I demonstrate the continuation of selective clientelism, grounded in Bolivarian notions of political constituency. These processes are then connected to Auyero's (2000) study that considers how cultural representations feed into and from processes of clientelism and brokerage, as the urban poor represent themselves as either epic strugglers, or grateful clients.

The chapter begins presenting evidence from interviews and informal conversations with members of the *Brisas de Alba* housing collective. The movement is shown to continue some of the characteristics of the more combative and independent barrio organisations of the 1960s and 1970s, as the group seek to unify in defence of their interests and also position themselves as clients to benefit from the politicisation of infrastructural projects under Chavismo. The chapter continues by presenting evidence about the anti-government *guarimba* protest movement of 2014. I argue that while the so-called *right-wing* protests do not necessarily fit with Chavista narratives about popular power, they continue some of the strategies and objectives of important *leftist* student movements from the pre-Chávez era. The chapter concludes by bringing together interviews and informal conversations with key participants and non-participating residents, along with observations of the meetings and activities of the Communal Council Calle Principal. These different kinds of information are used to discuss the group's experience of *partidismo*, the resulting loss of credibility for the PSUV among the grassroots and the ways the group have attempted to maintain their independence.

### 1. The *Brisas de Alba* collective: Chavismo's revolutionary clients?

In June 2014, the day of the ceremony handing over the keys for the first completed *Brisas de Alba* apartments was a momentous moment for the two barrios of the

Albarregas Valley. Until this time, and like most of the rest of the community, I had only seen the construction site at a distance. On arrival at the celebration, a council spokesman from one of the districts to the south of the city spotted me in the crowd and slipped me in to the middle tower block blocks for a first glimpse of the finished apartments. We walked down empty corridors, popping our heads into different apartments. In each, the grey, unfurnished rooms contrasted with the jubilant scenes and the red shirts and banners of the crowd glimpsed through the windows.

Back at street level, the celebrations were gathering pace. As the youth dance troupe from La Escuelita wowed the crowds with their human pyramids, Governor Alexis Ramirez sat and checked his messages on his phone. The teaching staff from Fundación Cayapa mingled with the *Brisas de Alba* collective –there to support our young students and friends from the barrio. Dusk had fallen by the time the keys were handed out and the families celebrated – not least Janeath, the Director of La Escuelita who clutched her keys in the air and celebrated with her children. Now in her forties, Janeath had finally moved out of her family home. It was a change made possible by the four-year campaign and the government’s commitment to provide “dignified housing”. All the while, the iconic eyes of Chávez painted on to on the *Brisas* building, watching over the celebrations (see Photo 3).

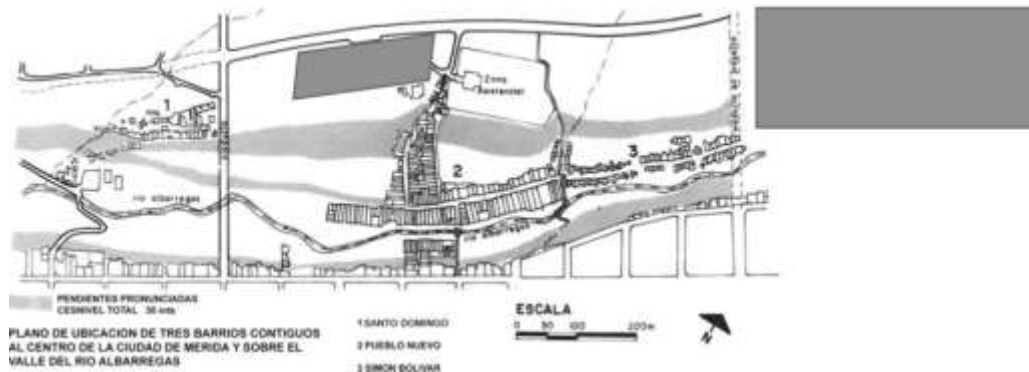
### **Legitimate *invasiones*? New land and housing movements in Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar**

The handing over of keys to the *Brisas* apartment blocks is a significant moment for Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar. Chapter Two described how 1973’s attempt to expand Pueblo Nuevo to the south was demolished by the National Guard and city police. Now, the latest expansion to the North of the twin barrios of the Albarregas Valley had been sanctioned and paid for by the Chavista government. This was a strikingly different response to an occupation which, like the 1973 movement, was planned by barrio residents as a response to over-crowding.

In contrast to the so-called “land invasions” of the mid-twentieth century or the waves of barrio expansion in the 1960s and 1970s, the new apartment blocks built to the North of Simon Bolivar were completed on formally expropriated private land, and funded through the national housing Mission Vivienda. In 2010, Chávez began to encourage the expropriation of unused private land to help identify areas

suitable for Mission Vivienda construction projects. In a speech to the House of Representatives, he gave a call to the Venezuelan public to form social movements to identify and occupy suitable plots for the construction of apartments and houses, legislating for the seizure of ‘disaffected lands’ in the Urban Land Law – *Ley de Tierra Urbana* (Raby 2006: 178). This speech called on his constituents – the humble, long-suffering Venezuelan poor - and invited them to be part of the Bolivarian process of social transformation by taking part in the direct re-appropriation of property from the Venezuelan bourgeoisie.

In response to this general consent from the President, two sites bordering Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar were occupied. These were the land to the North East of Simon Bolivar used during the bullfighting festivals at the Plaza de Toros and the land to the West of the Ambulatorio Venezuela, owned by the Chinese family who ran the Yuan Lin supermarket to the south of the barrio (see Map 1).



*Map 1. The grey area on the left is the Yuan Lin site and the Plaza de Toros site is on the right. Edited from Jugo Burguera’s original version (2004: 79)<sup>1</sup>*

This movement developed as a response to the living conditions in the two barrios. If the Bolivarian Missions described in the previous chapter had rewarded Venezuela’s barrio populations for their political support, the problems facing residents of Pueblo Nuevo were not all addressed by the new initiatives. High levels of violent crime continued to shape every-day life, while addiction, unemployment, domestic violence and family breakdown were problems in Pueblo Nuevo that had

<sup>1</sup> Key reads: “Prominent Slopes, total change in elevation 30 metres.” Title reads: map of the location of three neighbouring barrios in the centre of the City of Mérida in the Albarregas River valley.”

not been addressed by any state-funded initiatives. These concerns dominate the list collected by Barrio Adentro staff in their household survey in Pueblo Nuevo in 2011 (Correa and Wilson 2011). Just as the desire for more living space had motivated the original founding of the barrio and the attempted expansion during the Comité de Toma of 1973, efforts to expand the community were renewed by campaigns by new community members for land and social housing from 2010.

From June 2010, separate movements known as *custodios* – or “custodians” – planned and occupied the two sites and began to petition the government to begin construction. The members of the Plaza de Torros movement were formed from families from Simon Bolivar and Pueblo Nuevo, while the Yuan Lin movement also included members from barrio Santa Domingo and other neighbouring communities. During fieldwork, several attempts to make contact with the Yuan Lin group were unsuccessful. For this reason this description will focus on the Plaza de Torros movement, known as *Brisas de Alba*.<sup>2</sup>

The *Brisas de Alba* collective began with 250 members, who maintained a constant presence in the occupied territory. Members committed one or two hours each a day and formed ten groups of around fifteen people to sleep out at nights (Interview w. LD, 15.7.14, BA). The participants were typically young mothers who lived in over-crowded conditions in the two barrios and who frequently their night-shifts with their young children (Interview w. DO, 24.05.14, PN). As well as the symbolism of the occupation, the groups also had a practical purpose, including preventing the return of temporary squatters who had been evicted with support from city authorities (ibid).

---

<sup>2</sup> I suspect in part this was due to the reluctance of any single member to speak to me without the other members of the group agreeing this. The story of the as-yet-undeveloped Yuan Lin site is one that remains to be told. It is especially interesting that the occupied land is owned by a Chinese family – a rarity in Venezuela. This family have also had a previous conflict with the barrio, as the foundations dug for building works for the supermarket threatened the structural integrity of the hillside, and the family were required to pay costs to some residents. This tension could be a fruitful avenue for further investigation, especially as the nationalist Chavista discourse is especially critical of foreign economic activity in Venezuela.



Photo 1. In Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar, homes have different building standards. June 2014

Chávez's endorsement of the land seizures gave them a complicated legitimacy. In part, this is linked to the political identity of *Brisas de Alba*. Membership of the movement was determined in accordance with social housing criteria from the Fund for Social Inversion (FONVIS), and included as a minimum being a Venezuelan national, to not own a house and to have children (interviews w LD, 15.07.14, SB; and RL, 24.07.14, PO). However, although the group originally included non-Chavistas, these members are all said to have left as the group developed a clear Chavista orientation, including using the meetings for mobilisation attending Chavista marches and political events in the city centre. This reduced the size of the collective, while others dropped out due to the time-commitment required, or to the dangers attached to the night occupations, members of the group also said that they had been witnesses to at least one shooting, and had stepped in to care for the injured man (interview w CB, 15.07.14, SB).

The perseverance of the remaining 160 families would ultimately pay off for the *Brisas de Alba* collective. Following a socio-economic survey of their members and a delegation of fifty members attended Caracas to petition to central government.



Construction began in 2010 and the first two apartment blocks opened in June 2014 in a celebratory event attended by the Chavista Governor Alexis Ramirez (see Photo 2, below). The first families moved in shortly afterwards, along with six families of refugees who remained displaced by the mudslides of 1999, and with some apartments left unoccupied as of July 2014, which members of the group suspected were reserved for the families of government officials (Interview w DO, 24.05.14, PN).<sup>3</sup>



Photo 2. The celebratory event to hand over the keys to the first apartments. June 2014

When I left Pueblo Nuevo, the occupation of the remaining territory by the *Brisas de Alba* collective continued at the edges of the construction site, as the third building was yet to be finished. The new occupants of the tower blocks were beginning to organise new Communal Councils for the area. As I left Pueblo Nuevo in 2014, it was unclear what effect this mass relocation of people would have for the barrio, with one local activist concerned that a new period of conflict would begin due to changes in the population (Interview w VR, 21.07.14, PN). The second movement occupying the Yuan Lin territory has been less successful. Although large furrows were dug in the area by government contractors prior to the elections

---

<sup>3</sup> During fieldwork, I met one government official from a neighbouring State who had benefited from this arrangement - without meeting the criteria for receiving social housing.

in 2013, construction had not begun by the end of fieldwork in June 2014. Along with other plots across the city at different stages of expectation and legal process, the occupation continued.<sup>4</sup>

### **Change and continuity: old strategies, new legitimacy?**

The question of this new series of land movements, and their inevitably partial and uneven success in negotiating construction projects, is a pressing theme for Venezuela. Chávez sought to make political capital from the lack of suitable housing with a pledge to build 200,000 “dignified homes”, a figure somewhat short of the amount required to rehouse the millions of barrio residents living in overcrowded and unsafe conditions.<sup>5</sup> While this commitment and the distinctive yellow tower blocks that have sprung up across the country frequently cited as an example of the new pro-poor politics of Chavismo, the example of the *Brisas de Alba* development continues pre-Chávez era scenarios in three main ways. These are: i) the account of the “epic” (Auyero 2000: 1698-171) collaborative strategy of the *Brisas* campaign, and the illegality of the initial occupations; ii) the politicisation of the campaign as the collective sought to position themselves as clients of party and state and iii) the role played by women as leaders of the collective. These two characteristics also connect with different folk concepts about the urban poor – as successfully-collaborating social revolutionaries, as citizens claiming their constitutional right to housing, or finally as partisan clients making demands on their patron.

While the information collected for this study does not allow us much insight into the institutional decision-making mechanisms behind the *Brisas* construction project,<sup>6</sup> for the group’s members, the allocation of houses is evidence of the part the occupation movement played in securing this new development. Interviewees described how the idea of taking the land had developed from initial idea to a

---

<sup>4</sup> In my only conversation with a member of this movement, the lack of construction was attributed to problems with the suitability of the land for construction, while one of the leaders of the *Brisas de Alba* collective said that the Yuan Lin movement was “disorganised, divided and apathetic” (interview w CB, 15.07.14, SB).

<sup>5</sup> One barrio in Caracas, Petare, is reported to house a million inhabitants- although evidence from Pueblo Nuevo shows conditions vary dramatically even within neighbourhoods.

<sup>6</sup> Chapter Seven includes an interview with Reyes Lobos, an official from FONVIS and discusses this further.

campaign that was sufficiently coordinated to maintain a permanent presence, night and day, on the territory for more than four years. The *toma* of 1973, and the so-called *invasions* to establish different barrios around the city were reportedly planned in Pueblo Nuevo by the prospective residents. Like the historic *tomas*, members of the collective also resisted violent attacks - although the motive for these attacks is not clear from the accounts of the people I spoke to, one participant advised this had included pressure from police forces. These accounts of the *lucha* or “struggle” for the building project (interview JL, 24.05.14, PN) told of the bravery of the participants, and of the independence and spontaneity of the group.

The different accounts I heard in Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar also emphasised the role of group solidarity. Janeath Lopez described how the group’s strategy included regularly attending meetings with the city authorities *en mass*, regardless of whose offer of housing was being discussed (interview JL, 24.05.14, PN).<sup>7</sup> As discussed in Chapter Four, Hernández de Padrón’s explanation forms part of a romantic reading of community organising in Pueblo Nuevo, that casts community against the city authorities. Both this reading and the contemporary accounts of the success of the movement connect with the “epic version” of hard-won infrastructural improvements collected by Auyero (2000: 170-171) from residents of Villa Paraiso, Buenos Aires in the 1990s. In these descriptions of the group’s endeavour, solidarity and success, we see the participants casting themselves as *revolucionarios* - fitting with a folk concept of empowered barrio residents who are changing their communities from within. Like the self-styled “heroic” residents of Villa Paraiso, the *Brisas* members saw the success of their movement as being about the constancy and effort of their members, where other campaigns for housing like the Yuan Lin occupation had lacked stamina and coordination.

The second area of continuity with the history of organising in Pueblo Nuevo can be seen in the group’s overt political support for the PSUV. This connects with the experience of different local groups during the pre-Chávez era - described in Chapter Two and Chapter Three - where the political affiliation of groups was

---

<sup>7</sup> Although Janeath did not make reference to the 1973 *toma*, the lack of the sort of solidarity she describes was part of the reason for the failure of that movement according to Hernández de Padrón (1998), as the state was able to negotiate with individual families separately and break the solidarity of the movement.

connected to their political success. Like those groups - and unlike the Communal Council Calle Principal described at the beginning of the chapter - the *Brisas* collective have established their Chavista partisanship publicly. During fieldwork, the *Brisas* collective often took part in public displays of their Chavista political conviction, including marching together at the workers day march (May 2014), the march through the city's barrios described at the introduction to this thesis (July 2014), and at a public pledge of loyalty in the Plaza Bolivar (July 2014). Participation at these events, which for some members of the group may have been among few occasions that they left the barrio, again chimes with observations from Villa Paraiso. Auyero's (2000: 170) participants described their attendance of marches as "...an expression of gratitude" rather than part of an exchange of votes for services. At *Brisas de Alba*, one young mother, Yoleria, also described her participation as an act of gratitude, explaining that she believed that Chávez's personal intervention had made the construction project happen (interview w YO, 15.07.14, SB). Another young mother, Greny Uzcátegui, saw this as a shift from the old clientelism of the pre-Chávez era, saying that: "Before, they only offered things to look for votes, but now with Chávez I see the hope of getting my own home" (in *Correo del Orinoco* 2011). In her explanation, the shift appeared to be less about a change in process, and more about the improved terms of this exchange.

Janeath, like Yolaria, also described using group meetings to mobilise for elections, saying that:

"When they came around, we did use the group to discuss elections. If this is a project that is social and political then we have to support the government that is giving us this thing. And if (the opposition supporters) are there and they are achieving the same thing, they have to show respect go along with us to get the dignified housing that we have. And at the least they are going to be living with the Chavistas! It is good that they can learn to share with us."

This politicisation of the *Brisas* collective was also a constraint on membership, as people who "put on the red shirt" - who pretend to be Chavistas to gain some sort of financial or professional advantage - are badly thought of in Venezuela amongst Chavistas and *opositors* alike. Apart from Janeath, however, the members of the

*Brisas* collective that I interviewed all agreed that any opositors had quickly left the group. One member, Sofia, made light of this, remarking that the opositors who had wanted to attend simply “...couldn’t stand the singing” (interview w SF, 12.05.14, PN). Despite these attempts to play down any emphasis on a political exchange, the participants also said that they expected a small proportion of the apartments to be reserved for the families of officials. This indicates an expectation of the more cynical characteristics of clientelism.

It is likely that having Chavista-only membership meant the group were better positioned to take advantage of political support. Rewards for public displays of partisanship are part of the history of barrio organisations in Venezuela, where support for either local officials or incumbent national parties have seen clientelist returns (Ray 1969: 37). Again, like Auyero’s study, the *Brisas* group described how they believed they had benefitted from the involvement of particular local politicians. Caramoto Briseño, one of the “principal members” of the *Brisas* collective, described how the group found themselves caught between the anti-government officials at the Mayor’s office, and the Chavista officials from the Gobernación (interview w CN, 14.07.14, SB). She described how she believed that different senior Chavistas had intervened to support the group, including Governor Alexis Ramirez, Ex-Governor Carlos Leon, and the PSUV’s 2014 mayoral candidate Maria Alejandra. In this way, the construction project reflects, at least in Caramoto’s account, both the contemporary political struggle for Mérida city, and the combative narrative (Emerson 29011) of the Bolivarian Revolution.

As a politicised project, and also like the account from Auyero’s (2000: 133) study where images of the local mayor were painted on all around the city, the *Brisas* apartment blocks, like all public projects in Venezuela are branded with the iconic eyes of Hugo Chávez (see Photo 3). The connection between the building works and the Bolivarian project were heavily emphasised at the opening event, and were described in the local public newspaper, as part of the Grand Mission Vivienda. While the pledge to build new affordable housing is a key election promise for the PSUV, the politicisation of social housing project can be in Venezuela goes back to General Gomez, who sought to cleanse Caracas of its ‘barrio problem’ by bulldozing the shanties and moving residents to new high-rises (Fernandes 2010: 43). It is a strategy that is familiar from Latin America today, with the same strategy employed

in Brazil as the government sought to make space for the stadia for the 2014 football world cup, contributing to the large and violent protest movement in 2013 and 2014. In Mérida, the strategy, goes back to the founding of the city's first workers barrio, later renamed Santa Elena, in the 1950s (Jugo Burguera 2014). Today, many public works in Venezuela branded are with the phrase "only possible in socialism" - part of a more ambitious narrative used to support not only a political party but a political ideology.



Photo 3. Chávez's eyes are painted on both of the two buildings completed so far

The third area of continuity with the history of organising in Pueblo Nuevo is the leadership role played by the women from the barrio and from neighbouring Simon Bolivar. While there is not an enormous amount of evidence of women's roles in barrio groups during the pre-Chávez era, Hernández de Padrón (1998) describes three separate occupation movements in Mérida City in the early 1970s that were led by mothers from the barrio communities - including the *toma* in Pueblo Nuevo in 1973. With the *Brisas* campaign, this was repeated. The vast majority of people participating in marches or other political activities were women, while participants said that the long nights spent keeping a constant vigil over the occupied land were said to have been undertaken by mothers from the barrios, often with accompanied by their children due to the need to balance parental responsibilities with campaigning.

In both eras, women have taken these leadership roles to address the poor living standards facing their families - often in the absence of a male parent due to high

levels of family breakdown in the two communities (Correa and Wilson 2011). These roles fit with Lallander's (2016: 149) observation of "protagonist" roles for barrio women under the Chávez era. However, this may be less about the recent processes of women's "empowerment" that Lallander observes, and more a continuation of the ways that women in the city's barrios have organised in the pre-Chávez era. In both eras, these leadership roles are also evidence of what Fernandes observes in the barrios of Caracas. For Fernandes, active roles in community organising for women can be part of Moser's (1986 in Fernandes 2007: 119) 'triple burden' of productive, reproductive and community managing work – meaning that the "empowerment" observed by Lallander is actually an increase in work, responsibility and, in the case of the *Brisas* campaign, the risks associated with a semi-legal occupation.

Together, these characteristics of the *Brisas* movement and building project connect not only with the history of community organising in and around Pueblo Nuevo, but with the history of clientelism as recorded in studies such as Auyero's (2000) work on the Peronist reward networks in Villa Paraiso, Buenos Aires. The group's explanation of their success is similar in that both the "epic" story of their success, and the contradictory idea of the housing having been gifted by a benevolent political authority are maintained together. Maintaining these distinct versions of change together connects with the broader promise of emancipation and patronage – and the respective political identities for the group's members - discussed throughout this thesis.

## 2. The anti-government protest movement: *revolucionarios* on the right?

In February 2014, in a rare calendar year free from national elections, a hard-line faction within the Venezuelan opposition led by Leopoldo Lopez and Maria Corina Machado launched a campaign of civil unrest known as *La Salida* – 'The Exit'. Mass protests in the country's major cities were followed by violent riots and then by the building of *guarimba* road blocks that closed highways and barricaded some middle class communities against the state. The government described the movement as an attempted coup, carried out with funds and support from the CIA, who hoped to replicate the temporarily successful coup of April 2002. The

protestors described their movement as responding to high crime, corruption and economic problems. Criticism of certain pro-poor policies, including free healthcare and education, also suggest that the protesters in some ways saw themselves as excluded from processes of Chavista patronage. In their own depictions of the dictatorship of the Bolivarianism, the protestors also built their own “epic version” of Venezuelan politics.

In Mérida, rioters burnt piles of refuse and car tyres in the city centre, and then set about building makeshift roadblocks on main roads and around middle-class housing complexes. In mid-February, police attempted to clear the main Las Americas highway, assisted by Chavista activists and public services staff. The attempt was ultimately unsuccessful, with protestors replacing the roadblocks even as the clean-up operation was going on (interview w DV, 12.04.14, MC). Following this failure, the police action was minimal, and the residents of the city settled in to wait for the rumoured arrival of the National Guard. From this moment, the roadblocks were gradually improved by the protestors, in some areas reaching over ten feet high and reinforced with metal panels and concrete. These roadblocks – the largest and most fortified a few hundred metres from my house in Pueblo Nuevo - were then patrolled by protestors armed with pistols, petrol bombs and other weapons. The roadblocks were used to control access to and from the fortified zones. There were reports of shoot-outs between police, protestors and involving the militant Chavista faction, the Tupamaros. Four deaths are recorded for Mérida for the period, against a national total of forty deaths and more than a thousand injured.

Although the *guarimba* zones were supported by much of their populations, residents reported being intimidated or charged small bribes to go in and out. The support for the protestors gradually waned as public services were interrupted. Schools and health clinics closed or were starved of staff and resources, shops were looted and buildings associated with the government were attacked. Without health care, basic services or the collection of rubbish, populations suffered. My friends living in the *guarimba* zones were able to leave, but some reported that the protestors, who often wore masks to hide their faces, were becoming increasingly threatening and had taken to robbing residents in the dark entrances when the street lights had been disconnected. Chavistas suffered attacks, and many known-



activists were forced to flee to stay with party colleagues in safe houses (interview w DV, 12.04.14, MC).

Outside the *guarimba* zones, people made their ways through the remainder of the city as best they could. At night, navigating the city meant trying to work out which areas were now under control of the protestors, and which routes might encounter a new roadblock or an armed gang. Riding on a *moto* became a nerve-wracking experience, as protestors had taken to setting improvised devices called *miguelitos* designed to burst the tyres of motorbikes. In general, people in Mérida seemed fearful of an escalation of the violence, in particular following the death of a Chavista activist. People reported hearing Colombian accents when passing the barricades, leading to the rumour that the protestors were not only middle class students, but had been joined by ex-FARC militants funded by the CIA. Violent crime in general was said to have risen, as the police were occupied with the protests and had been discredited, and street muggers grew in confidence.

In Pueblo Nuevo, we were at the edge of the main *guarimba* zone on Las Americas but separated by the drop into the valley. An attempt by some residents to block the road at the southern entrance of the barrio was short-lived – with other residents reportedly shouting them down and pushing their ways through. In fact, during the unrest the community served as an alternative route for commuters, who cut through the corner of the barrio as a way of avoiding the roadblocks on Las Americas. As a result, cars queued down the steep road into the barrio, paying local kids to act as traffic conductors to get them through the single-file sections. In the rest of the community, however, people seemed subdued but not overly worried. Although the Communal Council halted their meetings, at Fundación Cayapa, classes and meetings continued.

In the city, some weekly Chavista meetings like the Sala de Batalla and the Communal Council Calle Principal were suspended because of fears of attack, but eventually groups began to restart their activities. At this time I began attending meetings of the Frente de Vanguardia de Hugo Chávez - a group set up to defend the legacy of Hugo Chávez. The Frente also tried to respond to the situation by supporting the PSUV Juventud in putting on events in barrios around the centre, as the Chavistas sought to consolidate support in the communities that they see as

their heartland. These included “day of peace” family festivals in Pueblo Nuevo, San Jacinto and some other barrios, put on jointly with the Communal Council and students from the PSUV-Juventud.

Local support for the occupations declined, and occupations across the country were removed by the National Guard. In Mérida, a few of the smaller occupied areas returned to normal on their own, but the residents of the city on both sides of the political divide began to question why the government in Caracas hadn’t sent the National Guard to restore order in the others. Then on 25<sup>th</sup> April, armoured mini-tanks known as *tanquetas* rolled into the city accompanied by buses full of armed National Guards. Down in the barrio, we saw the helicopters overhead and onlookers gradually filled the Campo Elias Bridge as the National Guard moved in to the main *guarimba* zone at the edge of Pueblo Nuevo. Although everyone waited for a firefight, the protesters were said to have cleared out ahead of the operation, and no shots were heard. In the following weeks, windows were repaired, roads cleared, and life quickly returned to the occupied parts of Mérida. During a visit with one activist contact shortly after they had returned home from a safe house, I saw how the debris from the protests littered the streets and the house of one Chavista supporter had been burned-out completely.

### **Oligarchs on the streets, or part of a rich history of student protest?**

The period of anti-government protests in 2014 is part of a long history of a complicated relationship between the politics of people from poorer communities in Latin America, and the politics of students. Examples of solidarity between leftist students and non-students include events from Mexico in 1968, where the National Strike Council (CNH) was organised by students but called for wider social changes. The movement faced violent state repression, including the infamous Tlatelolco massacre. Students have frequently been part of movements calling for democracy and improved civil rights. In Argentina in the 1970s, student activism formed a key part of the banned movement to reinstate Juan Peron as President. Despite this, student movements in Latin America have faced a questions about the ability of students – who are often from wealthier backgrounds – to represent the views and needs of wider populations, including working class groups or people from poor urban communities (Sanders 2013).

In Venezuela in 2014, the perceived opposition of the popular sectors and the university students protesting against the government can be contrasted with the pro-Chavista Youth PSUV, for example, who number in their hundreds in Mérida but whose activities are dwarfed by the scale of anti-government political action. There is also a contrast with the history of Venezuela's student movement, when the so-called popular sectors and students often found themselves on the same side of the barricades together. The evolution of student activism in Venezuela began with opposition to the Gomez dictatorship, increasing in prominence during the early pre-Chávez *Puntofijista* era as a generation of students at Venezuela's newly autonomous universities became the new critics of the country's new democracy (Lopez Sanchez 2006: 76). The 1969 Movement for Academic Renovation sought to democratise universities with student council and general assemblies, President Romulo Betancourt accused university students of terrorism and took the step of occupying university campuses with the military (Ciccariello-Maher 2013: 110). From this point, the student movement would shift both to the left and towards more combative activities, at the same time as increasing their connection to what they saw as disenfranchised barrio populations (Lopez Sanchez 2006: 654). In the university town of Mérida, only a few blocks separate the barrios of Pueblo Nuevo with the campuses of the University of the Andes. As discussed in the previous two chapters, the strong connection between Mérida's university workers and students and the populations of the city's barrios included especially strong ties with Pueblo Nuevo, including support for the 1973 occupation that was destroyed by city authorities.

The important political role of Mérida's student movement was seen during the "university rebellions" of 1987 and 1988, when the death of student at the University of the Andes led to violent riots and saw the AD headquarters in Mérida burned to the ground (Ciccariello-Maher 2013: 114). These actions represented the most violent period in Venezuela's history since the new democracy in 1958 and coincided with the peak of anti-*Puntofijista* sentiment in the population as a whole. For Lopez Sanchez (2007: 661-662), the increasingly combative strategy of the students was a precedent for the wider population, as "...the actions by the student movements in one way or another dignified violent street protests..." Ciccariello Maher's (2013: 114) conclusion is that the militant street action of the "*Méridazo*"

prefigured the *Caracazo* of 1989 and the attempted coups of 1992, as “...many young students, enamoured of their deepening contact with the urban poor, left the university voluntarily to concentrate on barrio organising.” In this way, the student movement contributed to the national processes that would result in the birth of the Bolivarian movement and eventually Chavismo.

The exodus of leftist students in the 1980s left the universities “in more conservative hands” (Ciccariello-Maher 2013: 116). This meant a period of absence from national political processes during the 1990s as Chavista politics, the end of *Puntofijismo* and the reorientation of government to focus on the urban poor. The student movements would re-emerge in 2006 with a series of riots in response to Chávez’s refusal to renew the media license of RCTV, one of the broadcasters seen as having supported the 2004 coup. The resulting riots were confined to richer neighbourhoods – taken by Chavistas as a sign of class-alignment – but were framed in the language of freedom and appealed to the human rights, as the protestors did in 2014. In the years between, the consolidation of anti-government sentiment and action among in Venezuela’s autonomous universities, including in part as a reaction to the perceived challenge of new Bolivarian universities that offered subsidised education to students from poorer backgrounds and sought to challenge the intellectual monopoly of Venezuela’s autonomous universities. By December 2012, on my first visit to Mérida, the day of the State Governor’s Elections was marked with the anti-government student action that had once again become a regular feature of life in the city.

Unsurprisingly, this narrative of middle-class students in conflict with the Venezuelan public seemed to have been taken up by the Chavista support base. In Mérida, Chavistas at meetings would recite various horror stories including rumours about residents suffering heart attacks inside the *guarimba* zones without medical assistance, and a story that circulated about the rape of a mother and her daughters by protestors in their apartment. As Chavista groups began to meet again in the centre, I began to ask participants – somewhat provocatively – whether the *guarimbas* could also be seen as an example of “popular power”. The result was unsurprisingly a unanimous “no”. Maduro’s government, I was told, had been

elected by the people, and had the interests of the people at heart.<sup>8</sup> The protesters, on the other hand, were seen as bourgeois and self-interested. For Carlos XXXX, a builder and Pueblo Nuevo resident, the anti-popular nature of the protests was also about the wealth of those protesting:

“No, these protests are not popular. They are *puro de plata* – purely from money. If you go to where the protests are, the oldest car you will see there is a Toyota Corolla (...) The difference now is that the people are driving the country and have the right to say how things will be. Before, just because they were rich, *they* were driving the country. Now the people can say what should happen.”

For Carlos, and for many other Chavistas that I spoke to, the protesters were simply protesting against the Bolivarian Revolution’s threat to their own class advantage. In addition to the perceived wealth of the protesters, Chavistas in Mérida criticised the strategy of *guarimba* road blocks. By interrupting the freedom of movement and long-fought-for public goods such as healthcare and education the protest movement was seen to be unfairly disadvantaging the Venezuelan people who had only achieved these benefits under the Chavista government.

### **A connection with barrio populations**

The presence of barrio residents amongst the protestors also goes some way to contradicting the official version of class warfare, that brands the protesters as “oligarchs”. The one resident from Pueblo Nuevo that I talked to who had attended the protests was a high school student, Gabriel, introduced in Chapter Four. Gabriel said that the protestors at the barricades included students and opposition supporters also “many people” from Pueblo Nuevo. He explained:

“Do you know why? Because everyone doesn’t have enough to eat... (And t)he insecurity affects us all. How many people have been killed this week and all these days? There are people who are worried about their brothers, we are all like this in Venezuela.”

---

<sup>8</sup> Here the usual line from the Chavista grassroots that Venezuela’s system of representative democracy was “bourgeois”, seemed to have been temporarily forgotten.

Gabriel described how his respect for the Chávez government had been worn down by the threat of violence in the barrio. In particular, he explained how he felt at risk when returning home at night through the community from his work at a hamburger stall, where he serves fast food to the richer students outside the bars in the city centre. Although Gabriel's experience of this violence may be different to those of the richer university students, his participation is evidence of some sense of shared interests.

Gabriel also describes how the protests escalated in violence:

“That was before (the protesters) started to kill people. To abuse. It was just normal protest things then. And everything was fine. Once I knew that the *muchachos* where I was protesting were armed, I withdrew a little. When I was protesting, there were the police, coming on motorbikes, with the *Tupamaros*, a government collective. They came to kill. They didn't come to throw things, they came to kill. Where is the justice? What are the police doing? Imagine that. It's still happening. And so the protesters were afraid. And what did they do? They went to look for arms. And how many police have died? How many National Guard?”

While Gabriel's account alone is not evidence for the mixed backgrounds of the protesters, concerns about the government's failure to act on Venezuela's violent crime problem are certainly a central part of the protestors' explanation of their politics. People all over Venezuela, regardless of class, wealth or political affiliation, are concerned about violence, including in Pueblo Nuevo, where violence and perceived causes of violence like drug use dominated the list of community priorities in the Barrio Adentro Household Survey (Correa and Wilson 2011). In this context, the description of this as a bourgeois politics is difficult to maintain. While he identifies himself as an *opositor*, he counts himself and the other protesters as part of “el pueblo”, saying that the Chavista interpretation of the word only refers to “half the people”.

### **Identifying continuities with the pre-Chávez era**

While Ciccariello-Maher (2013: 105-125) gives a compelling account of the shift of politics among the student movement, this is just one of several continuities with student organising from the pre-Chávez era.

Gabriel's worries about street violence are long-standing concerns for both rich and poor in Venezuela that have historically been reflected in the activities of the student movement. The *Méridazo* of 1987 was sparked by a student death (Ciccariello-Maher 2013 114), the first large scale protests I observed during fieldwork followed the death of a young student, Juan Carlos Davila Barrios, who was killed by muggers in the entrance to Pueblo Nuevo in September 2013, two months after my arrival the barrio (see Appendix Six). As with twenty years earlier, it was these emotional protests that came before the more sustained period of civil unrest.

Rioting, burning government offices and the use of the *guarimba* roadblocks are strategies used by students in Venezuela historically (ibid). Although they were widely criticised by Chavistas in Mérida in 2014, these are the same strategies for civil disobedience which according to Lopez Sanchez (2007: 661-662) were "dignified" through their use by student campaigners in the pre-Chávez era. *Guarimba* roadblocks in particular were also used during the *Caracazo* uprising of 1989 (Gott 2011: 43) – the events of which are heralded by Chavistas as part of the shifting of the tide towards popular empowerment. These strategies of civil disobedience are well-known on the Venezuelan left, where they have been part of grassroots responses to feelings of disempowerment and frustration, of being disenfranchised from formal national political processes.

This sentiment is also an area of continuity. Both in 1969 and 1987 and again in 2014, students were protesting against new governments with revolutionary rhetoric and promises of a new kind of democracy. In each era, the criticism made by the student movements included the idea that the actions of the incumbent government were anti-democratic and represented the interests of a *partidista* minority above the public good. Like the barrio residents represented by historic student movements, the protesters in 2014 said that they were protesting against the violation of human rights, corruption and their alienation from the processes of Venezuelan democracy. As has been discussed above, this alienation includes

when Chavistas talk about *opositors* or *escualidos* – “the dirty ones” – as they are known,<sup>9</sup> as if they are not counted as part of the Bolivarian people. This may be particularly powerful for those barrio residents who also find themselves branded by Chavista rhetoric as Venezuela’s “non-people”, in this way, despite being part of the so-called popular sectors in terms of where they live and how much money they have.

In Venezuela, the protesters - and all *opositors* I spoke to during fieldwork in Mérida - described themselves as representing the interests of all of the Venezuelan population, connecting with precedents from Mexico in the 1960s and Argentina in the 1970s, among others. These protestors also faced a similar-looking government response – but with much less violent repression. During the protests, the Bolivarian Government’s moderate use of the National Guard, riot police, and the *tanquetas* used to liberate the *guarimba* zones in an extremely volatile and tense period of political period seemed necessary and proportionate. Human rights campaigners attributed three deaths to the disproportionate use of force by security forces – a number dramatically lower than the total of forty deaths (Robertson 2014). After the experiences of 2004, when opposition street violence was a part of the campaign to legitimise the coup against Chávez, the government seemed determined to be above reproach. After the *guarimba* zones were cleared, the numbers of National Guard on the streets slowly returned to normal levels over the following months. The government did not occupy campuses in 2014, and the escalation on both sides did not reflect the levels of violence during the Betancourt government in 1969 and for the *Méridazo* of 1987.

In Venezuela today, therefore, there are two competing notions of “revolutionary” politics. In opposition to the government, there are groups who argue for social change conceived as a rejection of Chavismo. During fieldwork, meanwhile, Chavistas frequently talked about the need for “deepening” – the *profundización* – of the Bolivarian Revolution. Tied up in these debates are different ideas about political emancipation – as fulfilling the citizens’ rights of a historically alienated

---

<sup>9</sup> The common use of “dirt” by Chavistas to describe the Venezuelan opposition is familiar from representations of poverty, but also as part of the language used to describe corruption, infidelity and sin. For Chavistas today, who seem to use this slur automatically, this second list of connotations are likely brought to mind all at once.



social class, or as a value that might apply to any group with minority views. This debate in turn connects with Beaseley-Murray's (2009), identification of a deep-seated tensions between the Latin American Left and liberalism, or with Castaneda's (2006: 28) concerns about "close-minded and stridently populist" elements of the Latin American left.

Without more detail about the class make-up of the protest movement, evidence from Pueblo Nuevo and from studies like Gill's (2012) shows that there are *opositors* living in Mérida's barrios. The participation of barrio residents like Gabriel also suggests that some relationship between the so-called popular sectors and the more combative student movements remains from the pre-Chávez era. During fieldwork, some Chavistas suggested that the participation of barrio residents was being paid for by the protestors. It is difficult to assess the truth of this, but the idea shows the depth of acceptance of both the Bolivarian class narrative – that all barrio residents are automatically Chavistas – and the folk concepts that represent barrio residents as politically-unscrupulous ghetto thugs.

Finally, it is important to note that drawing these parallels reflects a very small part of the story of the 2014 anti-government protests. During fieldwork, Chavistas pointed to the right wing demands made by the leadership and to the attacks on barrio health clinics as evidence of an anti-poor agenda. They also saw the scale and weaponry of the occupations as evidence of foreign funding, part of an attempt to destabilise the democratically elected government. While these ideas are important, the parallels with the pre-Chávez era, together with the examples of the Communal Council and the *Brisas de Alba* housing movement, still tell us something about the processes and discourse around community organising under Bolivarianism.

### 3. The Communal Council Calle Principal: participation for some, and a loss of credibility for the PSUV

Although I lived in the neighbouring La Cuesta council district, like the other teachers, my work at Fundación Cayapa meant I was quickly accepted at meetings of the remaining active council in Pueblo Nuevo, the Comunal Council Calle Principal. Following the scene described in the introduction to the chapter, at the

second meeting I attended I explained my research and was warmly welcomed to the group. Over the coming months, the *voceros* - the spokesmen - seemed happy to have an audience, and would explain points of procedure to me or throw winks my way when discussions became more heated. Even so, making sense of these meetings was slow work. My ear took time to adjust to the Spanish spoken in the barrio, and residents invariably explained their concerns with reference to years of context that was well-known to the *voceros* but of which, of course, I was unaware. On learning of the different political allegiances of the spokesmen and participants however, I felt like I was seeing something that I had not uncovered in the literature: a council where Chavistas and *opositors* collaborated together.

It seemed unfortunate, therefore, as the decline in participation, regularity and activity described in the introduction to this chapter became the main story of the Communal Council Calle Principal. However, the group also revealed something about the applicability of different political notions. Here, the constrained “popular power” offered by the council system contrasted with Chavista representations of Participatory Democracy, while the *opositor* spokesmen’s frustrated desire for community participation did not fit with the familiar narratives of leftist grassroots *revolutionarios*.

### **Two versions of declining participation**

Over time, and as I built my networks in the community, I collected two versions of the council’s decline in participation and activity. The first, more detailed version of events was told through accounts from the remaining spokesmen and participants. These accounts were collected in formal interviews and during informal conversations and discussions, often following the weekly council meetings. In them, participants emphasised the failure of the council’s application to the FUNDACOMUNAL, the body responsible for registering councils and administering funds. These remaining participants described how the application was made in the summer of 2011, five years after the launch of the council system and after new councils were confirmed in La Cuesta in the southern part of Pueblo Nuevo and in Las Casitas to the west. They described how the residents had completed a household census, a photographic survey, and held polls to elect

spokesmen for the different roles on the council. Despite following the regulations closely, they say, the officials at the FUNDACOMUNAL declined the application.

Like all of those that I spoke to who had maintained their roles in the council, Gerardo Lopez - a spokesman at the council and a participant in community organisations in Pueblo Nuevo since the 1970s - explained the refusal to register the council as being due to “pressure from the party” on the staff at the FUNDACOMUNAL to prevent councils with opposition spokesmen (interview w GL, 04.07.14, CD). He said that he knew that the participation of opposition party members in the councils was unacceptable to the PSUV:

“They don’t like that these people participate, and so they said that we cannot register the communal council. At first they told us this. I’ll explain it: if one of these people was to become in charge of finances, they would not approve of that. But we did the election, and they got the most votes. The decision of the people should be respected.”

One particular spokesman, Yonny Camacho, is a councillor for the non-Chavista party Acción Democrática, and agrees that his involvement with a non-Chavista party caused the failure of the council’s application. He says:

“In the FUNDACOMUNAL, they established that where there are *opositors*, the councils won’t be legalised. They say that clearly. They don’t care that the law prohibits talking about politics in the communal council. They can’t discriminate against anyone that has a different political tendency than the government. That is established by law... but where there are *opositors* they won’t legalise the communal council and they aren’t afraid to say it.” (interview w YC, 27.11.13, PN)

This interpretation was reflected by various other residents including among the teaching staff at Cayapa, who had been in Pueblo Nuevo in the lead up to these elections. Here it seemed, Yonny did not find himself to be part of Chávez’s “unprecedented popular force” that had been envisaged by Hugo Chávez (in interview in Harnecker 2003: 157-158). In this scenario, Yonny and the other voceros were constrained in fulfilling their potential as brokers for the community.

This denial of registration was reported as a significant handicap to the activities of the council. Registration with the FUNDACOMUNAL means receiving financial resources, applied for on a project-by-project basis. Ramón da Silva, the *vocero* in charge of finances for the council, reported that the failed registration led to a reduction in participation levels:

“In the community, at first, a lot of people always went. Because we started to work, and work, and work, and work, and work, but they did not legalise the communal council and people went back to the shooting a little. We did the meetings and we told people what had happened. And practically what happened was the same as always. (...N)ow, we have work that has been planned, at the least we have completed the planning for projects on drainage and electricity. We have those already, but we are waiting for the elections so that they legalise us so that we can ask the state, the government, for the resources to realise them.” (interview w RS, 11.05.14, PN).

Here, as in Gill’s (2012) thesis, inactivity was seen as having contributed to a decline in participation. Gerardo Lopez agreed with this conclusion, saying that eighty people participated in meetings before the failed application. He talked about the symbolic importance of registration as well as the dependence on resources and state support, saying:

“So everything has been kidnapped by the party, all of the missions, all of their programmes. They don’t recognise us. They don’t advise us. And what we do, we do, some members ... because we are friends. I feel sad. Because they speak about revolution, they speak about participation, they speak about the progress that they have, and I live it. That’s my culture. But when I come with the people, to speak about this, that it could be, and we meet and we see that the state didn’t listen to us, the people were discouraged. So that’s your revolution. And it’s difficult. And you see people walking around with their faces down.” (interview w GL, 04.07.14, CD)

Here, the emotional response described by Gerardo and the others is a strong link to the frustrated accounts from the 1980s in Hernández de Padrón (1998, 2000),

discussed in chapters two and three, where processes of participation were characterised by partisanship and clientelism. It is also a version of events that runs against the representations of barrios as places where empowered grassroots activists improve their communities with support from the Chavista that has won them these new rights.

The second version of the decline of the communal council was a much more general account of a loss of credibility. During interviews with members of the community who were less involved, or who had ceased participating, there was an impression that the specific circumstances around the incident had faded into the collective memory. In response to questions about the activities of the council, the new Chavista system was rarely distinguished from the different *Juntas* and Neighbourhood Associations of the pre-Chávez political establishment. The state was largely absent from the accounts of non-participants, along with any reference to party politics. As with the participants in the Sala de Batalla, discussed in the following chapter, residents in the Calle Principal area said that they did not understand procedures around the Communal Councils, in part due to lack of communication by spokesmen. General concerns about the low results and effectiveness of Communal Councils did not differ in particular from those of residents from neighbouring councils, which are registered but where weekly meetings had ceased by the time of research.

Instead, comments made about the Communal Council Calle Principal were often more personal, locating responsibility with the leadership of the councils, including as individuals. In a group discussion with students at the class I taught at La Escuelita, the participants praised Yonny and Gerardo as exceptions, but on the whole saw the spokesmen as either ineffective or corrupt (Focus Group 1: 22.04.14). It was notable that the participants did not talk about the different local councils as opportunities to participate themselves, but more as institutions that ought to deliver material benefits for the local communities. Here, the expectations of the group participants fits with processes described in the literature on brokerage and clientelism, where community gains are part of an exchange brokered by well-connected individuals (e.g. Auyero 2000; Zarazaga 2014). Instead, recurring community issues such as the flooding of Calle Principal due to long-overdue and poorly finished repairs to the storm drain in the centre of the

street were a visual reminder of both the unresponsiveness of city authorities to the council's demands. By 2013, the council's main contribution, therefore, seemed to be that of mediating with minor issues such as the use of the school building in the evenings, and letter-writing to different authorities. In some ways, the council had become more of a petition group than something offering the sort of well-resourced brokerage described by Auyero.

### **Inherited responses to party pressure**

The contemporary experience of the Communal Council Calle Principal connects with historical accounts of community organisations in Pueblo Nuevo and the surrounding barrios, where city authorities are said to have local groups as an opportunity to exert control. As described in Chapter Two, Jugo Burguera's (2004: 206) visit to Pueblo Nuevo in 1975 and described "...how a functionary tried to direct the participants to elect their candidates..." in a community meeting that may well have taken place in the same spot as the council meeting described at the start of the chapter. This pressure is also described in literature from the period from other parts of Venezuela, with Ray (1969: 45) highlighting "...a close connection between the amount of government assistance and the vitality of the *Juntas*" in the areas he studied. His account goes on to describe how the initial enthusiasm during local elections was typically followed by a drop in participation as ambitious proposals were not followed up and the group leaders lost credibility. This connects to the experience described by Gerardo and the other spokesmen.

In Jugo Burguera's (2014: 206) analysis, he suggested that these residents in Pueblo Nuevo kept their own leaders only at the price of damaging their working relationship with city authorities. This scenario was played out in many of Mérida's barrios, as discussed in chapters two and three. This sense of resistance observed by Jugo Burguera in the 1970s persists in Pueblo Nuevo today. Yonny described, however, how the loss of funds and prestige "... didn't stop us." He said that:

"Without doubt I wanted to renounce my position as spokesman, to not have this type lock and that the communal council would be legalised, that the communal council would have the liberty not to be held back by one figure from being legalised. And I did resign, and no one accepted it. And the members of the PSUV who are in

the communal council did not accept it either. They said that they would not accept this resignation, because the community elected me and that the PSUV have to accept me as well because it was a decision of the community.”

While they were disappointed, Yonny and the other spokesmen and participants also talked about the problems that would have come with FUNDACOMUNAL financing. Yonny explained that he thought that communities can be destabilised where funding decisions are not communicated effectively or simply where residents misunderstand the collective way projects have to be approved and expect cash hand-outs.<sup>10</sup> Here, we can identify a familiar tone both from the romantic reading of the history of barrio organising as told by Hernández de Padrón (1998, 2000), and from the “epic version” of community improvements from Auyero’s account of politics in Villa Paraiso, discussed above. For the voceros, it is collective good will and solidarity that might hold the answer to community problems, while the involvement of city authorities threatens to corrupt this. Here, the different voceros cast themselves as the real revolutionaries – local representatives of their neighbourhood who are more legitimate than state or party.

Pablo, another resident in Pueblo Nuevo, also downplays the importance of finances for Communal Council Calle Principal, saying that “That doesn’t really matter- but a lot of people think it matters and they are part of the problem...” (interview w PJ, 01.07.14, PN). As he saw it, these people often want “to be the hands between the government and the people” to achieve status and influence. Therefore, for Pablo, “...when money shows up it makes everything much harder”. This attitude is also tied up with the epic narrative of communities finding their own solution – a process that might be corrupted by formalisation and the provision of resources. This idea was repeated in activist accounts across the city, where the notion of “popular” meant something ‘pure’, and where group value and

---

<sup>10</sup> This interpretation is supported by interviews from the neighbouring La Cuesta Communal Council, where some residents believed funds had been misappropriated (interviews w MA, 19.04.14, PN; and JA, 19.04.14, PN).

identity included a desire to separate themselves from the Venezuelan public authorities, with their historical and contemporary failures.

According to Pablo and several other residents, the commitment of certain community members to carry on without resources from the government was illustrated in February 2012 during Mérida's *basura* - "refuse" - crisis. On this occasion, the response from the community involved the cooperation between the different parts of Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar, and occurred outside of the Communal Council or missions frameworks. After Léster Rodríguez, the city Mayor for COPEI, allegedly embezzled the funds for refuse collection in the city, rubbish piled up on street corners around Mérida. While Chavistas accused the opposition Mayor of embezzlement of the funds for the collection service and of seeking to destabilise the city to discredit Chavismo, the opposition supporters accused Chavistas of trying to discredit the Mayor because of his plans to campaign to be Governor in December 2014. Conflicts over issue of refuse collection in the city date back to the 1970s and 1980s (Garcia et al. 1994: 116), but on this occasion the total suspension of the service left dangerous amounts of rubbish in the streets.

In Pueblo Nuevo, household waste continued to pile in the streets, prompting residents to form an emergency committee to organise a collaborative refuse collection service. Representatives were nominated to manage funds and coordinate a response, and the committee was independent of the Communal Councils (interview w YC, 27.11.13, PN) - although prominent members of the Communal Council Calle Principal were involved in coordinating the new service, and are credited by some residents with its organisation (interview MA, 19.04.14, PN, other informal conversations). The service was paid for by donations from the houses in the community, with households who were able to paying twenty five Bolivares (0.25 USD at the black market rate) each to fund the hire of the refuse trucks (interview w YC, 27.11.13, PN). Residents then worked together to load the trucks. The events were captured in a video made by teenage students of Fundación Cayapa, *El Sabado de La Basura* (2012; see Appendix Two). These locally-coordinated actions happened in communities around the city, until in October a health emergency was declared and the Ministry for Popular Power and the Environment also sent trucks from Caracas to relieve the city, before regular collection services finally resumed.



The *Sabado de la Basura* collaboration is an example of how barrio residents are turning to informal forms of organising, as they did in the pre-Chávez era, packaged within similar ‘epic’ narratives of self-help and emancipation. Again, the notion is of a self-reliant, independent and arguably more *revolutionary* activist identity. Without registration and funds, the council spokesmen have also turned to other options. Gerardo, Yonny and Ramón all described using personal “contacts” to find other resources for projects. This included asking Mérida’s opposition Mayor, Lester Rodriguez, to contribute to the repairs to the East entrance to the barrio.<sup>11</sup> For an informal communal council, applying for alternative funding in this way may reinforce the social power associated with certain personal identity characteristics, including gender, education level, professional experience, membership of informal networks and the understanding of the social rules and language used to approach potential funders. The three most active remaining *voceros*, for example, are all employed or retired men over the age of forty who have completed secondary education. They have access to political networks and as such can act as brokers, with the additional and at times problematic social power that this intermediary role can bring. In addition, the fact that women in the barrio are less likely to have these contacts is a barrier to their participation, as they may feel unable to play the brokering role encouraged by the lack of dedicated funding. Ironically, these ‘contacts’ include non-Chavista members of the conventional bureaucracy. Here we see how the denial of registration, whether for party-political or procedural reasons, is making the space less egalitarian and more informally-regulated, reproducing elements of the dynamic of “*clientelismo*” from the 1970s and 1980s as described by Hernández de Padrón and Ellner, and from 1990s Argentina, as described by Auyero (2000).

#### 4. Conclusion: three experiences of organising

These three contemporary examples of community organising in and around Pueblo Nuevo show important continuities with the pre-Chávez era, including in the ways that local processes in Pueblo Nuevo fit with familiar explanations of community improvements: as part of a grateful patronage, or as due to the epic

---

<sup>11</sup> Although accounts differed as to who actually paid for resources for this.

struggle of community members. All three also connect with experiences from across Latin America.

With the *Brisas de Alba* housing movement, the collaboration and the tenacious sense of social justice behind the lengthy occupations connect with Venezuela's rich history of collective action around land and housing rights, not least in barrios such as Pueblo Nuevo. In their ability to position themselves as clients of Chavismo, the group also showed their ability to adjust effectively to the wider political environment. While it is this environment that may have enabled this project to succeed - and build houses where the historic *toma* campaign had been met with state violence - the groups' partisan identity arguably demonstrates the continuity of less-emancipatory political processes. In addition, while the campaign has resulted in leadership roles for a generation of women from the two barrios, this was the case with the pre-Chávez era, when women faced even greater challenges in a less-sympathetic political context. These roles for women, along with the success of the group's collective mediation with the state connect the *Brisas* experience to other land movements in Latin America, notably the Movement of Rural Landless Workers (MST) in Brazil. As with the MST, the astute political framing of the movement appears to be a large part of the group's success (see Wolford 2003, Caldeira 2008).

With the anti-government protest movement, we see a certain shift in politics among the protesters, as compared with the pre-Chávez era, but also the continuity of protest strategies. In protesting the nature of democracy and representation in Venezuela, these protestors also continue the long-running theme of student politics. While it is not clear how far government representations of these "bourgeois" campaigns match with the mixed backgrounds of the protesters, their exclusion from discourses of popular politics shows the ways that Chavista notions of political empowerment have been constrained and politicised to support a particular, partisan understanding of empowerment. These experiences can be linked to some extent with those of student groups in Chile in 2006 and 2011, when student mobilisations struggled to make headway in a corporatist civil society culture (Reyes 2012).

In the experience of the Communal Council Calle Principal, we see the continuation of the sort of partisan and dependent institutional structures that are familiar from across the continent – both in the Twentieth Century and in examples from after Latin America’s ‘left turn’ (see especially Cannon and Kirby 2012). We also see the community’s response: to collaborate outside of formal structures and to negotiate privately with political contacts in the form of political brokerage described in studies from Argentina (Auyero 2000) and Brazil (Arias 2006). Both were characteristics of organising in Pueblo Nuevo and Mérida’s other barrios in the pre-Chávez era, when the dependent institutions (the *Juntas* and Neighbours Associations) were supplemented by more combative, semi-independent organising (Comités de toma, cultural centres and the Moaco collective). In addition, these less-regulated forms of organising may be arenas in which barrio women are disadvantaged against male participants by having less of the official contacts that are needed to fulfil a more classic brokering role. Here, we again see the limits to the Chavista public narrative of bourgeoisie vs. *pueblo*. Not only do residents who support the opposition and Chavismo live in the same barrio and share some of the same local interests, but they work together and appeal to the same independent, community-spirited and collaborating identities of the *revolucionarios*. Ironically, these spontaneous forms of community organising, explained through the familiar “epic” story of community self-help appear to be a better fit for the narrative of Bolivarian Participatory Democracy, than the dependent organising of the Communal Council system.

## 7. New party, old *partidismo*? Inherited tensions around the administration of participatory politics

“My question is: apart from the recycling project, which of the projects on your list actually exists? How can we agree to sign off these projects – to ‘close the cycles’ – if they do not exist?”

Gloria is interrupted as the hall erupts into frantic conversation, drowning out the reply of the chairperson at the front of the meeting. As the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) representatives on the stage attempt to make themselves heard against the wall of noise in the hall, Gloria – the Communal Council spokesperson for barrio Santa Domingo<sup>1</sup> – is passed a printout listing the projects for the past year. She runs through the list, muttering under her voice, saying: “Does this project exist? Or this one? (...) Who here has ever made a single proposal for a socio-economic project? I am not in agreement that *this* is a priority!”

Some forty residents of the Spinetti Dini district – the administrative area where Pueblo Nuevo is located – are spread thinly around a large and dilapidated hall just past the western edge of the barrio. We are some eighty feet from my front door on La Cuesta, but I have only ever recognised residents of the barrio here on one

---

<sup>1</sup> Santa Domingo is the third barrio in the Albarregas valley, just to the South of Pueblo Nuevo and separated by the Camp Elias Bridge, see Map 2 in Chapter Two.

occasion - the first meeting I attended with other teachers from Fundación Cayapa. Since that day, I have attended weekly meetings on my own, gently chided by my colleagues who send me in their place as “our spy” and chuckle at the idea that meaningful “*participación*” - participation - might happen there.

After three hours of failing to reach an agreement about which projects can be said to have taken place, and despite insistence from the chairperson that only after signing off past projects can the group make new proposals, the *Sala de Batalla* - the ‘battle room’ - closes. The participants disperse, grumbling, into the warmth of the night.

The following week I climb the hill and find a handful of regular participants in conversation outside the meeting place. The hall doors are chained shut. Gloria’s husband, Herman, tells me that the party representatives could not return, as they are visiting the houses of Chavistas in the neighbouring barrios to encourage them to turn out at the following month’s Municipal Elections. Amongst the chorus of crickets and over a public broadcast on a car radio, talk turns to the PSUV.

“What we need is to have a nucleus of *formación* - of ideological development. This is the first thing. (...) Now we are in power and what have we done? Where is the popular power? There are how many Communal Councils, and what?”

“The projects that they talk about, all of them have received funds (...) They gave sixty thousand Bolivares.<sup>2</sup> Ask them ‘where are the sixty thousand Bolivars?’ I asked the chairperson and she said ‘No! That money was for the campaign’ and I said ‘What campaign?’”

Concerns about the ineffectiveness of participatory politics and the subversion of participants’ interests to party interests were voiced frequently during fieldwork. Spaces at the edges of meetings were often used to question the responsiveness of the party and the ideological development - the *formación* - of leaders. These Chavista participants felt their roles to be constrained by the PSUV’s hold on the formal channels of Participatory Democracy. They complained about processes

---

<sup>2</sup> Around 10,000 USD at the official rate, around 1,000 USD at the black market rate.

that are not clear, where decisions happen in the dark, driven by agendas that are unknown. Above all, they complained that at the meetings people “...just talk”.

The assembly in November 2013 described above was the last that I attended of the weekly Sala de Batalla. By February 2014, the surrounding area was occupied by anti-government protesters, making the large and rowdy meetings too dangerous to hold in public. Together, the grumblings of the participants and the violent reaction of the anti-government protesters reveal something important about the contemporary culture of *partidismo* – of partisan politics - in Venezuela. It is not only the opponents of Chavismo that feel alienated from the formal channels of Participatory Democracy, but those at the grassroots of the movement who see themselves as the constituents of Bolivarianism. These frustrations and the exclusion of non-Chavistas are connected to the way grassroots politics has been conducted in Venezuela since the proliferation of barrio communities in Mérida in the mid-twentieth century, and the fundamental tension between the competing notions of governance and of the urban poor described throughout this thesis.

### **Aims and structure of the chapter**

In previous chapters I have demonstrated how both before and after the rise of Bolivarianism, political parties have appealed for legitimacy among barrio populations with two competing premises. Prior to Chávez’s election in 1998, AD and COPEI presented themselves as the patrons of the Venezuelan public, brokering oil money to deliver jobs and public services (Buxton 2000: 3), and protecting against the threats posed by both greedy elites and ghetto thugs (Emerson 2011: 90). They also presented themselves as emancipators, encouraging community organisations and promoting the values of democracy and political inclusion for the poorest (Ray 1969: 31). Since Chávez’s election campaign in 1998, the Bolivarian parties - first as the Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement (MBR) and then its successor the PSUV – have also sought to present themselves as patrons and emancipators. They have presented themselves as both the benevolent providers for the country’s poorest, and as the passive facilitators of a new form of direct, ‘protagonistic’ democracy. I have argued that these premises reflect different folk concepts about the political roles of the public and of state and party

that in turn connect to different ways of thinking about poor urban populations in Latin America. Do the city authorities want participating people to be empowered *revolucionarios*, or do they want them to be passive clients of the state? This chapter adds to this discussion by showing how these inherited practices and ways of thinking about barrio residents can be seen in the role of state and party in administering participatory politics in Mérida today.

During the pre-Chávez *Puntofijismo* era, the tension between these different notions, and the different governance roles they imply, was played out in the experiences of community organisations during successive Acción Democrática (AD) and Christian Democrat (COPEI) governments. Hernández de Padrón (1998: 82) describes how in the early 1960s, institutions were set up by the Betancourt administration to act as “intermediaries” with organisations in the country’s barrios, with the aim of securing popular support for state plans for redevelopment. This resulted, she writes, in the “disarticulation” of community concerns. In line with marginality thinking about poor urban communities, participatory institutions are said to have become primarily mechanisms for modernisation, with most of the activities of community organisations initiated by the state (Hurtado 1991: 12). As described in the Chapter Two and Chapter Three, in Mérida this led to the penetration of city-level meetings by party representatives, leading to nepotistic practices and the subordination of local concerns (Hernández de Padrón 2000: 197). In the 1980s and 1990s, groups in Mérida were part of national debates among the neighbourhood movement about whether the neighbourhood movement should be apolitical or whether they should be involved with party politics and elections (Emerson 1999),<sup>3</sup> ultimately participating in election campaigns in 1989, 1992 and 1995 (Hernández de Padrón 2000: 204). In response, community organisers sought to find new channels away from party and state controls to try and recapture the identity of the movements as being about barrios and other neighbourhoods, rather than about centralised party or state objectives (ibid: 200-202). Discontent around the practice of participatory politics

---

<sup>3</sup> Velasco (2011: 168-174) also describes how neighbours’ movements in barrio communities had to reconcile ideas about longer-term political struggles associated with the radical guerrilla movement of the 1960s, with shorter-term social demands which became more prominent in the 1970s as residents organised to improve access to water, public services and amenities.

was important for the decline of *Puntofijismo*, as state and party alienated the community organisations they depended upon for electoral mobilisation.

The contemporary relationships between community organisations, the government and the PSUV has received limited attention from scholars seeking to evaluate the quality of Bolivarian Participative Democracy. As with *Puntofijismo*, some commentators have criticised the partisan politicisation of the participative processes (McCoy 2006; Gott 2008; Araujo 2010). Hawkins (2010a) emphasises the 'direct relationship' between participants and politicians, and demonstrates a nationwide trend in Chavista-only participation. Another area of continuity is the perceived conflict between the objectives of community organisers and the objectives of representatives of party and state. Fernandes (2007:118) describes a "cultural" conflict with representatives of the traditional bureaucracy, arguing that they hold attitudes to women's political participation that are out of step with local attitudes. While neither the conflict Fernandes' identifies between government and community organisations, nor Hawkins' concerns about *partidismo* are news to Venezuelans, our understanding of the relationship between party, state and people is hindered by a lack of studies that connect the day-to-day experiences of community groups with the accounts of representatives of party and state.

This chapter presents different kinds of evidence to identify continuities in the role of party and state in community organising in Mérida in the years before and after Chávez's election in 1998. The chapter begins by bringing together observations from thirty city-level community meetings. I identify how certain characteristics of these meetings work both to exclude non-Chavistas and to fuel discontent among the Chavista grassroots. The chapter continues with analysis from interviews with key bureaucrats from seven government institutions, outlining the extensive bureaucracy involved with administrating Mérida's community organisations. These accounts are used to show the tensions faced by bureaucrats to balance inclusiveness with more conventional bureaucratic priorities and the influence of the PSUV. Finally, the accounts of community organisers and officials are contrasted to show the contemporary tension around party and state authority over participation. I argue that these three sorts of evidence show inherited tensions in the ways that participatory politics happens that connect to the different ways that the relationship between government and people is thought



about in Venezuela. As throughout the thesis, I also use these continuities to discuss what is different about the present time period.

## 1. Constrained participation in invited spaces: evidence from public meetings

This section brings together observations from thirty public meetings observed in Mérida during 2013 and 2014. They show that certain characteristics identified in the scholarship on pre-Chávez participatory politics can be seen today. In the scholarship, these characteristics were i) the subordination of local concerns (Hurtado 1991, Hernández de Padrón 1998), ii) the use of meetings for disseminating party and state information, rather than for decision-making (Hernández de Padrón 1998, 2000) and iii) the domination of community groups by party leadership (Hernández de Padrón 1998, 2000; Ellner 1999; Jugo Burguera 2014). Observations of these meetings and the people that attend them help not only to establish these areas of continuity, but to provide context for the accounts of officials and participants discussed in sections two and three.

Different examples of the seven types listed in Table 1 made up most of these thirty meetings. These have been highlighted as the meetings that included, or were talked about as including, some contribution both from community organisations and from representatives of party or state. None of the meetings described here occurred within barrio Pueblo Nuevo, although two are groups for residents of Spinetti Dini District, within which Pueblo Nuevo is located.

Table 1. Key Public Meetings observed during fieldwork

1. **Frente de Vanguardia Hugo Chávez:** a weekly forum for representatives of different organisations to plan collaborative events and discuss city politics
2. **Sala de Batalla:** a weekly meeting for residents of the Spinetti Dini district to discuss local projects and hear communications from the PSUV

3. **Parochial Assembly:** one-off assembly for residents of the Spinetti Dini district to propose new projects at round-table discussions
4. **Communes Conference:** a semi-regular event bringing together Commune activists from around Mérida State to share best practice and discuss strategies
5. **The Street Government:** (May 2014) a public consultation drive visiting cities across the country as part of, with a series of different events held in Mérida over one weekend
6. **The 'HBCh':** weekly forums for smaller residents groups of PSUV activists, similar to the Bolivarian Circles seen in the 2000s
7. **Closed meetings:** three separate examples of "closed" meetings with limited attendance from representatives of community organisations

Understanding the logic of these different types of meetings during fieldwork was challenging. This was due in part to a lack of clarity in the descriptions of different participants around what the functions of different groups were, coupled with the changing activities from week to week. This lack of clarity is in itself revealing. Participants seemed to attend meetings without knowing what to expect, while the content of the meetings that were held weekly (1, 2 and 6) mostly lacked a sense of continuity from week to week – with the exception of election-related discussions. Most of these meetings lasted only a couple of hours, while the series of meetings making up the Communes Conference was spread over two days. The smallest meeting, the HUBECHÉ was attended by only seven people. Most were attended by between twenty and thirty people. Apart from the four weekly meeting types, the others were one-off events. Four of the meeting types were intended for residents only (2, 3, 4 and 6), while the "closed" government meetings were by invitation only.

**Meeting formats: working table discussions and the 'right to speak'**

Parts of these thirty meetings can be separated into three basic formats: semi-scripted speeches or presentations, more rambling, undirected open discussions and more structured “working table” discussions intended to lead to consensus and some kind of action.

The events or parts of events with greater planning and association with the state and party typically favoured the use of semi-scripted speeches and presentations. This included parts of the Communes Conference, the PSUV ideological discussions and the high-profile Street Government. In October 2013 Nicolas Maduro’s *Gobierno del Calle* – or Street Government – visited Mérida city. Events ran over a single weekend and included the destruction of hundreds of confiscated firearms in the Plaza Bolivar, a public hospital tour and an event for women’s groups at a Cultural Centre in the downtown neighbourhood of Santa Elena. This last event was attended by more than a hundred representatives from women’s groups from across the city, who filled the hall and sat in rows wearing pink T-shirts with pro-Chavista slogans. The event consisted of a lengthy speech during which the Deputy Minister for Women and Gender Equality recounted the Revolution’s achievements on progressing women’s rights. To the surprise of some in the audience, the event ended without questions from the floor, and without hearing from the delegates on stage - who each stood to receive enthusiastic applause before returning to their seats.

In its lack of dialogue or space for discussion, this event was a rarity, made especially notable by the way the Street Government had been described in party publications. This event was part of what President Nicolas Maduro has described as a national initiative of public consultation, intended as a key part of a new system of “popular government” (Maduro in Robertson 2013) which is reported as having consulted tens of thousands of people across the country since its introduction in 2013.

With the exception of the Street Government event, speeches in these meetings were always followed by opportunities to use the second format: the open discussion. This practice was a particular feature of the *Sala de Batalla*. The chapter opening – Gloria’s questions at the *Sala de Batalla* – was a notable example of the use of questions to challenge what had been said by the leaders. Typically the

chairperson would take numbers and those with raised hands would respond at length to what had been said. Participants practiced the principle they described as *derecho de palabra* – or “the right to speak”. Defined in the 1999 Constitution as the right “to be part of debates” (Article 245), in practice this right roughly translates into a license to talk indefinitely without interruption. The capacity of speakers from the floor to talk without notes seemed to be matter of personal pride. It is also a tradition that connects to the historical literature: Ray (1969: 22) commented that barrio residents thought nothing of wandering into government offices to approach officials, and evidence from these meetings suggests that this certainly continues today, as many participants in meetings seem to be unafraid to contradict high-ranking speakers from party and state.

At the Frente de Vanguardia, lengthy political anecdotes were a regular feature of meetings, with some members seemingly taking the opportunity to demonstrate their capacity for ideological elaboration. The problem of “too much *derecho de palabra*” was also raised during Frente sessions due to the impact of the principle on the length of meetings and concerns about a lack of concrete action. Andry Rangel - a youth organiser with training in techniques for structuring meetings - tried to encourage the use of stricter agendas for meetings in other groups, including the Frente Vanguardia.<sup>4</sup> She said:

“This happens a lot. Too much (...) It is difficult to have control. Sometime people come to meetings to show how they feel. To have catharsis there. But they have to understand to respect the time of everyone else, But look, you have to understand the people (in Venezuela) are very relaxed!” (interview w AR 03.06.14, MC)

The third meeting format, the *mesa de trabajo* – or “working table” discussion – is in part designed to balance participation more evenly. These were smaller discussions with predetermined themes, a chair person and often a minute taker, and shorter contributions as each member takes turns around the table. This simple format was used at the Parochial Assembly in October 2013 to suggest new

---

<sup>4</sup> At Youth PSUV meetings, I observed Andry use these techniques to keep meetings running to a minute-by-minute schedule – in contrast to every other meeting I attended in Venezuela.

project proposals for eight different project areas. A strength of the approach is that the tangential *derecho de palabra* anecdotes are cut out – perhaps because the audience for the rhetoric is reduced - and each participant is encouraged to contribute.<sup>5</sup>

The working table format didn't always succeed in disturbing the different levels of authority of different participants. At the Communes Conference, the people attending were divided, attending separate round table discussions on a first-come-first-served basis. The group discussing "security", was attended by two National Guard Generals, and the Governor for Mérida State, the former student leader Alexis Ramirez. As Governor, Alexis is both the President of the State's branch of the PSUV, and the administrative chief of its bureaucracy. The crowded class room was standing-room only. The facilitator explained the procedure for the round-table session: the community representatives and officials around the table could raise questions in turn, and then the group as a whole would work through a set format to discuss solutions and assign responsibility for taking action using boards on the wall. This attempt to bring local organising techniques to a high-level meeting didn't work. As each commune member described the security concerns in their communities, either of the two Generals or Governor Alexis seemed compelled to respond at length. Following each concern raised, one or another of the three officials would speak to the group for several minutes, outlining the progress being made by their organisations, and the difficulties they faced in doing so. After each exchange, the facilitator politely reminded all present of the format, and explained that the participants were there as equals: the National Guard and the Governor were expected neither to defend their actions nor provide solutions. Despite these explanations, the pattern continued – first local speakers, then direct responses from the different representatives of party and state, who seemed increasingly frustrated by the conversation. Eventually, first Alexis and then the Generals in turn announced other commitments, and excused themselves from the meeting. As the meeting closed, the white board was littered with problems, few

---

<sup>5</sup> One practical shortcoming of this method is that different working table discussions often happen at the same time – as in the case of the Parochial Assembly and the Communes Conference. One spokesperson attending the Parochial Assembly said that they had learned to plan for these events to work in teams and divide their efforts in order to make proposals in different areas.

solutions, and the column intended for “assigning responsibility” was left almost blank.

In some ways, this scene serves as an appropriate metaphor for the relationship between Mérida’s community organisations and the state administration. The Governor and National Guard Generals, pulled away from the day-to-day business of a State in the latter stages of a military crisis, appeared uncomfortable and confused by a format that neither recognised nor made demands of their authority. One of the community organisers involved with facilitating the discussion reflected on this, explaining how trying this sort of joint-working is necessary, but that the organisers recognise that the culture of more egalitarian participation that they are trying to develop is in its early stages, and is hampered by the lack of authority that has been delegated to the Communes.

These different formats also connect to the direction of travel of information at the meetings. During speeches, information was given from speakers to the audiences. Examples included announcements of government or party successes (Street Government, Communes Conferences) information regarding mobilisation for election campaigns (Sala de Batalla) disseminating ideological content (PSUV Juventud, PSUV ideological discussions, HBCh, Sala de Batalla) or directions for coordinating between the different bodies of popular power (“Closed” meetings). Of them all, only the Sala de Batalla meeting described at the start of the chapter contained specific information about local spending.

Where open discussions or questions followed these speeches, these were opportunities for community representatives to challenge what had been said (Sala de Batalla, Parochial Assembly, PSUV ideological discussions, HBCh). These discussions, however, were notable for the lack of dialogue between participants and representatives of state or party. Speakers from the floor would make their point, often speaking at length using the principle of *derecho de palabra*. The representatives of party or state would then thank them for their contribution,

perhaps making notes or assuring them that their concerns would be considered, and then move on to the next statement from the floor.<sup>6</sup>

Another function of these meetings was for the meeting convenors to receive information from the attending representatives of community groups. Working table discussions collected information including the project proposals at the Parochial Assembly, and concerns and suggestions from community groups at the Communes Conference. Other information was designed to help plan mobilisation as part of national election campaigns.<sup>7</sup>

The absence of any mechanisms for decision-making at any of these meetings was particularly notable. With the exception of agreeing proposals to submit to party and state authorities for consideration, the only firm decisions made during meetings were around scheduling future locations and times for future meetings. These were decided with a show of hands. At the Frente de Vanguardia, where practical decisions needed to be made to coordinate community outreach activities, these were typically made by a smaller leadership group away from the main meetings.<sup>8</sup>

Given the lack of decision-making that happens at these meetings, the attendance of the participants needs an alternative explanation. In the 1960s, Ray (1969: 21) observed that barrio residents felt “assimilated” by being in touch with party structure and having a sense of participation in city life. Today, Chavista participants – from different sorts of communities - explained their participation in

---

<sup>6</sup> Partly, this dynamic was about the size of these meetings, for example compared with the working table discussions, but the result was that any challenges to what had been said so far would not receive a response. One example was Gloria’s challenge to the projects report at the Sala de Batalla described at the start of the chapter, a direct challenge to the information presented. This comment was lost in a sea of questions and received only anecdotal responses from other speakers from the floor.

<sup>7</sup> In October 2013 the Sala de Batalla issued short questionnaires on party affiliation for community organisers to take back to their communities and complete, ahead of visits by candidates for the Municipal Elections.

<sup>8</sup> As discussed above, these meetings were of different types and were not necessarily thought about as opportunities for decision-making. At local level meetings, such as Communal Council meetings, or meetings of campaign or services-based groups with activities to coordinate, such as the PSUV Juventud or Fundación Cayapa, decision-making is much more regular. However, the implication behind narratives of “protagonistic” democracy is that there are regular opportunities for public influence over policy. The meetings discussed here were opportunities for this to happen, where it did not.

terms of a commitment to the wider project of participatory socialism.<sup>9</sup> In part, this appears to be about connecting with a powerful narrative of social change and class justice. It is also about participants constructing identities for themselves – at times as triumphant social *revolucionarios*, at times as embattled defenders of Chávez’s legacy.

### **Attendance limits: the right kind of participants**

Observing meetings as a fly-on-the-wall or occasional contributor meant that gauging the demographic characteristics of the participants was not systematic. The following assessments were done by sight only.

The meetings described here were all mixed gender, usually with a roughly even mix of male and female participants, and with both men and women making similar numbers of contributions from the floor. This fits with the research collected by Hawkins’ (2010) national study into participant demographics in Venezuela’s different community groups. Speakers and chairpersons at meetings were also mixed gender, although all of the more senior officials were men - the National Guard Generals, The Governor, and higher-ranking PSUV representatives and bureaucrats - with the exception of the Deputy Minister for Women and Gender Equality, who was female. While the ages of participants were mixed from late teens to people in their seventies, the majority of participants at all of the events here were aged between forty and sixty.<sup>10</sup> In part, in Mérida this age range may be connected to the existence of a large and active anti-government student movement, and to the existence of the Youth PSUV, whose activities were largely conducted at separate student-age events.

Making judgements about the social class of participants was harder, including whether they were residents of poorer areas. Ray (1969: 20) suggested that barrio residents were easily identifiable outside of their communities due to “their barrio clothes”. Making these sorts of visual judgments today would not be reliable, if it

---

<sup>9</sup> A further explanation is that participants expected material gains, for example benefits like consideration for subsidised white goods or housing, both of which were seen locally as being connected party membership (see Chapter Six).

<sup>10</sup> This age range also fits with the findings from Hawkins’ (2010) study.



ever was.<sup>11</sup> Instead, I relied on conversations with participants. Across the different meetings these revealed a variety of professions, including university professors, students, tourism workers, teachers and the retired. Throughout fieldwork spotting residents of Pueblo Nuevo, of whom I knew dozens by sight, was very rare. I did meet spokesmen of the two neighbouring barrios, Simón Bolívar and Santa Domingo, at several meetings, notably the *Sala de Batalla* and Parochial Assembly. At the Frente de Vanguardia, which included meetings to coordinate events in Mérida's barrios, the lack of participants from barrio communities was a particular concern. One member, Maria Cotta said:

“This is one of our faults. We have not incorporated *la gente del pueblo* - the popular sectors (...) We need to do this to help our group.”  
(interview w MC, 03.07.16, MC).

The concerns of Maria and other participants in the Frente de Vanguardia about the lack of participants from the popular sectors in their group are notable because the Frente declares itself to be committed to popular politics, was active in community engagement projects in Mérida's barrios, and because Frente meetings were held at the Julio Febres Cultural Centre, some thirty feet from the North-East entrance to Pueblo Nuevo. From frequent conversations on the issue, it was clear that Maria and her group saw people from poorer communities not only as people that her group ought to include, but as the participants that could bring a certain capacity for political action. Here we see the folk concept of the barrio revolutionary in practice: the assumption that people in Mérida's barrios are experience or inclined towards political radicalism of the political radicalism. These notions do not fit with my day-to-day experiences of either participating or non-participating people in Pueblo Nuevo, where throughout fieldwork, residents of Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolívar expressed their concerns about problems

---

<sup>11</sup> During fieldwork, I found that middle class friends in Mérida shared Ray's belief that they could judge what sort of neighbourhood a person lived in by their clothes and appearance. While it is not unreasonable to imagine there is some sort of connection between how you dress and where you live, both Ray and my *Mérida* friends are likely forgetting that the barrios are home to extremely diverse populations. The extremely smart Sunday church Sunday best worn by the churchgoers and the expensive-looking gym gear worn by Marleny and Jose-Luís on their trips to the local aerobics park would contradict these assumptions. These examples show some limits to this kind of marginality thinking about barrio populations.

facing the two barrios, but rarely talked about problems facing the rest of the city, even during the tense months of the anti-government occupations. This scenario appears to represent a continuation of the trend of “*comunitarismo*” observed by Hernández de Padrón (1998: 209) about organising in the city in the 1980s and 1990s, when barrio populations began to look inwards, due, she says, to dissatisfaction with the sorts of participation that happened in city-level organising.

In addition to these limits, the biggest constraint on participation stemmed from the affiliation of these events to the PSUV and the broader Chavista movement. While participants voiced concerns about low participation from barrio residents, the fact that these meetings were all spaces intended only for Chavista participants was something that seemed to be taken for granted by those in attendance. At the Communes Conference, for example, I asked a delegate from *Los Chorros* - a low-income barrio to the south of Mérida City - who participated in her commune:

“Why, all the world, of course. The entire community- everyone is there. We make sure to include them all.”

“Even *opositors*- opposition supporters?”

“*Opositors*? No, of course not.”

This response – “all the world” – was a common one, as if the idea of non-Chavistas attending meetings was unthinkable. Various practices contributed to the identification of these meetings as spaces with a specific political affiliation. It is important to reiterate that these events – with the exception of the Street Government, the Parochial Assembly and the Sala de Batalla - were not occasions that were presented as examples of public consultation in decision-making about services and public spending. In most cases, the intended audience of the event was highlighted through symbolism of either the PSUV or the wider Chavista movement. This included the use of the PSUV logo on presentation slides and hand-outs, pro-Chávez banners and t-shirts and in the case of the Street Government, singing the PSUV anthem to open the event. The spaces were further branded through shared practices including call-and-response chanting of political slogans, most commonly *Chávez vive: la lucha sigue!* – ‘Chávez lives the struggle goes on!’

Other verbal signals included members expressing concerns about the infiltration of the space by opposition informants and derogatory comments about these *escualidos* – ‘the dirty ones’ – as they are known.

In addition, information about these events was almost always shared directly through closed activist networks, by word-of-mouth or group text messages. At the Sala de Batalla, a register was completed with details about where participants lived, contact information and National Identification numbers. Together, these practices consolidated these spaces as ones where only Chavista supporters could participate freely. This scenario can be considered against the evidence collected by Hellinger (2011: 44-45), that suggests that nearly all participants in “highly organised” groups agreed with opposition involvement in public meetings in principle.<sup>12</sup> Among the participants at these meetings in Mérida, I frequently raised the question of non-Chavista participation, in an attempt to see what responses I could get to the tension between participants’ commitment to popular power and the partisan nature of these spaces.

One participant with various local groups, Angel Vierno, who is also a Communal Council spokesperson from Vice Hermosa, disagreed that spaces like the Sal de Batalla wanted to exclude opposition supporters:

“It is not about opposition or Chavismo. More important is that they have consciousness (...) to work to the same objectives. For example, all of the city is interested in (improving) security. Green, white, red and black. What we want is to have one space to work towards this.”  
(interview w GV, 29.05.14, MC).

Andry Rangel, the youth organiser, reminded me that legally meetings must be open to all participants (interview w AR 03.06.14, MC). She attributes responsibility to the individual:

“This is a contradiction of the Communal Councils, for example. That it is for everyone in all of the community. They cannot be prevented from

---

<sup>12</sup> Hellinger’s study totalled 850 respondents from eleven barrios and three *urbanización* (typically middle-class) communities which were all said to be “highly organised”. In the barrios 96.9% thought everyone should always participate, and 98.7% in the *urbanizaciones*.

attending. It is those same people (opposition supporters) who have to work and participate.”

Other Chavista participants were concerned that if opposition members did attend, they would disrupt meetings and not share the goals of the Chavista participants. This view was fuelled by the experience of some participants, who reported that opposition participants had blocked or derailed projects in the city (interview w JP, 29.05.14, MC). These Chavistas participants saw their plans as synonymous with the needs of poorer communities – just as the needs of *el pueblo* also appear as synonymous with government actions in Chávez’s rhetoric (see Harnecker 2010, see also Chapter Three). In this way, these participants were able to reconcile the partisan membership of their groups with the inclusive principles of *derecho de palabra* and community democracy.

It is important to distinguish here between the affiliation of participants with the PSUV and with the broader Chavista movement. During their time in office, both the PSUV and the two Puntofijista-era parties have been successful in blurring the lines between the party and the state. Part of this is about building legitimacy by acting as brokers for public services (Buxton 2000: 3). The equivalence of party and state, however, is not reflected in the thinking of community organisers who more typically see themselves as supporters of Chávez’s legacy and as activists within the broader mass movement for the Bolivarian Revolution. The Frente de Vanguardia Hugo Chávez, for example, is named after the late President, and was formed to protect his legacy after his death in 2013 (interview w LB, 03.07.16, MC). Meetings almost always included plenty of criticism of party practices (see discussion below). Maria Cotta described her decision to join the collective “because I had heard that there weren’t any PSUV people there” (interview w MP, 03.07.16, MC). Although Maria was critical of both the party and bureaucracy during group discussions, I marched with her through the city carrying a flag bearing Chávez’s face on more than one occasion. This attitude is widespread, and included the vast majority of organisers and activists encountered throughout all my time in Venezuela. Therefore, when activists like Maria use the pejorative “*partidista*”, they make a criticism not of Chavista partisanship, but of the PSUV’s reputation for ignoring the grassroots. This arguably shows the inadequacy of terms like “partisan” (e.g. Hawkins 2010; Hellinger 2011) for describing Venezuelan political

processes. Patterns of support can be distinguished between support for the Chavista mass movement, the President, or much more rarely, for the PSUV. As a result, it is important to discuss the relationship between party, state and mass movement in Venezuela in a more nuanced way.

Observations from these different meetings, and conversations with different participants gives us a picture of the constrained and ways that participation is happening in and around Pueblo Nuevo. While the values associated with the protagonistic, empowered Bolivarian ideal of Participatory Democracy are part of the narrative woven around these groups and spaces, these constraints are in some ways a continuation of some of the frustrated experiences of community organising and *partidismo* from the pre-Chávez era, described in chapters two and three. Part of explaining this continuity is about understanding how different notions about the role of government and people are thought about by bureaucrats who coordinate Mérida's community organisations.

## 2. Patrons or emancipators? The inherited challenge for Mérida's partisan bureaucrats

This section brings together interview responses from key members of the institutions tasked with administering Mérida's community organisations (see Table 2). Each participant also identified themselves as a supporter of the Bolivarian movement. These interviews were mostly conducted in the offices of the relevant institutions, either with prior arrangement or opportunistically. While these locations mean that these participants may have felt pressure to give responses that fit with government discourses, their accounts still show something of the challenge of reconciling the Bolivarian commitment to participatory politics both with these institutions' authority and with the influence of the PSUV.

<p><b>Table 2. Key Officials involved with the administration of Mérida's community organisations</b></p>
---

- |  |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Nelson Ruiz, State Director for the Ministry of Communes and Social Movements</li></ol> |
|--|

2. Noriada Gomez, Programmes Coordinator, FUNDACOMUNAL
3. Herberto Martinez Torres, State Coordinator for the Prefects Secretariat
4. Gudilo Rangel, Coordinator General at the Secretariat of Public Politics
5. Bridget Rodriguez, Participation Coordinator at the State Legislative Council
6. Gabriel Madera, Planning and Engineering Coordinator, Corpo Andes
7. Reyes Lobo, Community Articulation Officer at the Fund for Social Inversion (FONVIS)<sup>13</sup>

The scholarship on participatory politics in the pre-Chávez era identifies certain characteristics of the administration of community organising. These include i) the establishment of an extensive bureaucracy; ii) centralised processes for the registration and regulation of groups; iii) the prioritisation of state objectives over local concerns; and iv) the existence of direct party influence on these processes (see especially Ray 1969; Hurtado 1991; Hernández de Padrón 1998; and Ellner 1999). There is less available evidence about the attitudes of bureaucrats in the pre-Chávez era, or describing the political culture inside of the state institutions. I add these details here as evidence of another way that notions about the state and public roles that fit with the different folk concepts identified in earlier chapters that can be identified in both eras.

### **Mapping Mérida's bureaucracy for participatory politics**

Proponents of Participatory Democracy predict the eventual reduction in Venezuela's state apparatus (e.g. Raby 2006). Staff at the Ministry of Communes said that at the time of fieldwork, Mérida State had 2068 Communal Councils, 45 communes more than 350 registered social movements (interview w NR, 06.06.14, OF). These are joined by numerous residents' associations that often share

---

<sup>13</sup> I have added the acronyms for those institutions which are commonly known by them.

development work with electoral campaigning for the PSUV, such as those described in the previous section. Under the Bolivarian Revolution, however, Venezuela has also experienced an expansion of state bureaucracy reminiscent of the oil boom years of the 1970s. At the local office of the National Housing Fund (FONVIS), Reyes Lobo said that in Mérida State the *Governación* now reportedly employs over twenty seven thousand staff, including those tasked with community development planning and with the coordination of ‘popular power’ (interview w RL, 12.05.14, OF). Various pre-Revolution institutions which had engaged with public politics have reoriented to work with this expansion of organised civil society groups, while other new institutions have been created to implement the new legislation that governs their practices.

Several offices deal with different aspects of the coordination of community groups. The FUNDACOMUNAL, manages the registration of Communal Councils, monitors their elections and allocates funds for small projects. Corpo Andes provides funding and technical coordination for larger development projects, typically those that span more than one community. The National Housing Fund (FONVIS) coordinates the *Vivienda social* housing mission, including dealing with the collective applications that are made by the campaign groups known as *custódios* or *jurídicos* including the *Brisas de Alba* housing collective described in the previous chapter. The regional office of the Ministry of Popular Power for the Communes and Social Movements deals with the development and registration of groups of local councils as they seek to form inter-community residents’ associations. The other organisations mentioned in this chapter are smaller and each report within the *Governación* – the State Department. Their responsibilities include dealing with neighbourhood disputes, supporting local planning and coordinating the ‘public politics’ aspects of Mérida’s State Development Plan.

While these institutions are now part of the infrastructure of participatory politics in Mérida, each has their roots in departments from the pre-Chávez era. The three national institutions have all been renamed during the Chávez era, when most government departments changed their names to emphasise the ethic of popular politics. The Ministry of Popular Power for the Communes and Social Movements, for example, has been through various changes to its responsibilities, most recently combining the administration of participatory government with more protectionist

responsibilities as the Ministry of Popular Power for the Communes and Social Protection.<sup>14</sup> The FUNDACOMUNAL dates its origins to 1962, when the FUNDACOMUN was established as one of the first Organisations of Social Development (ORDES) of Betancourt's Presidency. At State level, this rebranding has not occurred. At Corpo Andes, Gabriel Madera also reported how, after fifteen years of Bolivarianism some of the staff remained in place from Puntofijismo, including people who were known to be opponents to Chavismo (interview w GM, 02.06.14, OF).<sup>15</sup>

These institutions have also inherited their day-to-day activities and processes from the pre-Chávez era. Where the FUNDACOMUNAL registered the prescribed processes for the *Juntas Comunales* and later the Neighbours' Associations, the institution now fulfils the same task for the Communal Councils. FONVIS' work to support Mission Vivienda is a cornerstone of Bolivarian welfare policy, offering "dignified housing" to vulnerable people, including those suffering overcrowding in barrio communities domestic refugees whose houses have been destroyed in natural disasters. The Mission - which builds iconic yellow tower blocks - is a central part of the government's package of support for the most vulnerable. It also revisits a state policy first seen under the government of General Perez Jiménez in the 1950s during the era of the New National Ideal, when apartment blocks were built on the hillsides of Caracas, with the same goal of relieving low living conditions in urban areas (Fernandes 2010: 43).

In response to questions about the roles of their institutions, the different officials all made reference to both Bolivarian emancipatory ideals and the need to regulate participation. Nelson Ruiz, State Director of the Ministry of Communes and Social Movements, emphasised the different needs of different communities, and the need to found participatory action as a response to these particular local characteristics.

---

<sup>14</sup> These blanket changes raise the question: if all government departments are rebranded in this way, does the affix "Popular Power" lose its meaning?

<sup>15</sup> Most of their offices are clustered around the historical and commercial centre of the city, with the colonial Gobernación building taking up a city block at the south edge of Plaza Bolívar. The FUNDACOMUNAL and Corpo Andes - the offices concerned with administering funds - are further out of town to the north of the city.



Despite this, Nelson also talked repeatedly about using community organisations as a means of increasing productive capacity:

“It is necessary to strengthen territorial control - to guarantee the autonomy in the theme of productivity, in the theme of the economy, and to have these networks of social productivity that guarantee the productive autonomy of the territory.”

This emphasis on productivity reflects an institutional objective that is somewhat distanced from the way local economic needs are articulated within community groups,<sup>16</sup> while the objective of “territorial control” seems to clash with Bolivarianism’s emancipatory ideals. Nelson’s account gives an indication of the challenge he faces to reconcile more conventional development priorities with the commitment to emancipation via new mechanisms self-government.

At Corpo Andes, Gabriel Madera also faces the challenge of balancing his own professional assessment with the opinions of community members. He describe show his team, who deal with larger or inter-community projects, look for “technical viability” and evidence of benefits for “the whole community” (interview w GM, 02.06.14, OF). From his description, collecting the ideas of local residents is an important first step to any project, but the ultimate assessments about the benefits of any scheme are made by Gabriel and his team.

Like Nelson and Gabriel, Reyes Lobo, a Community Articulation Worker at FONVI, emphasised the ways that his work responds to community priorities:

“We work together with popular power. It isn’t just us assigning houses. We do it in a way that corresponds to popular power and to the society and the communities. There is participation (...) People and institution united.”

Here Reyes echoes Chávez’s (in Harnecker 2005: 1263-164) representation of unity between government and popular actors. Despite this ‘togetherness’,

---

<sup>16</sup> At Fundación Cayapa, for example, “socio productive workshops” are the closest to a concern with productivity, but are designed in large part as a part of alternative education strategy that is in tensions with ideas about education as a vehicle for state objectives (see Chapter Eight).

however, Reyes' office is principally concerned with assessments of eligibility criteria. These were reflected in his frequent references to "necessity" and "conditions" throughout his interview. At FONVI, these values are set internally, then used for means-testing to decide who qualifies for social housing.

Nearly all of the officials made some mention of peace or social harmony. Herberto Martinez Torres, State Coordinator of the Prefects Secretariat, described how the prefects support the organisation of the Communal Councils (interview w HM, 05.06.14, MC). He highlighted their work to help people "live in peace, with good conviviality, and quickly resolve the conflicts between them". Herberto described using citizen's assemblies to discuss neighbourhood disputes, in "...the hope that the government resolves them". The *Prefectura* are another institution inherited their structure and function from the pre-Chávez era, and although this explanation talks about using a public meeting to address problems, the government is ultimately presented as the agent of change.

Bridget Rodriguez works at the Participation team at the State Legislative Council, who work with Communal Councils and other groups to offer training and advice. Bridget described the team's work as being largely "corrective" (interview w BR, 22.04.14, OF). While they don't control funds for community projects, the team are an additional part of the packed bureaucracy around popular power, with their own regulations and regulators. According to Bridget, the emphasis is on helping groups "conform" to the bureaucratic requirements and speed up the process of getting funding and registration. Their role includes blocking some local suggestions and even giving recommendations to Corpo Andes on project decisions. As with Herberto, Bridget emphasised the importance of avoiding conflict, by using working table discussions offering practical workshops "to maintain the calm, the tranquillity and the peace and cordiality inside that communal council (...) to put things in order."

In these interviews, language such as community benefit, social harmony, family necessity, peace and conviviality share space with more institutional sorts of language such as productivity, viability, and a desire to implement "correct" practice and resolve problems quickly. This gives some indication of the challenges

faced by these bureaucrats in assessing these goods in a way that matches both institutional processes and local attitudes.

### **Processes for regulation, registration and assessment**

As they did on the pre-Chávez era, these institutions also continue to centralise processes for participatory politics. The public faces of these institutions are the cubicles or offices where clerks receive and assess paperwork and the busy waiting rooms where community leaders, activists and other residents queue in line, checking and rechecking their paperwork. At the FONVIS, for example, campaign groups like the *Brisas de Alba* campaign group apply for housing collectively. As described in Chapter Six, the resulting new social housing project to the North of Pueblo Nuevo is considered locally to be the product of 'popular power'. Despite this, the institutions cartographers, engineers and specialists ultimately decide on the suitability of terrain for construction (interview w RL, 24.07.14, OF), the function of the housing campaigns may be largely to aggregate local needs. Eligibility criteria also applies for Communal Councils and Communes, where registration processes have to be completed for groups to receive funding and support. In Mérida, only registered Communal Councils or social movements can apply for project funding from Corpo Andes or the Fundacomunal. The formalisation of the collective strategies and needs of these groups happens in Community Development Plans, in the case of Communal Councils and as Project Proposals in the case of Corpo Andes.

Noriada Gomez, Programs Coordinator at the FUNDACOMUNAL, described how with the Communal Councils the assemblies, voting, elections and the pre-election residents' census are all prescribed and centrally assessed by state officials (interview w NG, 06.06.14, OF). A threshold of thirty percent attendance is specified to pass decisions - a measure designed to reduce the chance of councils being dominated by a powerful minority.<sup>17</sup> Once registered, she said, the process of

---

<sup>17</sup> In Calle Principal, however, voceros cite this threshold as an obstacle to completing electoral procedures necessary to register, while persistent low turn-out at councils that are already registered can result in paralysis. One participating member from another of Mérida's barrios advised me that her Communal Council had been stalled for several months at the point of electing a new team of spokesmen, due to a failure to get sufficient numbers to attend a meeting to ratify the appointments.

attaining funding for development projects is similarly centralised. For most projects, Communal Councils apply to the FUNDACOMUNAL on a project-by-project basis. This is a change from the original fiscal autonomy enjoyed by the first Communal Councils. Noriada explained how originally, each new council was “born with resources”. On registration, each group would receive the considerable sum of 30,000 Bolivars<sup>18</sup> and were given authority over spending it. This provision has now been removed, with greater control returning to the FUNDACOMUNAL. Noriada did not see this as a centralisation of control around her office, however. Instead, she emphasised how the decisions on finances are largely concerned with correspondence with the Integrated Community Development Plans that are designed by local councils themselves. Of course, these plans are also subject to approval by the FUNDACOMUNAL.

At the Ministry of Communes and Social Movements, Nelson Ruiz also played down the regulatory role of his institution:

“We are not the bosses of popular power, we are the *acompanantes* – companions - of the people. We accompany *their* process. So the real power doesn’t exist. I will touch on registration. It’s a process that is born of the people. We are just talking about formality. (...) What can I tell you? How do you refer to power? I can tell you, if I have an idea for the Communal Councils, I can suddenly convene a meeting, but it is on them to decide if they want to accept. I can’t oblige them to participate, understand? Us, what we are doing is the opposite. We are transferring all of the power that we have, if you want to call it that, all the things that we can do, do the people.”

Here, Nelson reproduced an idea about the decentralisation of power that is familiar from government discourses around Communal Councils and Communes. It is an explanation, however, that conflicts with the frustrated accounts of community participants in section three of this chapter.

### **Party influence on Mérida’s institutions**

---

<sup>18</sup> For 2014, this would amount to as much as 30,000 USD.

As well as balancing overlapping institutional and local priorities, these officials all described the close relationship of the institutions with the PSUV. Their waiting rooms, offices and corridors typically feature portraits of President Nicolas Maduro and the late Hugo Chávez alongside posters with revolutionary slogans or advertising upcoming United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) events. There are different allegations about the influence of party politics on the practices of the Venezuelan bureaucracy in general, including those institutions concerned with the coordination of popular power.

It is widely rumoured that non-Chavistas are frequently arbitrarily sacked from government jobs for political reasons. In one example from Pueblo Nuevo, Marleny Angulo-Quintero described her dismissal from a local department of the *Gobernación* due, she believed, to her personal politics, following the election of a Chavista Governor (interview w MA, 19.04.14, PN). Other allegations involve recruitment discrimination using the infamous *la lista Tascón* - the list of signatures used to force the unsuccessful presidential Recall Referendum in 2004 that is now rumoured to be used to block the appointment of any signatory to a position in a public office (Carroll 2013; 26). During fieldwork, people with experience of government institutions complained also about the promotion of officials due to their political rather than professional attributes (interview w CO, 09.09.13, MC). More widely, when bureaucrats attend marches or meetings it is viewed with scrutiny among Chavistas - as the participation of bureaucrats in public political activity is widely interpreted as an attempt to either avoid penalties in the work place or to accrue favour.

In line with ideas about the partisanship of public officials, I first met some of these officials at party-political events, while staff at the FUNDACOMUNAL, Corpo Andes, FONVI and the Secretariat for Public Politics, revealed themselves to be supportive of the revolutionary process though their language and comments. However, these officials also confirmed that there were also staff working at their institutions who were known to be supporters of the opposition. At Corpo Andes and FONVIS, the only non-Chavista staff were described as generally being longer-serving

bureaucrats who remained in post from the pre-Chávez era.<sup>19</sup> At Corpo Andes, however, Gabriel Madera did suggest that recruiters look for “both technical and political profiles” when they appoint new staff. This profiling was the clearest indication of discrimination in terms of recruitment.

Gabriel also said that the institution’s staff are involved with active campaigning, including attending events, “participating” with the party and giving logistical support for election campaigns. He explained this by connecting political ideology and professional working practices:

“We know that, when we are in a public institution, of the government, we have to fit with the *politica actual* –the current politics- right? So, yes. To work in Corpo Andes we have to be clear about the current politics of the government, at the least socialism, revolution, that’s what we’re working with, right? (...B)ut the majority that are here now are in line with the revolutionary process, we have seen that the other way doesn’t serve our country, we’ve learned the history of our country, and also we (Chavistas) are multiplying in all of the public institutions - Communal Councils, Communes, all of them. We go on with the power of the people, right?”

Here, Gabriel’s explanation frames Corpo Andes’ work as part of the broader revolutionary process. This attitude connects to the way that the PSUV has been successfully represented as ‘more than a party’ – as the AD and COPEI parties achieved during the first years of *Puntofijismo* (see Buxton 1999). This blurring of the lines between the party, the “mass popular movement” of Chavismo and the contemporary Venezuelan state, is used to try and legitimise the PSUV’s influence within public institutions.

---

<sup>19</sup> At the Fonvi Reyes said that there was no discrimination around the political preferences of staff, giving his own membership of the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV), as an example of political diversity. The PCV are members of the leftist Grand Patriotic Pole in Venezuela, but are separate from the PSUV and increasingly critical. Although they support the PSUV in presidential elections, they occasionally put forward rival candidates in municipal and state elections. In contrast, I was advised by another PCV party member that after the PSUV victory, some PCV members in the *Gobernación* did lose their positions.

At the FUNDACOMUNAL, Noriada agreed. She said that the Chavista ideology is “not just party”, but is also a “way of working” that is about being “less individualistic” (interview w NG, 06.06.14, OF). Among the different accounts, there was general agreement about the need for non-Chavistas to respect what were seen as the new working practices of Bolivarianism. Gudilo Rangel, Coordinator General at the Secretariat of Public Politics explained his expectations of his *opositor* colleagues:

“If we are in this process, they should respect this process. And we try to win them over to the process (...) The party links the government institutions of the government with the people who are there below. Chávez always wanted that.”

Here, the role of the party is to connect state and society – something that might be difficult to accept for the increasing number of people in Venezuela who are critical of the PSUV agenda and methods.

It is demonstrative of the extent of acceptance of the party role that the theme of party politics does not appear to be a sensitive area for these interviewees. It is possible that these answers have been rehearsed, but the speakers in each case seemed very relaxed and comfortable talking about the influence of the PSUV. In my interview with Gudilo, we joked about his having a poster of President Nicolas Maduro on his wall (interview w GM, 04.06.14, OF). He went on to talk about meeting Chávez as a student activist, explaining how the inclusive vision for Venezuelan politics that he was looking for as a young man is now coming to pass. He talked about the importance of being “a good *politogo*” by listening to reasoned arguments and debating the ideas rather than thinking about party politics. Gudilo, however, also recognised that:

“...there are radicals in the structure, who look for confrontation. Something that this process does have is ideology. And part of this ideology is dialogue and the discussion of ideas. The confrontation of ideas.”

In this explanation political ideology again is represented not as ‘party influence’ but as a principle for good practice – practice that potentially includes challenging the new Chavista politics.

For Noriada, the important thing is that the personnel in the party and the Communal Councils are also equivalent. She said:

“Yes we have contact with (the PSUV). Remember that in the case of Venezuela, all of the people involved with... (pauses) all of the institutions that convey popular power come directly from the party or from a current within (the Chavista coalition) the Grand Patriotic Pole.”

Noriada adds that mainly in Latin America ‘poor people’ have a ‘left-wing ideology’. In her different responses we see how the Bolivarianism occurs as party, as a certain collective work ethic, as part of a homogenous participant identity and now as a rough proxy for social class. These ideas were commonplace during fieldwork – where the lines were often blurred between class, the PSUV and the broader Chavista movement. In part, this draws on Chávez’s ability to present his policies and ideas – now referred to nostalgically as “the road of Chávez” – as equivalent to the interests of the people. In this way, Chávez framed government itself as an institution of popular power (see Chapter Three). This reasoning conflicts with theories that define participatory democracy, popular governance and “constituent power” as separate to representative democracy, populism and “constituted” power (e.g. Negri 1999). It is a conflict that most Chavistas, and in particular these bureaucrats, seem comfortable with, as they reconcile radical discourses of grassroots empowerment with the conventional roles of state institutions and the PSUV as described in this section.

### 3. Notions about government and people: the disordered public and the dominant state

The two sets of information presented above show the tensions between state officials’ and community organisers attitudes about the role of state and party participatory politics. For the officials, the maintenance of institutions’ authority fits with inherited marginality-type ideas about the public as disordered parochials who are in need of corrective measures. For the organisers, the unresponsiveness of the state and the dominance of the PSUV fail to deliver on promises of more



direct democracy and a new era of participatory socialism for the revolutionary Venezuelan poor.

### **The disordered public? A rationale for *funcionalismo***

In their commitment to participation, different officials showed a certain regard for the capability of the public. At the FUNDACOMUNAL, Noriada described how, in most cases, council members were extremely cost-effective, using their resources for materials and using volunteers to undertake unpaid labour and administrative duties. These local *cayapas*, she said, can see mass involvement of communities, with resident often working every Saturday and Sunday to complete repaving work on roads, or building or improving shared sports facilities. According to Noriada, the resulting construction projects often achieve much more than a private firm could have delivered, maximising the community improvements from the finances available. Her description reproduces ideas that are familiar from government discourses about the failings of the private sector and the superiority of communal development approaches as not only fairer but more efficient than the individualism of capitalism.

Despite these successes, however, Noriada described other “fiascos”, where groups were unused to cooperative working. In these cases, she says, the community participants struggled to share responsibility for significant funds, resulting in infighting and project failures. These difficulties, she says, contributed to the 2011 change to the centralised financing decisions that remain in place today. She talked about government institutions having to propel the council process so that later the people can “walk alone”. While Noriada’s responses may have been elicited in part by my line of questioning into the justifications for institutional oversight, her descriptions of the public were consistently reproduced by the other officials.

Nelson Ruiz expanded on the particular nature of urban populations, giving this as an explanation for slower progress among the Communes in Mérida City. He explained how, for him, people in the cities are “different” and their problems, such as delinquency and addiction are “more complicated”. He said that people in rural areas were more convinced of the Bolivarian ideology, while those in urban areas had less understanding to go with a general “lack of harmony”.

Herberto's account of the work of the *Prefectura*, presented the state intervention as necessary to deliver peaceful resolutions, implying that without their intervention, meetings could not have progressed safely. At the Legislative Council, Bridget characterised community participants as disordered and parochial. She talked about resisting engaging with 'gossip' and intervening when Communal Councils "...do things they shouldn't". The idea of these participants as in need of some sort of paternal support or oversight was also seen at the State Council. Gudilo emphasised the importance of 'accompanying' the communities, while at the Fundacomunal, A recurring idea was that community groups are made up of individuals who are somehow underdeveloped and in need of instruction in terms of how to participate the 'correct' way. At FONVI, Reyes talks about the local failure to respect "norms" and other participants to be tolerant of the "laws" of participating. He identified a problem with personal attitudes, education and ideological "formación". This is echoed elsewhere, for example as lack of preparation and a resulting lack of political "consciousness".

These descriptions of community participants as disordered and parochial, and of the state role to regulate these spaces, connect with certain ways of thinking about poor urban communities and their populations discussed in the thesis so far. Slater (2010) describes how "folk concepts" about marginality can be used by officials and politicians to justify certain policies and practices. Here, evidence from Mérida implies a certain way of thinking about community participants on the part of government officials suggests that notions about barrio populations being disordered, delinquent and as "different" are part of a rationale for continuing the kinds of *funcionalismo* – of bureaucratic oversight - seen in the pre-Chávez era.

### **The dominant state? Growing dissatisfaction with *partidismo***

These practices and ways of thinking clash with those expressed by community participants at the meetings described in section one. Like the comments from the chapter opening, the spaces at the edges of meetings were often used to grumble about the limits to participation identified in section one. Above all, the most common criticism by participants in these meetings was of what they saw as a lack of space for dialogue and *autocrítica* - or "self-criticism". This principle, championed by Chávez and later Maduro, has become a by-word for the tensions

between the grassroots and the PSUV. For some, the lack of *autocritica* was interpreted as the subordination of public needs to private interests:

“The problem is we are still currently in plain capitalism. With all this speculation. We are not yet in socialism. What we have is an idea (...) The people who are right at the top are working for the Revolution, but those who are just below are in it for business.”

Others participants were more sympathetic. Juan Valeri is a teacher at the Fundación Cayapa, and a resident in the part of Pueblo Nuevo represented by the Communal Council Calle Principal. Juan described how:

“...(W)hat can happen as well is that there are some *compañeros* who come to instances of power that are there. And they get confused, and they think that to build the Revolution is to defend their power. They are confused, and this is a contradiction. They are confused, and they have political attitudes that are not really revolutionary.” (interview w JV 05.06.14, PN)

Here, Juan sees the tendencies of the state as tied up with a commitment to the Bolivarianism rather than any fundamental self-interest. Like Juan, others described what they saw as the “bourgeois” tendencies as a misunderstanding of the anti-authoritarian principles of participatory socialism. This was often described as a lack of *formación* – ideological development.

As well as these grumblings at the edges of meetings, other expressions of discontent about the relationship between the grassroots were more public. In May 2014 an occupation was held outside the Governor’s offices to protest the treatment of a prefect and Communal Council spokesperson for Campo de Oro, a barrio to the north of the city. The occupation was a fairly small assembly of community organisers from different parts of the city, positioned so that the occupiers could start conversations with other activists and junior officials as they entered the offices. One, Juan Bartoli, explained that they were representing a spokesmen whose community development projects – including some for developing new economic opportunities in his barrio - had not been supported by the PSUV (interview with JB, 29.05.14, MC). Juan described how the projects had

failed due to the withdrawal of support, something he attributed to “pressure from above (and) a structural and legal failing” on the part of the PSUV to consult the public as Chávez had wanted. These examples of informal solidarity away from the formal channels of participation may be an increasing trend. In June 2014, a group of activists from Caracas visited the city, attending meetings including those of the Frente de Vanguardia to promote a new alternative network of organisers with ambitions to expand nationally.

On occasion, public meetings attended by higher-ranking state or party officials were also treated as a forum for raising concerns with the way participatory politics happened. One meeting led by more senior representatives of the state bureaucracy gave a clear impression of the attitude of the bureaucrats towards the grassroots. The convenor explained in his introduction that:

“Today, this is not an open meeting, it is a closed meeting (...) We need to have the *jefes* – the bosses - here, because here, we are going to make decisions”.

The meeting proceeded using an official PowerPoint that outlined the government’s strategy for the “territorial coordination” of the different community organisations. On this occasion, however, contributions from the floor included those from representatives of civil society, who challenged the speaker’s emphasis on territory and argued that the participatory processes should be owned by the communities. The speakers – including participants from the Frente de Vanguardia and spokespersons from local Communes - argued that the coordination of community organisations in the way proposed was a deviation from the original idea, and risked leading to organisations “of paper” where the real power was held by conventional authorities. At this meeting, these comments were received gracefully, but provided only a short postscript following the clear plan for coordination outlined in the previous two hours.

In July 2014, the PSUV responded to the growing alienation of the grassroots Chavistas, by calling on the country’s social movements and community organisations to submit their suggestions for consideration at the Third National Congress of the PSUV. 20,000 submissions were rumoured to have been collected nationwide. At the Frente de Vanguardia, this opportunity was used to

unequivocally raise the question of party responsiveness and the lack of spaces for dialogue and *autocritica*. The group used a working table format to design a submission of proposals that sums up many of the arguments about the relationship between the party and popular sectors. The document calls for “...communal spaces (for) critical discussion and self-criticism”; meeting supporters and potential supporters in their homes; an end to the election of spokespersons without consultation; and the inclusion of community organisations in political decision-making (pp1-2). A “new culture” is suggested for the relationships between party, government and popular power, with the goal of bringing an end to the “bourgeois state” by giving public institutions over to worker and community control (p4).

While these proposals were carefully prepared by the Frente, the HBCCh, the Sala de Batalla and other groups and submitted to the PSUV the week before a national congress to consider. Just how the 20,000 expected proposals could be read and assimilated in just one week was not made clear. Following the event, the gossip in Chavista circles was that the PSUV Congress had proceeded *como siempre* – “as always” – and had been dominated by a list of familiar party delegates. The following month, a packed hall of grassroots activists attending to share their feedback in person were first treated to a lengthy speech from a senior PSUV official visiting from Caracas, who repeated the Revolution’s latest buzzword, in calling for grassroots *lealtad* – “loyalty”. In response, a representative from the Frente de Vanguardia spoke first, arguing that affirmed that “some who ask for our loyalty ask us not to criticize, but criticism is an act of loyalty”.

#### 4. Conclusion: old partidismo, new tolerance?

Writing in 1998 about community organising in Mérida, Hernández de Padrón (1998: 198) described the “brutal *partidista* penetration” of public meetings and state institutions by AD and COPEI in the 1980s and 1990s. Among the Chavista grassroots, the role of the PSUV is talked about in similarly emotive terms today, while the opposition street occupations of the spring of 2014 suggest among opposition supporters have given up on democratic mechanisms altogether. Among Chavistas in Mérida, however, framing problems with state and party responsiveness as about either commercial interests or a lack of *formación* shows

an important difference from the dissatisfaction during the 1980s and 1990s. Under *Puntofijismo*, problems with clientelism and *partidismo* were seen as fundamental characteristics of the political system. Then, party and state officials became seen as class enemies, and critics – including Chávez and the MBR - called for an end to the two-party system altogether. Today, the criticisms are directed at the PSUV and state officials without necessarily rejecting the broader Bolivarian movement. Support for Chávez, whose personal commitment to participatory methods was never questioned among the grassroots Chavistas during fieldwork, is also unwavering. In part, this seems to be to do with not only feelings of loyalty to Chávez, but also feelings of association with and hope for the Bolivarian movement as a step towards participatory socialism. It seems reasonable to suggest that this association has been helped by the emphasis on the more positive notions about the role of the urban poor in social change: as *revolucionarios*.

Despite this important difference in the way political discontent is expressed on the left in Mérida, this chapter has demonstrated other important similarities with how public consultation happens, and in how the public are thought about by state officials tasked with coordinating community organisations. Section one showed how public meetings in Mérida are still used for electoral mobilising and disseminating party and state information - as they were in the pre-Chávez era and similar to the use of public meetings in Cuba since 1959 (Alfonzo and Nunez 1997). Concerns about a lack of dialogue with state and party representatives continue, with different sorts of opportunities for participants to express their concerns, but a lack of accountability. Section two showed how the institutions concerned with administering public participation remain, and continue to control the registration of groups, approve projects and adjudicate in community disputes. Accounts of officials were used to show how party influence on these institutions also continues. Section three showed how the competing notions about the political roles of the state and the public remain from the pre-Chávez era. These notions of patronage and emancipation are carried on through a new language of participatory socialism. These characteristics together arguably continue patterns of “dominated” (Hernández de Padrón 1998) or “disarticulated” (Jugo-Burguera 2004) forms of participation from the pre-Chávez era.

## 8. Fundación Cayapa and Pueblo Nuevo's 'Little School': continuing the tradition of semi-independent barrio organising

*"Chamos, chamos! Escuchamos!"*

Juan calls out across the classroom to where the students have spread out. *Los chamos* - the kids - have just finished breakfast in the kitchen and paraded through the small courtyard to the teaching *salon*, pushing each other as they go. Several have to be called down from the rafters near the ceiling where their game of hide-and-seek has taken them, or pulled back from the front door where the *motos* whirl by in the street outside. Now Juan calls their attention to the board, where the following week's blank schedule is written up. Along with about a dozen *chamos*, who vary from five or six to as old as fourteen, at the back of the room several adults lean on any unused desks: two more teachers, a guest visiting from the PROUT institute in Caracas and myself.

"Now we are going to choose the theme for next week," says Juan. Who has a suggestion?"

The class falls silent.

"Nobody? It can be anything you like. No suggestions? It can be anything at all... For example we could study plants..."

"Yes, plants!" shout several of the students.

“That’s just an example,” says Juan. “It can be anything you like. For example, it could be plants...”

“Yes, plants! *Profe!* Plants!”

“... well Ok. But first let’s hear some more suggestions.”

After some effort Juan draws up a shortlist that includes plants, bears, the stars and several suggestions that seem like regulars. A vote is taken and carefully counted and the unanimous decision is unsurprising: plants.

“OK, plants it is.” Juan smiles at the adults at the back of the room. “Now, how do you want to study plants? Do you want to read books about them? Or plant some yourselves? Or visit a forest or a farm? Or watch a film about plants? Or invite an expert in to talk about them? Which will work best, and which day shall we do what?”

Slowly the week’s schedule fills up according to the preferences of the students, with two day trips planned and a session planting seeds in the schoolyard. Each idea is debated and discussed among the children, who remind the teachers about the need to leave space for football matches and dance practice. By the end of the following week, the courtyard and the classroom will be filled with seedlings sprouting from yoghurt pots and another vote will be taken to decide a new theme.

In the afternoon the children move outside and the adult high-school begins, taught by Vannesa Rosales and Lisbeide Rangel, both student teachers from the Polytechnic Territorial University of Mérida (UPTM). Both are *Merideñas* who grew up in the city centre and have now moved to live in Pueblo Nuevo. On this occasion we are making toothpaste to practice chemistry and maths and to learn about sterilisation. The small class is attended by young mothers from Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar, some with their children. Miguel, the local *mercalito*,<sup>1</sup> closes his store to join us. The students seem nervous handling the equipment, but grow in confidence, as they did when visiting the city centre to find ingredients during the last lesson.

---

<sup>1</sup> First introduced in Chapter Three, Miguel runs Pueblo Nuevo’s branch of the MERCAL subsidised food store, selling groceries and household goods from a room at the front of the CEDECOL building.



The adult course is a recent addition to Pueblo Nuevo's little school - *La Escuelita* - and the group are still working each other out. In the small community, they have known of each other and share relatives but some have never spoken – a difference, for now, from the familiarity shared by the *chamos*. Like the younger students, the adult group have designed their curriculum from scratch, choosing this class in part because of the scarcity of toothpaste - an imported product- during the economic crisis. At the end of the class, with some students still wearing their paper masks, the group completes the daily *systematización* together, listing which areas the students feel they have covered to present to the board of education as evidence of their learning.

As the adults leave, the *chamos* return to take over the building for the remainder of the day, playing games on the last working computer. Later on the older children disturb the Communal Council meeting by smuggling a motorbike through the front door under the noses of the *voceros*. The children tolerate the adults as playthings or nuisances, safe in the confidence that comes with being told daily that this is *their* space. As night falls they drag the audio equipment down the stairs from the radio station to play reggaeton and practice dance routines under the stars.

### **Aims and structure of the chapter**

The thesis so far has demonstrated how community organising is happening in and around Pueblo Nuevo in the context of tensions inherited from the pre-Chávez era. These tensions can be seen in the ways local groups are administered by state and party, as well as in the response and strategies of local groups to fulfil their objectives in a new national political landscape. This analysis has in turn been connected to the ways that the identities and political roles of barrio populations have been thought about in folk logic, academic writing and in the Bolivarian public narrative. This chapter continues this analysis by discussing how Fundación Cayapa's little school continues precedents for semi-independent community organising from the pre-Chávez era. In a case study of the work of the group I knew best in Mérida, I present a detailed picture of the work of the group, as well as continuing the broader analytical work of the thesis by adding detail to the folk concept of the barrio revolutionary.

During my time working at Fundación Cayapa, I returned often to the question of how Pueblo Nuevo's "little school" fits with the broader processes of institutional change of the Bolivarian Revolution as an example of community organising. In some ways the education and community development collective is tied up with these processes: the school's alternative methods match the government's promotion of Latin American popular education principles, a mural of Chávez and Castro marks the front of the school, and teachers' salaries are partly paid by the board of education. In other ways, the school is out of step with the practical reality of the new "Bolivarian Schools" and Education Missions: party-politics are never discussed in class or meetings, coordination of the group's activities is independent and democratic, and learning methods are more of a departure from conventional teaching. This chapter discusses the messy role of Fundación Cayapa as part of an attempt to better conceptualise how community organisations fit within local and national political histories.

The chapter draws on observations made during the nine-months spent working as a volunteer teacher with Fundación Cayapa and on interviews with staff members and recordings of staff meetings.<sup>2</sup> I begin by using the accounts of teaching staff to describe the development of the school project. These accounts are used to show how the work of the school may be contributing to different kinds of community improvements in Pueblo Nuevo, including the reduction in street violence and improved community cohesion. The chapter continues by locating this work in two connected traditions of alternative education: the processes of Bolivarian educational reform in Venezuela, and the wider movement for alternative education in Latin America. The analysis concludes by tracing precedents from Pueblo Nuevo's history of student-led, alternative community organising. I argue that in making up for state failures, their pragmatic strategy and their semi-independent status, Cayapa continues important characteristics from

---

<sup>2</sup> During the nine months I spent in Pueblo Nuevo, I taught at and participated in the daily adult high-school classes, including leading sessions on basic research skills for application in the community. I also ran arts workshops for the young people, taught guitar classes and gave occasional English classes to residents and students. I also participated in and helped plan various events including different excursions for the young students and helped make two short films about the work of the school.

the rich tradition of semi-independent organising in the barrio during the pre-Chávez era.

## 1. Teaching Pueblo Nuevo: meeting barrio circumstances with holistic education

While this chapter will identify three connected sets of precedents for the work at La Escuelita, the teaching staff all gave explanations of their work that framed their project as a response to the conditions of everyday life in the barrio. The staff described how Fundación Cayapa grew out of four separate community projects which were running in Pueblo Nuevo in 2009. These four projects were: the *Tareas Dirigidas* – or “directed tasks” – after-school club, the Barrio Adentro clinic, Lisbeide Rangel’s dance workshops and Radio ECOS. The teachers, who each started with a connection to one project or another, described how they began to communicate together, recognise shared problems and eventually conceive the idea for what they describe as an “alternative school” to combine their different activities (interviews w JW, 31.5.14, SB, and LR, 16.5.14; VR, 21.7.14; JV, 5.6.14 all PN).

The most notable activity of the organisation was its primary school, which by the time of fieldwork in 2013-2015 had around twenty students aged between five and twelve years old. These students attend morning classes and receive daily breakfast and other meals. A new adult-high school started in 2013 and various workshops, sports and cultural events are also run by the group. In the video describing the work of the school, filmed in 2011 (Sosa et al 2011), the group describe themselves as responding to the high number of school-age children in Pueblo Nuevo who had dropped out of or never attended education. This is a generational problem for Pueblo Nuevo, where 25% of women and 26% of men had not completed primary education, compared with a national average of 8.4 and 11.5.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> These statistics are from the 2011 household survey completed by Barrio Adentro, education completion in Pueblo Nuevo. In addition, 67% of women and 70% of men had not finished secondary education, compared with 64.4% and 76.2% at national level. Statistics for school-age attendance are not available for Pueblo Nuevo, but if national rates are reflected, it is likely that children remain more likely to complete both primary and secondary education than their parents, reproducing the trend Ray (1969: 26) observed in Venezuelan barrios the 1960s.

Janeath Lopez, a life-long resident of the barrio now in her late forties, is now the director of Cayapa. She describes how the project began when she began to rebuild the community library that had existed in the 1970s as the community work part of a teaching degree at the University of the Andes (ULA) (interview JL, 24.05.14, PN). Janeath describes how she and her classmates cleaned and painted the back room of the CEDECOL building and acquired a collection of books for residents to borrow. Surprised at the enthusiasm and high levels of participation among the other residents, and after realising the teaching needs of the many young people who came to use the space, Janeath began teaching an after-school class in the new library. She describes this as a response to the needs of many of the children in Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar, many of whom by twelve years old had never attended school as they are “without papers”. This means that the government has no record of their existence, “...even though they lived so close to the centre of the city”. Janeath, who is a single parent with three children, describes how other children had dropped out of the school they attended just beyond the edge of the barrio. She describes how they were unable to cope with the rule-based learning environment after what she sees as their more “disordered” living situations in Pueblo Nuevo.

As lessons continued to be well-attended, Janeath was encouraged by Professor Myriam Anzola at the ULA to continue the classes when she graduated, and would eventually combine with the projects described below to open the barrio’s Alternative School in 2010. Connection with the activities at the CEDECOL building, including the increasingly active Barrio Adentro clinic, added impetus to the group as an increasingly joined-up service developed. Cayapa’s teaching staff recalled how their methodology quickly evolved from a rule-based classroom to the more democratic practices described in the opening section (interview w LR, 16.5.14; interview w JV, 5.6.14, PN). As the group developed varied activities to keep the young students interested, they also developed a broad conception of “what is a school”, as Juan put it, (ibid). For the teaching staff, this means engaging not only with the students but with their families, and working towards improved social harmony. In the twin barrios of Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar.

### **Engaging “*lo privado*”: collective responses to family problems**

The conception of the work of community organisations in literature on Venezuela is overwhelmingly public in its focus. Institution-level work on cooperatives (Harnecker 2009) Communal Councils, and regional work on social movements focus on shared, community-level solutions and negotiations between communities, political parties and the state (e.g. Fernandes 2010; Duffy 2012; Gill 2012). This literature largely reflects the focus of government discourses in Venezuela, which focus on the resolution of more public, shared community problems (e.g. Chávez in Harnecker 2005: 162-177). Much of these public activities have a strong bearing on what might be termed 'family matters', through the provision of health, food and education services to family members. However, there is a certain dissonance between the sorts of private issues that fill in-depth works in urban slum communities in the region (e.g. Scheper-Hughes 1992) and what appears as the public realm of self-help groups and community activism. Many of the community needs in Pueblo Nuevo - identified above - do not take place at a public community level, and in the words of Cayapa staff fall under the heading of *lo privado* - "the private".

Like any community, Pueblo Nuevo has a mix of different family scenarios. As seen in studies of low-income urban communities in Latin America Pueblo Nuevo has high levels of parental absence – most commonly the father. Under-age and unplanned pregnancies in the community are common, results which were supported by interviews with Barrio Adentro staff (interview w MP, 23.07.14, BA, and GB, 20.04.14, MC) and Cayapa's teaching staff. Many of the family scenarios of Cayapa students include those where drug addiction or alcoholism are present, or where the arrest and imprisonment for drug-related crime results in parental absence. As a response to overcrowding in the community which dates back to the 1960s (Jugo Burguera 2014), most homes house several generations, with maternal roles in some cases being filled by grandparents or siblings in place of absent parents. Among these families are those where there is no or only irregular economic activity. Domestic violence is also reported to be a problem. Several teachers reported that they knew some of the young students had witnessed extreme violence or the deaths of family members in their homes.

In this context family engagement at Cayapa is a fundamental part of the group's strategy. Although parents' evenings were not well attended during fieldwork, the

family background of each student was well known to teachers and new students were introduced with a staff meeting discussion around the challenges likely to arise from a student's background. Engagement during fieldwork extended beyond a counselling role, however, and included visits to students' homes to discuss barriers to attendance, often with other students in tow. Other examples of the work in this area included mediating following a violent family conflict, discussing treatment for addiction and mediating around the issue of a young female student's relationship with an older local man.

In one particular occasion, different kinds of support were offered over a long period to a family who had had their adult family members arrested during a night police raid. Supported offered by Cayapa included arranging legal advice, helping with childcare, offering emotional support and included a series of meetings to plan and arrange alternative economic activities for family members on their release. This support amounted to a long-term strategy both for moving on from criminal activity and for coping with the sudden absence of parental figures. The closeness of teaching staff to these family members from working with their children appeared to help the organisation respond to this crisis, including through the use of family meetings with Cayapa staff and on school premises. Staff were also able to act as a bridge to services outside of the barrio.

The broad community work role increasingly assumed by Cayapa's staff remains defined in terms of what works for the younger students. From the way Cayapa was talked about in the community throughout fieldwork, it is clear that staff retain their identities as teachers first and foremost, meaning important work to resolve private problems in the community continues under the organisation's non-threatening identity as a school. This intensive work with students' families is something that has developed as the credibility of the teachers has grown in the community. Janeath describes how at first many of these families were in "a state of *hermetismo*". She explains how the social isolation of the barrio had prevented visits from teachers (interview w JL, 24.05.14, PN). She adds that the intention had never been to work with students' families, but that this element of Cayapa's work is something that "just happened". Later on, from 2013, the creation of a new participatory adult high school curriculum formalised this work with non-school

age members of the two barrios. Here we see how the teachers see the holism of their roles as an evolving response to community needs.

In Pueblo Nuevo, this extra support occurs in two ways. First, teachers work to provide a familial and compassionate environment for students, as Joshua Wilson describes, for teachers “...to become family members to the kids and give them their love and their attention and their time and be positive role models” (interview w JW, 31.5.14, PN). Second, teachers engage directly with the challenges and conflicts taking place within students’ families.

### **Socialisation and sharing: combatting delinquency and gang-violence**

As described in the Chapter Three, levels of everyday violence rose in Mérida’s barrios as the drug trade became a source of income from the 1980s (Jugo Burguera 2014). As Pueblo Nuevo and neighbouring Simon Bolivar became notorious for the sale and consumption of drugs, street shootouts over the control of trade and the muggings seen as being perpetrated by the gangs’ customers contributed to a general sense of lawlessness and a de facto curfew for residents as the streets became unsafe after dark (Focus Group 1, 22.4.14, PN). The two barrios underwent a period of heightened gang violence and drug-related crime in the period from 2003 to around 2007. A near-total absence of police in the neighbourhoods has left the barrio’s most difficult and arguably most urgent social problem solely in the hands of residents’ groups.

One of the founding members of Cayapa, Dr Joshua Wilson explains how for him, the idea of the school was connected to a desire to address the fundamental problem with crime in the community – something he had witnessed first-hand when dealing with gun-shot wounds at the near-by Ambulatorio Venezuela:

“The idea with the school was, try to grab these kids before they pick up the guns and give them a healthy environment, a support structure and a place for them to develop themselves in order to keep them from falling into that cycle of violence. So particularly children from the families that had been part of that cycle constantly.” (interview w JW, 31.5.14, PN)

By providing this space and support, Joshua believes that Fundación Cayapa has contributed to “interrupting the cycle of violence” in Pueblo Nuevo.”. The first part of this strategy involves providing a safe space where children are less likely - and in less need of - being recruited by gangs, and where they can engage with non-violent forms of self-expression.



Photo 2. Cayapa Street Art workshop, May 2014. Sketch reads: 'I love you'

What takes place in the school environment is summarised by Joshua as “basic socialisation”, as participating young people gradually learned to share the school space together. Several of the teachers reflected on the extremely high-levels of student violence in the early days of the school. They saw this as having only been addressed through the abandonment of conventional teaching practices and the shift towards more flexible and more empowered forms of learning. As Janeath says: “What they have seen in the adults they repeat in their childhood experiences with other people.” In this way, the democratic practices described at the start of the chapter are introducing an alternative to the violent responses to disagreements associated with gang culture and in the home lives of many of the students. In this respect, Cayapa may be providing an alternative to the processes of “gang socialisation” which are seen as being a cause of cultures of youth violence in other low-income urban communities (e.g. Stretesky and Pogrebin 2007).



This shift was facilitated through the expertise of Professor Myriam Anzola at the University of the Andes (ULA) (interview w JV, 5.6.14, PN). Cayapa's teaching staff, however, recalled how their teaching practices quickly evolved from a rule-based classroom to the more democratic practices described in the opening section (interview w LR, 16.5.14; interview w JV, 5.6.14, PN). For them, this was simply a response to their early experiences – as quickly found to a rule-based teaching environment to be inappropriate for their student group.

As well as this work with the young people in the community, Cayapa works with certain families who have been relying on crime for their income to seek out alternative economic activities. This is an area of work that has no comparable government project in the barrio. In addition to working with residents whose activities might be seen as more directly contributing to violence, the various workshops, classes and events run by Cayapa also provide a space where people from both Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar can spend time together – in contrast to the separation and mutual distrust and suspicion during the more violent period. During a focus group with the students of the adult bachillerato courses, participants emphasised the change in tensions between the two communities, describing “a new era” and “a changed mentality” (Focus Group 1, 22.4.14, PN). For many of the participants, this was about the communal events staged by Cayapa, with one saying “I think that more than anything it is here, in La Escuelita they put on many things that can help the community”. Several of the participants attributed better community relations within Pueblo Nuevo to this, and criticised the cultural centre in Simon Bolivar that is now largely unused. Again, these assessments fit with much of what has been written on the role of using community activities to reduce conflict and crime, including the use of team sports in combatting gang violence in the community of Revenga in Central Venezuela by teaching discipline and teamwork (Project Alcatraz 2014).

The positive reflections of staff and regular participants ought to be viewed with some scrutiny. On several occasions, different people in Pueblo Nuevo gave the simple explanation that those responsible for crime had either died or been arrested. When I asked Joshua specifically about this during our interview, he defended the work of the school in response to the common perception, saying:

“I know what people are talking about, but that’s not accurate. Because there has always been those cycles where the most violent people, would be killed and it would just be a matter of months before someone else came in and took power back. They (people saying that) are wrong. Most of the gun violence in the streets was being perpetrated by very small groups of people that were usually from the same households and families. And a lot of people from those families, those were the families that we started working with principally. And so the youth in those families had that cycle interrupted. (...) And it sounds really audacious or arrogant and there would be a danger of over-simplifying it like that but... it did! *That’s* what changed. And it changed the whole dynamic of the street. And it also changed the whole dynamic of this barrier between the barrios because we were working with youth from both neighbourhoods that before couldn’t really be friends but all of a sudden now were not just playing together but passing time together all of the time.”

Cayapa staff are likely to reflect positively on the impact of their organisation. It is reasonable to assume, however, that and new shared community and young persons’ services for the two barrios might have contributed to rebuilding the shared sense of community needed to lower gang crime and street violence.

### **Deconstructing marginality: bridging Pueblo Nuevo and the city**

While the different community problems described above are the result of Pueblo Nuevo’s particular history and setting, they are also characteristics that are typical for barrios communities: those lower-income urban communities which remain disconnected from the imaginary of the rest of the city. A third part of Cayapa’s strategy therefore involves bridging the community with other parts of Mérida. During fieldwork, Cayapa’s teaching and community work helped to achieve this in two ways. First, the group gives a reason for non-residents to visit the community. Second, the school provides opportunities for students to leave the barrio and visit other communities.

Cayapa sees non-residents visit Pueblo Nuevo, not only to work on community projects but to live full-time and become – in the words of several residents “a part

of the community”. During my time at Cayapa those of us living and working full-time in the community were also joined by outsiders who came specifically to visit the school, including activists from the PROUT institute in Caracas, temporary volunteers from other barrio communities and other projects in Mérida, representatives of a Caracas-based CSR initiative, journalists from the UK and Australia, artists from a local mural-painting collective, a photographer from the USA and musicians from Cuba and Venezuela. A cultural day in 2014 run by teaching staff and volunteers from the Youth PSUV turned Calle Principal into a dance and music festival, attracting many residents who have not historically been involved with Cayapa. These visitors were attracted to the barrio by word-of-mouth and a growing online reputation, as the reputation of La Escuelita and the alternative form of education practised there grows - due in large part to the video about the school that has been uploaded to YouTube in both English and Spanish (Sosa, C., Rangel, L. and Salcedo, F. 2011).

These are by no means the first visitors to Pueblo Nuevo, and to some extent the two evangelical churches in the community perform a similar function for their congregations and the Barrio Adentro clinic also brings Cuban doctors into the community. However, in attracting this attention to the barrio the school provides one of few important links with the outside world.

Juan Valeri describes his experience of moving to Pueblo Nuevo:

“I am from the middle class, like my parents. I did not know the true reality of Mérida. I knew that here in the valley are barrios, there in the mountains are barrios, but I didn’t really know who was living in the barrios...”

Juan Valeri, Fundación Cayapa Facilitator, 5.6.14, PN

Challenging ideas about what sort of people live in Pueblo Nuevo has become part of the strategy of the school. The various opportunities provided by Cayapa for their students to visit other parts of Mérida are part of a conscious effort in recognition of the limited chance school-age children and young, non-working parents have for leaving the barrio. Opportunities to visit other communities during fieldwork included inter-barrio sports tournaments, dance competitions

with other schools, a near-by hip-hop event, visits to the centre to buy provisions for lessons, and trips to the pool and the mountains in the valley to the North of the City, and in 2013 an expedition to Caracas to showcase the photography of the young students. For many students these are the only occasions when they leave the barrio.



Photo 3. Young Cayapa students visit a cabin in *El Vallecito* in May 2014

Although these opportunities provided by Cayapa are not the first or only means by which residents and non-residents can bridge the divide between Pueblo Nuevo and the outside world, they are nonetheless important for connecting the barrio and the rest of Mérida. This is an area of need for the community that is not addressed by existing institutions of Bolivarian popular power, as the Barrio Adentro, Communal Councils and MERCAL all bring services into the barrio, and reduce the need for residents to leave, and inter-community meetings in the district were not attended by residents of Pueblo Nuevo during fieldwork (see Chapter Seven).

Although the classes for school-age children and adults provide different classes for around thirty local people, the holism of the schools approach – to work with their families and build relationships with and notions about the wider community

– is a contribution that goes beyond the remit of conventional education. While the teaching staff mentioned here described their work primarily as an undirected, pragmatic response to a growing understanding of “what works” in Pueblo Nuevo, the remaining sections in this chapter will consider the precedents for this work in Bolivarianism, the regional alternative education movement, and Pueblo Nuevo’s history of student-led, semi-independent community organising.

## 2. “Our Revolution, here”: Cayapa as part of Bolivarian education reform

Both the extension of education among barrio populations and the move towards teaching methods that reflect the different needs and contexts in these communities is part of a national process of Bolivarian education reform.

### **Improving education for barrio populations**

Hugo Chávez’s election campaign in 1998 made education part of a new commitment to improved social conditions for the county’s poorest. As in low-income urban communities across the continent, Venezuela’s barrio communities had low completion rates for education throughout the twentieth century. Ray (1969: 26-27) describes how campesinos arriving in Venezuelan cities during the mass rural-urban migration in the 1940s-1960s had very low levels of education, leading to a situation where almost no adults had completed primary education.<sup>4</sup> Low literacy and education completion remained general characteristics of social exclusion for Venezuela’s barrio populations in the latter half of the twentieth century, with knock-on effects for employment opportunities. High dropout rates were attributed to the inadequate education infrastructure in the country, particularly where separate cohorts of students attended a shorter, five hour morning or afternoon school session (Griffiths 2010: 614). These ‘double-session’ schools were part of a fragmented system that are seen to have inhibited the attendance of marginalised populations (ibid).

---

<sup>4</sup> Ray also presents the lack of schools in rural areas as part of the explanation for their migration to cities (ibid: 169). The first generation of children to be born in barrio communities were more likely to move on to secondary education (ibid), leaving a legacy of a less-educated older population.

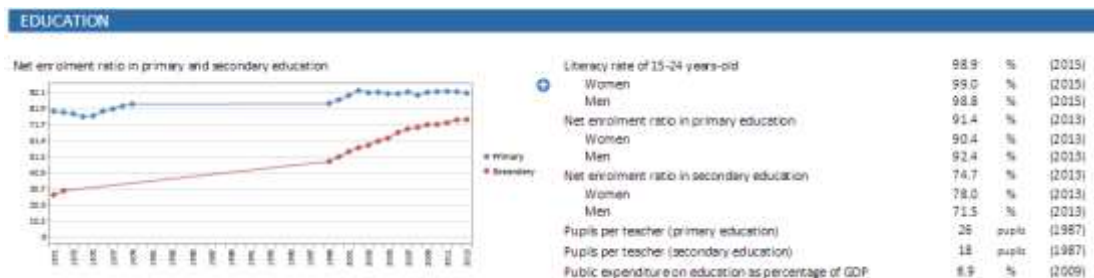
In this context, Chávez made universal education part of his commitment to his core voter based – the urban poor. After his election victory, education was enshrined in twelve articles of the new Venezuelan Constitution as “a fundamental human right and social obligation which is free, obligatory and democratic”. In the first years of his presidency, Chávez using the military to build mobile classrooms under Plan Bolívar 2000 (Chávez in Harnecker 2005: 77).<sup>5</sup> As well as promoting adult education, the Education Department attempted to reform education for school-age children. This followed what the government described as an Educational Constituent Process with hundreds of meetings with parents and teachers. This led to the design of a National Education Project (PEN), which included the creation of “Bolivarian Schools” (ibid: 139-140). The primary task was improving retention rates, with only around 50% of students staying on until 6th grade, 30% to 9th grade, and around 15% or less to Year 11 (Ministry of Education and Sport 2004: 16). Public schools transferring to become Bolivarian Schools abolished their fees, provided free school meals, more scholarships and improved public transport (ibid: 17). A single eight-hour school day was introduced in Bolivarian Schools as part of efforts to target and incorporate historically excluded groups (Griffiths 2010: 614). The government’s stated objective here is to incorporate all learners into the Bolivarian system as new schools are built and existing schools are repaired. By 2010, approximately 34% of all primary school students within the public school system were enrolled in schools described as Bolivarian (ibid: 614-615).

The Bolivarian Government also supported their education reforms with a rise in funding: from 3.38% of GDP in 1998 when Chávez was first elected, to 5.43% of GDP in 2007, or more than 7% if federal government expenditure on the educational missions is included (Chávez 2008). This increased spending appears

---

<sup>5</sup> While Chávez was able to present this work as part of his personal response to the needs of the poor and as part of the new era of revolutionary government, in fact this echoed the strategy from the 1960s when National Guardsmen were used as instructors for literacy classes (Ray 1969: 26). Here we see how – as with discourses around participatory democracy – the Bolivarian political process was framed as being connected to social transformation and specifically to the empowerment of the urban poor (see also Spanakos 2008).

to have had significant effects. In 2007, the government reported increases on the participation rates between 1998 and 2006 from 44.7 to 60.6% for pre-school (0–6 years) children; from 89.7 to 99.5% for primary school-age children; from 27.3 to 41% for secondary school-age children; and from 21.8 to 30.2% for tertiary education (ibid: 47–57). Enrolments have also improved, with significant increases in the rates for primary and secondary schooling, while the largest gains have come in higher education, with increases of 86% from 1999 to 2007 (Weisbrot et al 2009: 13). Graph 1 shows the improvements in the enrolment rate at national level.



*Graph 1. National Education profile, ECLAC CEPALSTAT database: accessed 02.06.14*

From 2003 the Bolivarian Social missions also began the work of extending adult education, including teaching basic reading, writing, and arithmetic (Mission Robinson), higher education courses (Mission Sucre) and remedial classes for high school dropouts (Mission Ribas), where students were also paid a small stipend. Mission Robinson in particular has been reported as having been particularly successful, leading the UNESCO to declare Venezuela free from illiteracy in 2005 (Telesur 2014). Again, these education reforms were framed both as part of the delivery of new and empowering citizen’s rights and as the gift of the benevolent President (Spanakos 2008). This extension of adult education now puts Venezuela some way ahead of the regional average (see Graph 2).

	Male				Female			
	0-5 years	6-9 years	10-12 years	13 years and over	0-5 years	6-9 years	10-12 years	13 years and over
<b>Venezuela</b>	11.5	36.1	28.6	23.8	8.4	28.9	27.2	35.6
<b>Latin America</b>	22.5	30.3	26.1	21.1	24.3	27.6	24.7	23.4

Graph 2. Years of education completed for male and female population between 25-59 years old (ECLAC CEPALSTAT database, 2014)

### **The Bolivarian commitment to popular education**

As well as extending access to basic education, the Bolivarian Schools' curriculum and educational Social Missions for adults are part of a wider goal to deliver popular education as a means to transform Venezuelan society. The Ministry of Education identifies a major goal of the public schooling as "to bring access and permanence to the marginalised urban and rural population at the school and pre-school level, (and) to bring quality comprehensive education capable of overcoming inequality and generating opportunities for human development" (Ministerio de Educación y Deportes 2006: 44). Griffiths (2010: 615) describes the strategy as "the socialisation and preparation of citizens to actively participate in the development of the Bolivarian socialist political project". Here, education is seen as part of the broader revolutionary program, with teachers working to instil "socialist values" in line with Cuban-style mass education. Preparing citizens for an empowered and participatory civic role in particular "...rests on student involvement in the development and implementation of local multidisciplinary projects, in consultation with local school communities" (ibid).



Here, Bolivarian discourses around the emancipation of low-income urban populations draw on the popular education commitment to student empowerment outside of the classroom with its overtly political objectives, including addressing inequality, particularly around gender and income-levels. In Venezuela this approach is therefore intended to extend beyond the class room and school-age students. Chávez reportedly saw the entire revolutionary process as dependent on an organised and conscious people, setting out to “educate them” in his weekly radio and television show *Alo Presidente* (Harnecker 2005: 12).<sup>6</sup> Specifically, the consciousness raising and promotion of solidarity is about general political mobilisation and the erosion of what was commonly referred to during fieldwork as *la mentalidad Venezolana* – “the Venezuelan mentality”. Here the dependent mind-sets associated with rentier capitalism are seen as an obstacle to participatory socialism – a view frequently encountered among Chavista supporters during fieldwork.

### **Cayapa as part of education reform?**

At Cayapa, different members of the group described their work as both dependent on the Bolivarian Revolution, and as an important part of the revolutionary process:

“I believe that under another system of government we would not be able to do what we are doing. No, I don’t believe so. We’ve had the liberty to do it because we’ve been given this environment, right? Right through the social plans, through the objectives in education that is the integration it is possible to do this. Yes, we have felt that it is a new vision of the life, of the politics, of the education, in all of the limits we’ve been given an opening that we can work in this way- this way to integrate with the community, to integrate with the families, to integrate with all of the spaces that we are given like this one. A window has been opened for us”

---

<sup>6</sup> Other examples of the influence of popular education ideas on participatory Chavista initiatives include *BanMujer*, the women’s development bank which draws directly on *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a premise for its grassroots activities (Ciccariello-Maher 2013: 281).

Janeath Lopez, Founding member and Director of Fundación Cayapa,  
24.05.14, PN

“When I came to work at the school.... I realised that the work... the first tarea to do in the Bolivarian process is education. It’s a pedagogical work. It’s a work to look to form yourself (*formarse*).”

Juan Valeri, Fundación Cayapa Facilitator, 5.6.14, PN

These two comments sum up two sentiments that the teachers described about how Cayapa connects with Bolivarianism. The first idea is that the school is made possible due to new processes of national political change. The second idea is that the work of the school is part of a broader process of social transformation.

Despite this, every member of the group also displayed a weary cynicism about the centralising tendencies of the Venezuelan Bureaucracy and the *partidismo* of the PSUV, as described in the chapters six and seven. Only one volunteer teacher was a current PSUV member, and political sympathies for the broader Chavista project were not overtly expressed.

Vannesa described how the absence of party politics at Cayapa developed without discussion:

“...(I)t’s organic. In reality it took us a long time to give an understanding of our political posture to the community. Which as well for me was a mistake. Before, no one knew that we were leftists, no one knew that we were inclined towards socialism. ... until a little bit before the death of Chávez.”

Vannesa Rosales, Fundación Cayapa Facilitator, 21.7.14, PN

It is a political posture that is demonstrated visibly now, as the exterior wall of the building is now painted with a mural of Chávez and Fidel Castro (see Photo 1.).



Photo 1. The mural at the front of the CEDECOL building

While most of the residents involved with the group identify as ‘Chavista’, the party-political discussions that occur in the majority of spaces in this study almost never occur at Cayapa. Bolivarian education policy has been criticised in the western media for the introduction of politics into the classroom (e.g. Economist 2001) – a practice that one teacher at a local educational mission advised is resulting in drop-outs from less-ideologically sympathetic students (interview w CO, 09.09.13). In contrast, at Cayapa, the Revolution, the PSUV and Chávez himself are all mentioned extremely rarely and important Revolutionary constructs like ‘the opposition’ are mentioned infrequently or with humour. In downplaying their shared leftist ideology, the group are able to include opposition supporters among their members and collaborators. Participants in the space talk about their motivation with reference to the needs of Pueblo Nuevo, and the inclusion of non-Chavistas is welcomed.<sup>7</sup> This inclusiveness is in contrast with the explicit exclusion of *los escualidos* - the dirty ones, as opposition supporters are known - from the residents’ meetings I attended outside of the barrio, including the Parochial

---

<sup>7</sup> Although no overtly socialist content is included, sessions on the Pinochet coup, for example, provided an opportunity to reflect on regional politics.

Assembly, Street Government, various public consultation events and the Mérida State Conference of the Communes in May 2014 (see Chapter Seven).

### **More progressive than Bolivarianism?**

At Cayapa, teachers described the Bolivarian Schools as failing to live up to popular education principles. While the government's rhetoric is progressive, they agreed, classes at Bolivarian Schools are taught by teachers who were trained in conventional learning and assessment methods. In taking popular education precedents from the wider region, they argue, Cayapa represents a better fit for the educational needs of Pueblo Nuevo.

Although not a Bolivarian School, Cayapa also has other ties to the national education processes. Several teachers at Cayapa receive salaries from the board of education and are employed through the Miraflor Mayor, a neighbouring school at the western edge of Pueblo Nuevo, beyond the borders of the community. This relationship has developed since the project took off. As attendance at La Escuelita increased, the group eventually attracted funding as the teaching staff successfully negotiated with the board of education for the recognition of the lessons taking place there. This means that the development of Cayapa's practices the group's involvement with the institutions of state education.

The shared CEDECOL building itself had been leased from the Chavista-run Gobernación, but this has currently lapsed (interview w VR, 21.7.14, PN), meaning the different collectives are effectively reverted in the informal occupation of the 1990s. La Escuelita also shares the building with the other organisations that make up the La Lyria Community Development Centre (CEDECOL). Radio ECOS, the Communal Council Calle Principal, MERCAL, the Barrio Adentro clinic and INFOCENTRO computer access salon all have their own funding processes and institutional ties. Cayapa is involved with cultural events, health service delivery, 'socio-economic workshops' and there is a collective ethos that sees staff from the different organisations frequently working together. The general coordinating role of their staff gives Cayapa a complex community role. Supporting these different services may help build important for the PSUV credibility, but the school sits outside of the party's groupings of 'social movements', 'communal power' and 'missions', and the sets of administrative procedures that come with them.

Perhaps most importantly in thinking about Cayapa's connection to education reform, the week-to-week curriculum is which is decided by students, as described in the chapter opening. This freedom is an important difference from Bolivarian schools, where conventional classes are still taught. Similarly, the emphasis on socialisation, mentioned in the previous chapter, also echoes the language Griffiths (2010: 615) uses to describe Bolivarian educational objectives.

At Cayapa, however, teachers described how their move from conventional practices happened organically. Janeath describes how they were unable to cope with the rule-based learning environment after what she sees as their more "disordered" living situations in Pueblo Nuevo. Unlike most schools in Venezuela-Cayapa's recent history means the group's working practices are a local reaction to community needs- with the group only later receiving recognition and funds from the state. This process, however, is also in line with the Bolivarian rhetoric around citizenship: Hugo Chávez (in Harnecker 2005: 162) expected local groups and networks to be ideologically ahead of both party and bureaucracy and thereby form "...the transformational river of our movement." It is an ideal in some ways fulfilled by Cayapa, who continue the trend observed by Ciccariello-Maher (2010) of local groups leading and feeding into Chavismo, rather than following from it.

### 3. Cayapa as part of a regional culture of popular education

From La Escuelita's democratic processes for designing a curriculum and facilitating collective learning, to their anti-hierarchical management processes and independent origins, Cayapa draws on principles from a rich regional history of popular education. This methodology both chimes with the Bolivarian commitment to grassroots empowerment, and clashes with the centralising tendencies of the Venezuelan bureaucracy.

In addition to studying texts from Paolo Freire and other alternative education scholars from the wider region, the school is connected to a network of teachers and researchers involved with alternative education movement in Venezuela and

the wider region.<sup>8</sup> Representatives of the PROUT<sup>9</sup> institute in Caracas visited La Escuelita on different occasions during fieldwork, and the students from Cayapa visited the institute during a trip to display their participatory photo project at a gallery in the capital. Two Argentinian students also visited the barrio for an extended stay, travelling over-land from an alternative school in Cordoba, Argentina, bringing materials from the Freire institute in Sao Paolo. Above all, Professor Myriam Anzola was instrumental on the development of the project and she and her husband, Monchu, continue to help plan the strategy of the school. In this context, Cayapa might be better thought about as part of a tradition of popular education from the region.

### **The popular education movement in Latin America and Venezuela**

Popular education, also known as Freirian or empowerment education (Wiggins 2011) or as non-formal learning (Paulston 1980; Brennan 1997; Romi et al. 2009), is a well-established movement in Latin America that endorses teaching methodologies - and holds social and political objectives - that challenge so-called conventional approaches to education. Wiggins' (2011: 357-358) review of research from the region conceptualises popular education as:

“...a philosophy and methodology that aims to construct a just society by creating settings in which people who have historically lacked power can discover and expand their knowledge and use it to eliminate societal inequities.”

Conventional approaches are seen as Western-centric and neoliberal by popular education practitioners, who argue that their own approaches offer student empowerment and social transformation (Torres 2011). Popular schools are concentrated among communities that are seen as disadvantaged and

---

<sup>8</sup> Juan Valeri had also found a copy of A. C. Neil's book on the pioneering British democratic school, Summer Hill. I also visited Summer Hill in February 2014 - between my two fieldwork periods in Pueblo Nuevo - to get materials and find out about their democratic processes to share with the teachers at Cayapa.

<sup>9</sup> The PROUT institute in Caracas is part of an international movement involved with grassroots learning about cooperatives and alternative economics.

disempowered, including poorer rural settings in Bolivia and Peru, the favelas of Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro and in Venezuelan barrios like Pueblo Nuevo.<sup>10</sup>

Popular education is strongly associated with the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire, but has its roots in Marxist-influenced “popular universities” in Latin America in the early twentieth century that taught socialist practices to workers and farmers (Gómez and Puiggrós 1986; Becker 1995). Other precedents included the literacy and political consciousness-raising efforts of Augusto Sandino in Nicaragua and Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico (Gómez and Puiggrós 1986). These precedents were inherited by Paulo Freire in his work in the 1940s and 1950s, as he developed his ideas in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972). Freire would set new principles for the growing movement in this landmark work and in subsequent writings until his death in 1997.

During the era of Pink Tide, leftist governments that began with the election of Hugo Chávez, the movement for more popular education practices has gathered pace. In 2009, CONFINTEA VI, a regional conference held in Brazil brought together civil society actors from across Latin America to share ideas and set principles for popular education. Participants voiced concerns about the penetration of neoliberalism into education institutions, rejecting the idea that education should contribute only to economic development or employment promotion (Torres 2011: 44-45). They agreed that this should be replaced by an emphasis on the transformative potential of the methodology, including a new vision of democratic citizenship (ibid).

This new vision of citizenship - the part that was most been taken up by Chávez government- is part of a political project for popular educators. For Freire (1972: 48), changing education is deeply connected to changes outside the classroom, with learners expected to gain a new awareness of the “social contradiction” of modernity and to engage in a struggle for liberation and the transformation of

---

<sup>10</sup> Popular education has had a strong influence on other leftist social movements including the Zapatista National Liberation Front in Mexico and Brazil’s Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) (Caldart 2004; Cho et al. 2004). Popular education has also attracted attention from a range of connected disciplines, including from health experts interested in building patients’ capacity to change their own lives (Wallerstein and Bernstein 1988).

society (49-52). This transformation is to be achieved, for Freire, as students and educators use problem-posing education as part of a revolutionary praxis (52, 66). For Freire, revolutionary struggle is synonymous with the participative and non-systematic educational projects of a new, inclusive pedagogy (31). For its advocates, this means not just fostering social inclusion by helping more favela residents reach university (see Paster 2014), but equipping students to change wider society. Students are seen as having the potential to become new “revolutionaries”, fulfilling Che Guevara’s (1965) vision of *el hombre nuevo*: the socialist men and women capable of transforming social relations.

In Venezuela, the principles of popular education have been a part of the language and ideas of leftist social movements for more than fifty years. The anti-government guerrilla movement in the 1970s emphasised the importance of Freirian ideas about “liberatory education” and saw schools as spaces for revolutionary struggle (Ciccariello-Maher 2013: 112). Freire’s consciousness raising techniques were also used by leftist community leaders in barrios in Caracas (Fernandes 2010: 50) and feminist groups in the late 1970s (Ciccariello-Maher 2013: 131). These principles were also found in the barrio movements in Mérida, including Pueblo Nuevo, where the cultural centres in the early 1970s used participative techniques and consciousness-raising activities to engage with residents (Lopez 2009: 4) in an antecedent of Cayapa’s contemporary work.

### **Cayapa’s democratic classrooms and horizontal structure**

Where Cayapa moves beyond the practices of Bolivarian Schools is in the reconfiguration of student-teacher roles, with particular reference to curriculum planning. These methods draw on the personal study of teaching staff and the guidance of Myriam Anzola, their practical experiences in Pueblo Nuevo and other communities and on contacts within a national and international networks of popular educators, including an alternative school in Cordoba, Argentina and organisations with similar ethics elsewhere in Venezuela, for example the PROUT institute in Caracas. The day-in-the-life outlined at the start of the chapter captures the something of the emphasis on participation, student-empowerment and democratic decision-making that is fostered by the teaching staff at Cayapa. The continuous involvement of students in planning both learning themes and methods



-weekly for primary school and more irregularly for the adults – reflects the fundamental message of Freire’s critique of education.

Freire (1972: 45) saw the conventional form of education he had encountered in Brazil as “suffering from narration sickness”, as teachers confused professional authority with authority of knowledge. According to Freire, in conventional education learners’ ideas and existing knowledge are of little relevance and students receive information passively from their teachers (47).<sup>11</sup> Freire’s reconceptualization of education therefore involves the disruption of conventional teacher and student roles, as teachers are encouraged to enter into dialogue with students, learning alongside them rather than making arguments based simply on their authority as educators (53). These principles appear in the practice and reflections of Cayapa staff. As well as taking place in an overtly democratic environment, lessons at La Escuelita make use of action-learning, with practical activities such as and film-making. Lessons also focus on the community setting of the barrio – including the research skills sessions I delivered in 2014 – and on situating the community in regional and national context. Learning is also “applied”, in that rather than having set maths classes and chemistry classes, sessions like the one making toothpaste are used to introduce chemistry and maths learning as part of a practical activity.<sup>12</sup> For adults, sessions also draw heavily on the existing knowledge of the student group –as opposed to didactic learning- for example basing sessions on nutrition around the dietary choices of the class.

The democratic ethos is easily observed within the organisation. Although the teachers form a clear leadership group, staff meetings are open to students – behaviour permitting - while as a foreign and slightly unusual outsider I felt that my input was valued from the first week I attended. In dozens of staff meetings votes were never taken, with decision-making conducted via consensus and

---

<sup>11</sup> This results, Freire (1972: 46-49) argues, in the oppressive regulation of information the conception of education as “a mirror of society” (46) rather than an active, dialogical process. Here, educators present only a partial view of reality – one that reinforces the status quo and serves the interests of an oppressive social class.

<sup>12</sup> According to Freire, (1972: 56) popular education is intended to be as “problem-posing” and highly contextualised, replacing *doxa*-level knowledge with *logos*-level knowledge (54). This often means learning by praxis: a rejection of the dichotomy between reflection and action (56).

following lengthy deliberations.<sup>13</sup> Weekly staff meetings often ran to four or five hours, as ideas were shared and tasks allocated as staff members volunteer based on their strengths and experience. On joining the teaching staff in August 2013, I was struck by the horizontal structure of the group. It was several months until Janeath's nominal role as Director was ever mentioned, and then only in passing.<sup>14</sup>

Marta Harnecker (2009) suggests that it is the experience of democratic decision-making in an organisation which fosters community compassion and solidarity, drawing on a case study of Venezuelan cooperatives. Likewise, at Cayapa, it is hoped that this egalitarian ethic can be an example to the school's student participants, many of whom are reportedly more used to disharmony and conflict their home lives. One indication of the burgeoning democratic culture at La Escuelita came during a meeting to discuss the ongoing use of the space by the young people. In November 2013, the young students attended a meeting of the Communal Council Calle Principal to negotiate a compromise with a group of women who had requested to use the basketball court for dance therapy classes throughout the week. The young people crowded into the entrance hall of the CEDECOL building, swelling the ranks of the weekly council meeting. A lengthy discussion was then chaired by the voceros, taking questions and arguments from children as young as ten as the group sought to defend their access and reassure the older residents that "nothing would happen" to the women who wanted to share the space in the evening. As the meeting progressed, a wider discussion developed about the legitimacy of the council itself to implement decisions about

---

<sup>13</sup> Despite this, status and some sense of informal hierarchy based around experience and length of time spent with the project does exist within the group. Those who had been there longer tended to take the lead, speak for longer, and to some extent filled some of the more desirable roles – mainly working with the young people rather than the newer and less-engaged adult students. Tensions around this were minor, however, and one of few areas of disharmony for which I was looking very carefully. Staff were able to reflect on this critically, and trialled a mechanism for limiting speaking time if another staff member raised their hand – a tactic that was left unused in all but one meeting.

<sup>14</sup> The way meetings were carried out at Cayapa was a contrast with the meetings of various Chavista group I observed outside of the barrio. In those, the principle of *derecho de palabra* – or 'right to speak' – was followed, effectively meaning participants who were so inclined could deliver lengthy and vague monologues, often to the frustration of the other participants. The *mesas de trabajo* 'round table' model was also used at several meetings, however, in a deliberate attempt to foster more democratic and inclusive discussions. A short-coming of this model is that when different *mesas* are run simultaneously, individuals cannot follow events at more than one, while small groups who attend with a common goal are able to represent their interests in each discussion.

the space, with the young people questioning their exclusion from voting in elections. This debate and the eventual consensual compromise, pleased both the women and the voceros, with one later commenting that they had seen “...Pueblo Nuevo’s voceros of the future” in action that night.

The patience shown during this meeting in November 2013 can be contrasted with the extremely violent and conflictive behaviours the different teaching staff described encountering during the first weeks of lessons in 2010 (interviews w JW, 31.5.14, PN; and JV, 5.6.14, PN). The belief among the staff is that this is about the feeling of ownership of the space among the young people in particular. Added to this, a growth in confidence and engagement among the adult students, as they came to realise that curriculum decisions would not be taken for them, was clear from the semester I spent teaching Bachillerato for Adults.

### **Transforming community and people?**

Although the day-to-day decisions and activities at Cayapa grow out of discussions of community needs and the ideas originating in the student body, the staff see the student body as part of a broader process of social transformation:

“If you work with children, from young, and they are growing and forming, with values of solidarity, and the socialist values we have arrived at - like with La Escuelita where the focus is more on solidarity, no? In participation, in organisation. We believe, then, that this is the seedbed of the new citizens of a distinct society.”

Juan Valeri, Fundación Cayapa Facilitator, 5.6.14, PN

“The way the youth has organised itself was started by the teachers but later became completely autonomous. So what the gymnastics organisation and the youth coordination, what that is, is that those youths have learned that they have to organise themselves to get what they want (...) And they are part of the future of the next generation.”

Joshua Wilson, Fundación Cayapa Founding Member, 31.5.14, PN

These hopes for the potential of Cayapa's students match those of Paolo Freire and the Bolivarian government's vision for empowered citizens.<sup>15</sup> No overtly socialist content is included at Cayapa. This is contrast to what has been reported in the West about the education Missions and Bolivarian Schools (e.g. Economist 2005) – claims that were supported by one teacher at a local Mission that I spoke to during fieldwork (interview w CO, 09.09.13, MC). Despite this, sessions on the Pinochet coup, for example, provided an opportunity to reflect on regional politics. Venezuela's indigenous history was also emphasised, and symbolised by the organisation's name, Cayapa, which is the Guajiro word for collective action.

There has also been a debate at Cayapa about whether to be explicit about whether or not the project is "a feminist project". Heated discussions around this issue were recalled by different people at Cayapa, who said that in the period just before my arrival in Pueblo Nuevo, teaching staff had disagreed about whether or not the group would declare a shared attitude to gender politics (interview w VR, 21.07.14, PN, and LR, 16.05.14, PN). Eventually, it was agreed that the project did have a *feminist* identity. As with the shared Chavista politics of the group, however, the main ways that feminist principles were fostered at Cayapa during fieldwork was through working practices. Janeath's role as founder and Director of the group and the leadership roles played by Lisbeide, Vannesa and other female members of the staff and volunteer team fit with what Lallander (2016: 149) describes as "... the empowerment of Venezuelan women (...) achieved through their protagonist roles in the new participatory democratic model..." These women also model these roles for the women of the barrios, including the school-age students at La Escuelita and the adult high-school classes which was usually made up of about two thirds with young mothers. In addition, the male staff and volunteers at Cayapa fulfilled what have historically been seen as women's tasks in Venezuela – for example preparing the young students' breakfasts. For Fernandes' (2007), sharing of supposedly gendered tasks plays an important part in challenging gendered ideas about social

---

<sup>15</sup> I found a similar ethic at Summer Hill, the famous alternative school in Suffolk, on visiting in February 2014 to begin to build a relationship with Cayapa. The teaching staff saw the students as their immediate priority, and processes of wider change in education – or the potential societal contribution of graduating students - as something of a distraction from the task of providing a student-focused learning environment.

roles in Venezuela's barrios. It is another, less explicit way that the politics of Cayapa's participants are feeding into the social environment in Pueblo Nuevo.

The ethos of Cayapa to work with students' families to address barriers to education and promote a better home life is another area that connects with precedents from the alternative education movement. Treating students' home lives as part of the sphere of activities for teachers is increasingly common in contemporary thinking about education in what is termed as 'family engagement'. Favela and Torres (2014: 51) promote building genuine relationships and focusing on student needs outside of school, arguing that "...embracing the role of advocate is critical in order to respond to students' increasingly complex lives." While some of this involves expanded counselling roles, other examples draw on alternative education principles and see educators move outside of the school themselves. Auerbach (2009: 9) describes family engagement in poorer urban areas of Los Angeles as "...part of a broader moral commitment to social justice and educational equity for disenfranchised Latino families", including moving towards strategies of home-visits and taking principles from community organising into the classroom. This expanded role for teachers matches that adopted by Freirian-style educators who use their trusted reputations, their status and their access to families to fulfil broad social work roles in poor urban communities.<sup>16</sup>

Also in line with empowerment education principles, student assessment is unconventional. The adult students, for example, take part in a process known simply as *systemtización*: a technique developed by Vannesa Rosales during her time at Cayapa as an alternative to accreditation via examinations or written coursework. The end of each class is spent asking the students what they feel they have learned, and charting the progress throughout the semester. At the end of the semester, the records are taped up around the classroom as a visual representation to aid reflection on the learning journey for the whole semester. This approach is seen intended to be more empowered, as students rather than examiners take control of assessing their own progress. This unconventional assessment approach

---

<sup>16</sup> Providing engaging activities and a safe space for social interaction is also a common principle for community workers using alternative education, principles – and was also part of the approach used in a particularly similar favela youth work project I visited in Rio de Janeiro in June 2014.

is an example of ongoing negotiation with the board of education (interview w VR, 21.7.14, PN). In defining their own processes and in negotiating their own autonomy from public authorities, Cayapa arguably draws on a local tradition of “combative” organising in Pueblo Nuevo from the pre-Chávez era (Hernández de Padrón 1998: 81).

#### 4. Cayapa’s history and context: a continuation of pre-Revolution organising

Although the teaching staff said that the process of setting up Cayapa started in 2009, the broad community role of the school connects with the history of barrio organising in Pueblo Nuevo from the pre-Chávez era. During meetings Cayapa staff frequently talk about the need to “defend the space” from outside influences which might derail the “organic” process of the school. This shared language is part of the way that Cayapa’s staff differentiate their work from conventional education and a recognition of the pressures to conform to a standardised assessment procedures and work-patterns. In resisting these outside influences – most notably from the board of education – Cayapa draws on precedents of student-led, semi-independent community organising in Pueblo Nuevo from the 1960s-1990s. The challenge facing Cayapa, therefore, is to position themselves as clients within the Bolivarian process, while avoiding the centralising tendencies of the Venezuelan bureaucracy.

##### **Student politics and the barrio**

As discussed in Chapter Six, the landscape of Venezuelan student politics has shifted to the right under the Bolivarian Revolution, with the shift demonstrated most notably by Mérida’s increasingly militant anti-government politics at the ULA among both the academic staff and student body. In the 1960s and 1970s, many barrio organisations were supported and in some cases led by Mérida’s student activists, including as part of Pueblo Nuevo’s *Comité de Toma* in 1973 (Hernández de Padrón 1998). The leftist student groups shared barricades and causes with barrio residents and university workers, while city authorities endeavoured to divide them with deals for either side and oppose them through increasingly

violent repression (ibid, see also Chapter Two). Among the leftist students of the last century are those who have grown up to form part of the new Bolivarian bureaucracy (interview w GM, 04.06.14, OF) or have moved into new Chavista groups like the predominantly lower-middle class collective Frente de Vanguardia *Hugo Chávez*. Under the Bolivarian Revolution this opposition of the state has continued in Venezuela's universities, with many students now occupying increasingly right-wing political positions in response to what they see as Chávez's irresponsible populism. Among the grievances of several students encountered during fieldwork was the opening up of university access to barrio residents under Chávez. Student protests continue in Mérida, but appear to have lost their solidarity with the working classes: protests during fieldwork included those in favour of lecturers' salary increases (in 2012 and 2013) and against the violent crime students see as being perpetrated by barrio residents (in 2013 and 2014). The backlash against the state culminated in the '*Guarimba*' anti-government neighbourhood occupations of spring 2014, where violence was seen by some as being targeted at poorer Venezuelans.<sup>17</sup>

Despite this shift in student politics in Mérida and Venezuela, a strong undercurrent of leftist students remains, with a connection to Pueblo Nuevo that has come to focus on Fundación Cayapa. Some of these students have moved not only to work on community projects but to live full-time and become – in the words of several residents – “a part of the community”. During my time at Cayapa those of us living and working full-time in the community were also joined by outsiders who came specifically to visit the school, including activists from the PROUT institute in Caracas, temporary volunteers from other barrio communities and other projects in Mérida, representatives of a Caracas-based CSR initiative, journalists from the UK and Australia, artists from a local mural-painting collective, a photographer from the USA and musicians from Cuba and Venezuela. A cultural day in 2014 run by teaching staff and volunteers from the Youth PSUV turned Calle Principal into a dance and music festival, attracting many residents who have not historically been

---

<sup>17</sup> In particular the tactic of using wire garrotes strung across roads at neck height to target motorbike riders – was seen as a way of targeting the poor, as only lower-income Venezuelans tend to ride motorcycles (interview w DV, 12.04.14, MC). This strategy – if true – may rest on the assumption that poorer citizens are proportionally more likely to be Chavistas, or simply an act of aggression against the lower classes.

involved with Cayapa. These visitors were attracted to the barrio by word-of-mouth and a growing online reputation, as the reputation of La Escuelita and the alternative form of education practised there grows - due in large part to a video about the school that has been uploaded to YouTube in both English and Spanish.

While it is unsurprising that the paid teaching staff at Cayapa are either current or ex-students, those who have moved to live in the barrio from more middle-class area of the city are part of a tradition which dates to the community organisations in the 1960s. Hernández de Padrón (1998:80) describes how the first grassroots organisations in Mérida - the Pro-Defence Comités tasked with protecting the new campesinos settlements like Pueblo Nuevo. This role continued as students helped with the second wave of *invasiones* in the 1950s:

“The *dirigentes comunistas*, above all the students and a few university workers like in my case, we entered the struggle in defence of the most poor that live in “*ranchos*”. We decided to organise them, to seize land and to support them in the construction of their houses... it was a constitutional right that had to be defended... the students were the great support within the Pro-Defence Committees...” (University Worker and ‘Communist Militant’, cited in Hernández de Padrón 1998: 81)

Hernández de Padrón’s account found that these leftist *dirigentes* – or leaders - had given the invasions of 1958-59 “*un character contestatario*”: a combative attitude towards the state and an emphasis on the rights of all Venezuelans to land and housing. Many of these students lived in the barrios. In Pueblo Nuevo this relationship culminated in the 1973 Comité de Toma, as students and residents seized the land to the south of the barrio (see discussion in Chapter Two). This relationship live don in the Cultural Centes of the 1970s, while the connection with the ULA was maintained through the health activities of the Moaco collective in Pueblo Nuevo the 1980s and early 1990s (Lopez 2009).

Today, this tradition is continued through those members of Cayapa who were not born in the barrio. During fieldwork, Lisbeide, Pichi, Vannesa, Juan, Andrey and Griseide were the core Venezuelan staff and volunteer members not form Pueblo Nuevo who have shaped the organisation and complement the staff and volunteers



who grew up in the barrio. Their numbers are added to by international volunteers, invariably leftist ex-students, including myself. This new generation of student *dirigentes* come from middle class areas, and most have changed their lives dramatically to work with Cayapa. While Juan Valeri “...did not know the true reality of Mérida” until visiting Pueblo Nuevo, he now lives across the street from Cayapa on Calle Principal, having left his own neighbourhood and given up plans to join a monastery to live and work in the barrio (interview w JV, 5.6.14, PN).

Juan and the other teachers in Pueblo Nuevo – including those who were born in the barrio like Janeath and Gerardo Lopez - also hold the radical leftist politics of the earlier generations of student activists. Their politics became clear working alongside the staff, and over many late night conversations at candle-lit tables in conversation in those of Mérida’s student bars which are filled with Youth PSUV and Venezuelan Communist Party (PCV) activists. In line with Freirian principles and Bolivarian educational objectives discussed above, the group saw their work as part of encouraging grassroots reflection and action, the long process of fostering improved community organising and the broader process of social transformation. Despite this, and like the semi-independent groups from the pre-Chávez era described in Chapters Two and Three, a pro-government political posture is a part of the ways that Cayapa is able to negotiate autonomy over their activities.

### **Clients with independence: balancing support and autonomy**

Perhaps the defining feature of pre-Chávez community organisations in Pueblo Nuevo and Mérida’s other barrios was the extent to which different groups were more or less dependent on the state and ruling parties. Chapters two and three described how the *Juntas Pro-Mejoras* and the Neighbourhood Associations in the city were largely clients of the ruling parties, acting as agents of Acción Democrática (AD) and the Christian Democrats (COPEI) in barrio communities and positioning themselves as clients to receive any available funds and accrue status as community representatives (see also Hernández de Padrón 1998; Jugo Burguera 2014). These groups are contrasted in the literature with the more informal, student-led *Comités de Toma*, *Comités Pro-Defensa*, the Cultural Centres and groups like Pueblo Nuevo’s Moaco collective which were more critical of the state

and whose politics made them less willing to align themselves with the major parties. As a result, these more independent organisations were replaced, destroyed, or penetrated by state and party forces, while the dependent organisations lost credibility with barrio populations. Cayapa arguably sits somewhere between these two categories, and is engaged in the challenging work of securing accreditation for students, support and funding, while also maintaining credibility in the community and protecting the organisation's activities from bureaucratic controls.

An important factor in avoiding institutional controls is the complex role of Cayapa and the way the organisation bridges different administrative areas. As a community organisation, Cayapa's identity as a school means the group sits outside of the state's groupings of 'social movements', 'communal power' and 'missions', and the sets of administrative procedures that come with them. The group's complex funding streams also helps avoid oversight. As well as the teachers who are paid via Miraflores Mayor, another teacher is employed by National Institute of Socialist Information Capacitation (INCIS), while two other members of the staff team are student doctors who worked previously in the Barrio Adentro in Pueblo Nuevo and now work at hospitals in the city, but continue to give their time and expertise to Cayapa. Other part-time teachers work as volunteers, including those working with loosely affiliated groups from other barrio communities and the international volunteers. Other sources of funding include private donations and the upcoming investment as part of the 'Profit' corporate social responsibility scheme. This new opportunity is a way of earning significant funds from the expertise of the group in a way that is independent from state institutions or the PSUV. In constructing accountability in diverse spheres, the group constructs what Edwards and Hulme (1997: 38) describe as "freedom for manoeuvre" - a substitute for autonomy acquired by groups which report to different arenas.

Despite Cayapa's ability to attract diverse sources of funding, the Board of Education - the *Zona Educativa* - maintains an influence over the organisation. The most notable constraints are attached to accreditation. Vannesa Rosales is the teacher at Cayapa who is in charge of the adult bachillerato daily course and deals with frustrations around registration as many students lack the necessary identification documents. While a large part of her time and energy is taken up

chasing documentation to help maintain accreditation, she sees this as worthwhile, due to the fact that “...what we do has formal recognition we also have the liberty to follow our pedagogical strategy” (interview w VR, 21.7.14, PN). Here, some state controls appear to be unavoidable, as students want recognition of their learning that is valid outside of Pueblo Nuevo, both to help them to find work and for the symbolic value of a formal qualification.

A further tension exists around the group’s preferred strategy in that the board of education expect the teachers to work set hours. The teachers feel that they need to be available at night to work with the families, and on an ad hoc basis to respond to events in the community. Disagreement over this issue, however, does not currently affect the teachers’ practices. The Director of the parent school Miraflores Mayor, for example, visits infrequently and briefly and is reportedly “very afraid” of the barrio (interview JL, 24.05.14, PN). This is an example of where space is particularly important for constructing group autonomy, as day-to-day teaching behaviours are largely invisible to the state.

The continued ability of the group to source different kinds of funding and resources appears to be a factor in keeping Fundación Cayapa free from institutional controls. As well as the Profit CSR scheme, other potential funders are becoming interested in the space. For Janeath, this is connected to the group’s growing reputation:

“In terms of resources we haven’t received a lot because we haven’t been very visible. Only right now are they understanding what la Escuelita is. We didn’t have a directive. We didn’t know how it worked –nothing. It is only now that we are articulating more and working in other communities that this is changing.” (Interview w JL, 24.05.14, PN)

For Janeath, having less resources also means having more freedom and autonomy “...because we didn’t have any liabilities nor politics, nor partisan commitment, or any other type of compromise.” According to Janeath, it is the capacity of the staff and community members are the most important resource for Cayapa. In this respect, her views reflect those of the *voceros* from the Community Council Calle

Principal, discussed in Chapter Six, who gave an “epic version” (Auyero 2000: 170-171) of participant capacity to deliver community changes under their own steam.

Despite this, and the fact that the space is open to residents of any political sympathy, for one founding member, Lisbeide Rangel, what she describes as the “political posture” of the organisation is particularly important for building their autonomy (interview w LR, 16.5.14, PN). Although Cayapa is a space largely free from party politics or explicit Revolutionary speech and symbolism, Lisbeide describes how the alignment of the organisation with the politics and ideology of Bolivarianism means that the basic impetus to apply bureaucratic controls is not there. She says that this is about “the discourse” of Fundación Cayapa. By building an understandable political narrative around the complex role of the group, with its inclusiveness to non-Chavistas and its independent and organic processes, the group achieves a certain independence. For Lisbeide, the identity of the group means achieving support without having to fulfil partisan behaviours:

“If you help with elections, or with plans that the party has, then you will receive much more benefits than if you don’t. That’s like a tendency. But you see the school, that is autonomous, without these pressures, is the same. People come, who are very clear politically, and they say ‘this space is very important, we are going to help.’”

Vannesa Rosales agreed that the reputation of La Escuelita primary school gives the group security over their future (interview w VR, 21.7.14, PN), but it is a security that is limited. As a result of their success in positioning themselves as clients, Cayapa staff acknowledged that they are vulnerable to a change in government – something not seen in Venezuela now since 1998. This is consistent with experiences in Pueblo Nuevo dating back to the first national democratic transition in 1958. Like the Communal Councils discussed in Chapter Six, the connection of party and community organising which is said to have historically discredited Venezuela’s neighbourhood organisations (Hernández de Padrón 1998; Ellner 1999; Buxton 1999) may continue. In achieving support whilst maintaining a certain independence, however, the organisation have negotiated the freedom to implement a strategy which addresses Pueblo Nuevo’s needs in a

way that may have been previously hindered by either lack of funds or by greater orientation to partisan politics.

## 5. Conclusion: Cayapa as an example of organising in and around national political processes

In this chapter I have sought to demonstrate how the different precedents for Fundación Cayapa feed into a set of activities which fit some of the unmet needs of barrio Pueblo Nuevo. While alignment with the principles of Bolivarian education reform and the political posture of the group help secure support and resources for the school, the organisation also draws on the history of combative, student-led organising in Pueblo Nuevo to avoid controls on their activities and follow Latin American popular education principles. By responding to a specific set of local needs – by addressing what are considered to be “private” family problems, by combatting delinquency and violence and by building social ties to the outside world - Fundación Cayapa is responding to local needs not met by either conventional apparatus of the Venezuelan state, or by new Bolivarian popular institutions. In working with a small group of students and their families to meet these problems, and in providing a space where people of different ages from both Pueblo Nuevo and Simon Bolivar can meet and spend time together, the busy school building also provides meeting a need identified from the 1970s.<sup>18</sup> In adopting this role – one that is not well-fulfilled by the largely dysfunctional Communal Councils in the two barrios – Cayapa not only aligns with Bolivarian notions about Participatory Democracy but also continues tradition from the student-led, semi-independent barrio organisations seen in Pueblo Nuevo in the pre-Chávez era.

This chapter fits with the broader work of the thesis by demonstrating continuity in the contested relationship between barrio organisations and city authorities. It adds to this argument by demonstrating how a local community organisation can outpace institutional changes to services for barrio populations in Venezuela to deliver the kind of popular solution that is the more radical part of the Bolivarian

---

<sup>18</sup> Julio Burguera (2004: 36) had identified the lack of opportunities for young people to mix socially as part of the infrastructure lacking in Pueblo Nuevo.

ideology which itself has its roots partly in barrio organisations and grassroots social movements of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Ciccariello-Maher 2013). Finally, in developing this picture of a community organisation, we can see how folk concepts about barrio revolutionaries are not a particularly good match for Cayapa, certainly the most active community organisation in the barrio. The staff and volunteers at Cayapa are Chavista, but not *PSUVista*. Along with local staff and volunteers, they include students from outside of the barrio who are continuing a tradition from the pre-Chávez era of bringing in ideas and methodologies from the wider regional movement. Above all, however, they are concerned with ‘what works’ in Pueblo Nuevo, as a part of a process of social transformation that connects with national politics but that is both smaller and bigger in scope than Bolivarianism.

Part of the analytical work of this thesis has been to identify different areas of continuity in community organising and in how people think about the relationship between people and government in and around Pueblo Nuevo. Challenging aspects of the political landscape in Mérida include the enduring culture of *partidismo*, the centralising tendencies of the Venezuelan state and political parties, essentialising notions about barrio populations and politicised narrative of class conflict. This last chapter, however, has used a study of the case I know the best to identify a more positive area of continuity, as a tenacious and pragmatic group of barrio residents are joined by leftist students who bring energy and expertise from outside the community. This group is engaged in interacting with this political landscape to do what successive local groups have done since the barrio’s founding – to work together in a challenging political environment to find small ways of making Pueblo Nuevo a better place to live.

## 9. Pueblo Nuevo: *sigue! Sigue!*<sup>1</sup>

Across the street, a man waiting at a bus stop tosses his cigarette and taps his friend on the shoulder. The pair step out of the shade, squinting their eyes against the afternoon sun. I turn and follow their gaze down Don Tulio Febres Cordero Avenue and see the first bus. It is one of the beaten-up American school buses that I have ridden on many times – the buses that someone once drove down from the United States, winding their way through half a continent to reach Venezuela. This bus, however, is driven by a soldier in the green uniform and peaked cap of the National Guard. As it passes we see it is full of young, nervous-looking recruits, sat side-by-side with their rifles. The bus is gone in an instant, followed by the usual swathe of Mérida's afternoon traffic. Before long, the bus is followed by another, just the same. And another, shortly after, followed by a haulage truck with a *tanqueta* – one of the grey-blue police mini-tanks – loaded on the back. I share a smile with the men across the street, turn, and head for home. It is the 25th of April 2014.

By the time I get back to Pueblo Nuevo, the news is already buzzing around the barrio. I take the steps down the Eastern entrance two at a time, casting half an eye on the sky above. On Calle Principal, the old men have left the shade in front of the bodega and are squinting up, to where military helicopters have begun to circle overhead. As I turn up La Cuesta I see Marleny leaning on the railings of our house. She has already heard the gossip by telephone, as usual, from a cousin here or there. She is waiting for Jose-Luis to come home, and hoping to ask passers by what they

---

<sup>1</sup> *Sigue* means “to continue” or “to go on” – as in the popular Chavista call and response, “Chavez lives, lives! The Revolution goes on, goes on!”

have seen and heard. “It’s started,” she says, and warn me to keep off the streets today.

Somewhere in the *guarimba* zones, behind the barricades that have stood for nearly three months, the protesters must have seen the helicopters and heard the news of the arrival of the National Guard. It is a day they must have planned for, and a day that the city of Mérida has waited for anxiously.

In the end, we heard, the protesters gave in without much of a fight, and without any shots being fired. Whether they had lost the support of the exhausted residents in the occupied communities, or felt their point had been proven, or whether they had never really had the capacity to defend these communities is unclear. After months of tension and intermittent violence, however, the end of the occupation was something of an anti-climax. Over the next few weeks and months, the city slowly returned to normal. In the *guarimba* zones, roads and businesses reopened, and Chavista activists returned home from their safe-houses. A small presence of National Guard remained, and the city breathed a collective sigh of relief. Down in the barrio, life went on for most people - just as it had during the occupation. Marleny was disappointed that the government had not been toppled by the protests, but even she was tired of worrying about Jose-Luis getting home safe from work. The market-traders and beggars from the barrio returned to the Campo Elias Bridge, and meetings of the Communal Council Calle Principal resumed. At the CEDECOL building, classes continued, and the teachers carried on their little corner of the Revolution as if nothing had happened.

If Mérida recovered quickly from the disruption brought about by the protests, Pueblo Nuevo’s continuation of day-to-day life throughout this period showed something about the resilience and insulation of the community to the politics of spectacle (Uzcategui 2011) happening in rest of the city. This thesis has used different kinds of information from Pueblo Nuevo to disrupt the idealised narratives about the relationship between people and government in Venezuela – including ideas about the exceptionalism of the Bolivarian Revolution and Participatory Democracy. I have done this in part by developing a description of community organising in and around the barrio, and by connecting contemporary experiences and discourses with those from the pre-Chávez era. In place of the



agonistic narrative of rich *opositors* against poor Chavistas, I have developed a more nuanced description of the relationship between people and government to feed into wider discussions both about Bolivarianism and about populism and democracy in Latin America.

## 1. Continuity and change: Pueblo Nuevo through the Chávez era

Pueblo Nuevo's experience of community organising in the pre-Chávez era fits with evidence from elsewhere in Venezuela. The centralising tendencies, repressive tactics and *partidista* culture of *Puntofijismo* meant groups in the barrio sought more, leading to the emergence of more combative, semi-independent alternatives including the *toma* land occupations, the Cultural Centres and the Moaco collective in the 1980s and 1990s. These experiences took place against a backdrop of shifting attitudes towards barrio populations, first as the migrant invaders, then as the rightful citizens of a new democratic era, and in the wake of the 1989 *Caracazo* as the criminal underclass who threatened the lives of normal Venezuelans. These different ideas were also accompanied by different government and party strategies for Mérida's barrios: to remove them, to contain them, or to permit their expansion in return for party loyalty. Different kinds of evidence presented in this thesis have shown how these experiences were in some ways continued during the Chávez era.

After the increased political importance of barrio populations after the *Caracazo* fed into the rise of the Bolivarian Revolution and a new era of pro-poor politics. This the call for Bolivarian citizens to take protagonist roles in Participatory Democracy, drawing on the revolutionary history of Venezuela's urban poor and feeding into new, more empowering representations of barrio populations. From 1998, Pueblo Nuevo experienced this pro-poor politics as an expansion of services – notably the new MERCAL food store, the Barrio Adentro health clinic, the provision of resources for the CEDECOL community centre and the new housing development to the north of the barrio. These services were accompanied by new opportunities to participate – including the community assemblies to contribute to 1999 Venezuelan Constitution, a new system of Communal Councils and the inter-barrio *Sala de Batalla* and Parochial Assembly.

This thesis has shown how these new services and opportunities continue some important characteristics of the relationship of people and government in Venezuela from the pre-Chávez era. Evidence from local accounts and observations of council meeting have been used to show the loss of faith in the Communal Councils following what have been seen as corrupt practices and the exclusion of non-Chavistas. Where *opositores* and Chavistas do collaborate together, in the case of the Communal Council Calle Principal, this is believed to have resulted in the denial of registration and funds. This experience, one that reflects the partisan state-led organising of Puntofijismo has also resulted in the lower participation levels and the move to the brokerage roles of the old system of *clientelismo*.

Interviews with members of the *Brisas de Alba* housing collective, along with observations of their political activities, has suggested that the most substantial project to benefit people from the barrio has been allocated in part on party-political grounds. Although MERCAL and the Barrio Adentro services are open to everyone in Pueblo Nuevo, non-Chavistas said that they avoided these services. This appears to be linked to the heavy politicisation of these services by the PSUV, along with the oppositional Bolivarian public narrative that sets Chavistas against *opositores*.

Evidence from city-level meetings, including the Street Government, Sala de Batalla and Parochial Assembly have also demonstrated the limited ways that people in Pueblo Nuevo and Mérida can take up their new protagonistic democratic roles. The partisan branding of spaces, one-way communication and the lack of decision-making about project details all limit the involvement of participants and contribute to the low numbers of barrio residents taking up these opportunities to participate. Interviews with key officials from the institutions tasked with coordinating participatory politics have demonstrated how this frustrated forms of participation have in part been inherited from the previous system. They show how inherited ideas about the need to “control” or “correct” what they see as “disordered” and parochial community groups are part of the rationale for continued bureaucratic oversight.

The continuation of these politicised and dependent processes from the pre-Chávez era have been connected with a general loss of support for the PSUV, and two

connected responses from the people in and around Pueblo Nuevo. First, experience of the period of anti-government protests in the spring of 2014 showed how despite being excluded from local narratives of popular power, these protest groups continued some of the themes and strategies from the left-wing student protests movements of the pre-Chávez era. This was especially the case where street occupations were used to challenge the rule of law and protest the legitimacy of the Bolivarian Government. Second, evidence from Pueblo Nuevo has shown how people have turned to more independent opportunities for participating in community development by organising around the state.<sup>2</sup> **Negotiating politics, identities and organising around the state**

In some ways, the tensions identified around the processes for community organising in Pueblo Nuevo relate to an inherent tension in participatory approaches – what can public authorities do to facilitate ‘the right kind change’ from below (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Hickey and Mohan 2004)? The evidence from Pueblo Nuevo tells us: when authorities get it wrong, or seek to control these processes, people ‘below’ can find ways to work around them.

I have framed this tension around participatory politics in Venezuela in terms of two different, neo-populist ways of conceiving of the relationship between people and government - as being about patronage and as being about emancipation. The evidence collected during fieldwork shows different ways that this tension is experienced in and around Pueblo Nuevo – as *partidismo*, as one-way communication in public meetings, as bureaucratic attempts to control “disordered” barrio populations, and even as building apartment blocks to house groups of political supporters. This thesis is partly a story about these processes as part of a particularly volatile political moment. As the anti-government protest movement gathers momentum, the PSUV seeks to keep its support among the populations of barrios like Pueblo Nuevo as Chávez did: both through providing opportunities for emancipation, and through delivering on promises of improved services. It is also partly a story about the ways that people work around the formal channels designed to administer community development: by collaborating to collect a community’s refuse, by developing participatory teaching practices in a barrio where education inspectors do not care to visit, and by making sure the loss

of the funds and prestige of Communal Council registration “... didn’t stop us” (interview w YC 27.11.13, PN).

Within this complex story of community organising are the roles that have been created and taken up by women from Pueblo Nuevo. These include leadership roles at Fundación Cayapa and the *Brisas de Alba* housing campaign – the two organisations with the highest participation, the more discernible contributions to community development and the most success at adapting to take advantage of the Chavista political environment. In contrast, however, the broker roles that have been taken up by the remaining active spokesmen at the Communal Council Calle Principal seem encourage the sort of reliance on informal contacts that may privilege barrio men and act as a barrier to the participation of women. These options to participate, combined with the high rate of single-parent families in the barrio, also contribute to Moser’s (1986 in Fernandes 2007: 119) ‘triple burden’ of productive, reproductive and community managing work for barrio women – although this is being mediated to some extent by the efforts of men to fulfil what have been seen as women’s roles in Venezuela, including cooking for the school age children at Cayapa. This story of women’s “protagonist” roles in the Bolivarian Revolution however may be less about “empowerment” during the Chávez -era, as Lallander (2016: 149) suggests, and more about a continuation of the kind of combative, collaborative ways that women have responded to their families’ needs since the founding the Mérida’s barrios, not least during the *toma* movements of the early 1970s.

In both the formal processes and in the creative and collaborative ways that people in Pueblo Nuevo work around them, these experiences of community organising have been shown to connect with experiences from the pre-Chávez era. If people in Pueblo Nuevo are engaged in what Fernandes (2010: 23-24) describes as “everyday wars of position” with city and national authorities, it is difficult to separate this description from that given by Padron (1998, 2000) and Jugo Burguera (2004, 2014) in their accounts of Mérida’s barrio politics in the second half of the Twentieth Century. Important continuities have also been identified in the discourses around citizenship and the political identities that are used to explain the relationship between government and people in Venezuela’s barrios. While barrio populations are no longer described as “migrant invaders”, ideas

about criminality and parochialism which are associated with theories of urban marginality are reproduced among public officials, people in Mérida, and also by people in Pueblo Nuevo. More emancipatory representations of barrio populations as rightful citizens of the Bolivarian Revolution, and as social *revolucionarios* form part of the public narrative of Chavismo - but these representations can also be traced to the pre-Chávez era, including from the movement for democracy in the mid-twentieth century (Emerson 2011; Velasco 2011). Finally, ideas about barrio residents as clients of the state can be traced through both eras. Today, votes and political support continue to be involved with negotiations for improved public services and basic goods, including the allocation of white goods and the allocation of the newly built *Brisas de Alba* apartments.

In this thesis, I have shown how these different identities are part of how people talk about politics in Pueblo Nuevo – drawing on different notions at different times to make sense of some of the contradictory processes of participatory politics. These identities are joined by representations of *opositor* and Chavista, in the “retold” story (Arberola in Uzcategui 2010: 1) of class warfare at the centre of Bolivarian public narrative. Despite these essentialising ideas, it is important that various community members also talked in ways that subvert them – not least in resisting the constrained notions of *el pueblo* to talk about the variety of identities and experiences in Pueblo Nuevo. This was demonstrated in particular by Miguel’s commentary from Chapter Three, when, despite his fear that *opositor* protesters might fire-bomb his MERCAL store while he was sleeping inside, Miguel Parra insisted that:

“But MERCAL is of the people. It’s an initiative of the government but it’s for the people. It’s not just for people who are socialists or Chavistas, it’s for everyone. Everyone who is in Venezuela in the moment that they are giving this service. There are Colombians, Ecuadorians, there are gringos, there are *amigos!*” (interview w MP, 16.04.14, CD).

As Miguel and the other people in Pueblo Nuevo with their different party politics continue in their “everyday wars of position” (Fernandes 2010: 23-24) with city authorities, it is clear that this ongoing negotiation is, as Canel (1997: 190) puts it,

for identities as well as for services. If for Wacquant (2008: 272), the urban poor are imprisoned and divided “creatures”, if for Suttles (1982: 4), they are “largely... pathological families” living lives that are “...more transient, depressed if not brutal...” - this is not my experience from living in Pueblo Nuevo. There, different people and different times showed dignity, community-heartedness and kindness. This was especially the case with my Venezuelan family, Marleny, Jose Luis and Marco, and the teaching staff and volunteers at Fundación Cayapa. At La Escuelita, these sentiments are part of humble ambitions for what might grow from “...the seedbed of the new citizens of a distinct society.” (interview w JV 5.6.14, PN).

## 2. Populism, democracy and Revolution: what next for Pueblo Nuevo and Latin America?

Since the end of fieldwork for this thesis, in July 2014, Venezuela has continued into a deepening political and economic crisis. The chronic scarcity of some foods and basic goods and the plummeting value of the Bolivar have meant dwindling credibility for the PSUV, whose strategy of blaming foreign and domestic agitators has become less and less convincing for the Venezuelan public. Hellinger’s (2001: 42-44) study found that providing basic services and “meeting the demands of the poor” are considered far more important elements of democracy than political pluralism or representing minority views. As the Andres Peres government discovered in the 1980s, dependent community organisations and *partidismo* may be tolerated less when the supermarkets have empty shelves, living costs rocket and wages fall far behind inflation.

President Maduro does not seem to have Chávez’s ability to separate his own legitimacy from that of his ailing party in the minds of supporters. This crisis of legitimacy resulted in the first major electoral defeat for Chavismo, as the MUD opposition coalition won a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly in December 2015. While Presidential elections will not be held until 2019 – unless there is a successful recall referendum – this result limits Maduro’s ability to make policies and to deepen the Revolution. Just preceding this result, in a now-famous article for left wing public media forum Aporrea.org, one notable Chavista commentator, Roland Denis (2015), had already wished “goodbye to Chavismo”. In it, he argued that the movement has reached its end point, “corroded by the

structures of the bureaucratic state", which Chávez had failed to transform, having "never shook off the caudillo that they obliged him to be... ". This then, may be the new narrative of the Venezuelan left, who may argue as Chavistas did during fieldwork, that Venezuela's problems are about 'not enough Revolution' rather than about any tensions within the Bolivarian ideology.

Since the death of Chávez, victory for centre-right Presidential candidates in Argentina (2015) multi-class anti-government campaigns in Brazil, new economic policies in Cuba but also the continuation of left-wing governments in Bolivia, Ecuador, Chile and Uruguay, leave the direction for Latin American regional politics unclear. If Chavismo is to survive, it may be necessary to shift from its pro-poor ideology back to the sort of catch-all, multiclass two-party system of the 1970s and 1980s (Heath 2009: 185). With the depth of the current economic crisis, however, it seems unlikely that any strategy would win over the Venezuelans who did not support Maduro in his narrow win in 2013. While Chavismo's longevity has to some extent been achieved by representing a systemic choice between the *oligarquía* – the oligarchy - of the opposition and the people's government, of Chavismo. This all-or-nothing narrative, however, has meant an end to the regular clean slates offered by the back-and-forth power-sharing of *Puntofijismo*. In the event of a loss for Maduro in 2019, the response to rank-and-file Chavistas will tell us something about how their commitment to socialism compares with their commitment to democracy.

Although Pueblo Nuevo is just one barrio community, the description developed in this thesis also feeds into discussions about populism and democracy in Latin America today. If some of the tensions around processes and discourses of community organising have been inherited from the pre-Chávez era, this points to a need to think about longer term political trajectories, examined through the detail of local community histories. This study has shown how some of the tensions between liberalism and socialism – as discourses and experiences of politics - can be seen in the relationships between people and government at a local level. While it would be difficult to make the case that a revolution has occurred in the relationship between people and government in and around Pueblo Nuevo, much of what continues is to be celebrated, not least the history of tenacious and creative organising that can also be seen in barrios across the country.

Just as the Bolivarian Revolution has not led to the “Cubanisation” of Venezuela (Raby 2006: 160), it seems likely that a new Venezuelan government led by the MUD is unlikely to mean a shift to something like the fascist authoritarianism of Pinochet, as Chavistas fear. It is my hope that the end or interruption of the Bolivarian Revolution, if it comes, will matter less for barrio communities like Pueblo Nuevo than many Chavistas might think. On Calle Principal, if the Barrio Adentro clinic closes, it may mean a return to the health project collaborative between the Moaco collective, the Neighbourhood Association and the ULA during the 1980s and 1990s. If MERCAL no longer offers subsidised food, then Gerardo and Janeath might continue to make breakfast for the children of the barrio. I hope that La Escuelita might continue to operate with little oversight from the Board of Education, and continue to be a place for communities to work and meet together to connect with the outside world and build the peace between Simon Bolivar and Pueblo Nuevo. I hope too that the more empowering barrio identities might also continue to appear here and there among the age-old ideas about Pueblo Nuevo’s *malandros*.

If, in unexpected and ungoverned ways, *el proceso* continues in Pueblo Nuevo without the big politics of the Bolivarian Revolution, then there is much to be optimistic about for the people on the Left who look to Venezuela’s barrios - as they have looked at different to the *Indignados*, to the *Zapatistas* and to Occupy. There may not be a perfectly-functioning Participatory Democracy in Venezuela, but in poor urban communities like Pueblo Nuevo, small groups of committed people are working together with love and compassion and drawing on a rich history of community organising in ways that do endure.



## References

- Alfonzo, D. and Nunez, G. (1997) 'The Cuban Revolution as Socialist Human Development', in Kaufman, M. and Alfonso, H. (Ed.s) *Community Power and Grassroots Democracy: the Transformation of Social Life*, London: Zed Books
- Araujo, X. (2010) *Decentralisation in Venezuela and citizen participation in local government: the case of local councils for public planning and the Communal Councils*, Doctoral dissertation, Loughborough University, accessed online on 3.8.16 at <https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/dspace-jspui/handle/2134/7002>
- Arias, E. and Rodrigues, C. (2006) 'The Myth of Personal Security: Criminal Gangs, Dispute Resolution, and Identity in Rio de Janeiro's Favelas', in *Latin American Politics & Society*, 48(4), 53-81
- Auerbach, S. (2009) 'Walking the walk: Portraits in leadership for family engagement in urban schools', in *School Community Journal*, 19(1), 9-31
- Auyero, J. (2000) 'The logic of clientelism in Argentina: an ethnographic account', in *Latin American research review*, 35(3), 55-81
- Auyero, J. (2001) *Poor people's politics: Peronist survival networks and the legacy of Evita*, London: Duke University Press
- Azzelini, D. (2010) 'Constituent Power in Motion: Ten Years of Transformation in Venezuela', in *Socialism and Democracy*, 24(2), 8-31
- Bacchi, G. (2001) 'Participation, activism and politics: the Porto Alegre experiment and deliberative democratic theory', *Politics and Society*, 29(1), 43-72
- Barrios, R. (1997) 'Descentralización fiscal y estabilidad macroeconómica en Venezuela', in *Serie Política Fiscal*, 94, 1-48

- Becker, M. (1995) *Setting the Virgin on Fire: Lázaro Cardenas, Michoacán Peasants, and the Redemption of the Mexican Revolution*, University of California Press: Los Angeles
- Beasley-Murray, J., Cameron, M. and Hershberg, E. (2009) 'Latin America's left turns: an introduction', in *Third World Quarterly*, 30(2), 319-330
- Bell, K. (2013) 'Doing qualitative fieldwork in Cuba: social research in politically sensitive locations', in *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 16(2), 109-124
- Blanco Muñoz, A. (1998) *Habla el comandante*, Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela
- Boas, T. C. (2005) 'Television and neopopulism in Latin America: Media effects in Brazil and Peru', in *Latin American research review*, 40(2), 27-49
- Bourdieu, P. (1979) *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*, London: Routledge
- Bourgois, P. (1995) *In search of respect: selling crack in el barrio*, New York: Cambridge University Press
- Brennan, B. (1997) 'Reconceptualizing non-formal education', in *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 16(3), 185-200
- Briggs, C. L. and Mantini-Briggs, C. (2009) 'Confronting health disparities: Latin American social medicine in Venezuela', in *American journal of public health*, 99(3), 549-555
- Buxton, J. (1999) *The Venezuelan Party System 1988-1995, with reference to the rise and decline of Radical Cause*. Ph.D. Doctoral dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science University of London
- Buxton, J. (2011) 'Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy', in Smilde, D. and Hellinger, D. (Eds.). *Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy: participation, politics and culture under Chávez*, London: Duke University Press

- Caldeira, R. (2008) 'My land, your social transformation': Conflicts within the landless people movement (MST), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil', in *Journal of Rural Studies*, 24(2), 150-160
- Cameron, M. and Major, F. (2001) 'Venezuela's Hugo Chávez: Saviour or Threat to Democracy?', in *Latin American Research Review*, 36 (3), 255-266
- Cammack, P. (2000) 'The resurgence of populism in Latin America', in *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 19(2), 149-161
- Canache, D. (2002) 'From bullets to ballots: The emergence of popular support for Hugo Chávez', in *Latin American Politics and Society*, 44(1), 69-90
- Canel, E. (1997) 'New Social Movement Theory and Resource Mobilisation Theory: the need for integration', in Kaufman, M. and Alfonso, H. (Ed.s) *Community Power and Grassroots Democracy: the Transformation of Social Life*, London: Zed Books
- Cannon, B. and Kirby, P. (Ed.s) (2012) *Civil Society and the State in Left-led Latin America: challenges and limitations to democratization*, London: Zed Books
- Cannon, B. (2005) *Populist leadership in the context of globalisation: a comparative study of President Chávez of Venezuela and ex-President Fujimori of Peru*, PhD thesis, Dublin City University
- Cannon, B. (2009) *Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian revolution: populism and democracy in a globalised age*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Carroll, R. (2014). *Comandante: Hugo Chávez's Venezuela*. Penguin Group USA.
- Castañeda, J. (2006) 'Latin America's left turn', in *Foreign Affairs*, 85, 28-39
- Chacko, E. (2004) 'Positionality and praxis: fieldwork experiences in rural India', in *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 25(1), 51-63
- Chacón Mora, G. (2014) 'Imagining the malandro: antipolitics and representations of the malandro in Venezuelan cinema', panel discussion, Venezuelan Research Network, Cambridge University, September 2014

- Chaves, L. (1985) 'División político-territorial y ordenación del territorio: El caso del Estado Mérida', in *Revista Geográfica*, 102, 143-157
- Chávez, H. (2008) 'Revolución bolivariana: 9 años de logros', Caracas: Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Comunicación y la Información, online content accessed 12.08.16 at <http://www.alternativabolivariana.org/modules.php?name=Downloads&do=getit&lid=34>
- Ciccariello-Maher, G. (2013) *We Created Chávez: a people's history of the Venezuelan Revolution*, London: Duke University Press
- Cho, E. (2004) *Building a Race and Immigration Dialogue in the Global Economy: A Popular Education Resource for Immigrant and Refugee Community Organizers*, National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, Oakland, CA
- Connelly, M. and Clandinin, J. (1990) 'Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry', in *Educational Researcher*, 19(5), 2-14
- Conniff, M. , Roberts, K., Basurto, J., Drake, P. and Ellner, S. (2012) *Populism in Latin America*, Alabama: University of Alabama Press.
- Cooke, B. and Kothari, U. (2001) *Participation: The New Tyranny?* London: Zed Books
- Correa, D. and Wilson, J. (2011) *Analysis Situacion Salud*, unpublished report prepared by Barrio Adentro Clinic, Pueblo Nuevo
- Correo del Orinoco (2011) *Vivienda Venezuela construye 200 apartamentos en Brisas del Alba de Mérida*, editorial, 17th October, accessed 3.8.16 at <http://www.correodelorinoco.gob.ve/nacionales/vivienda-venezuela-construye-200-apartamentos-Brisas -alba-Mérida/>
- De la Torre, C. (1997) 'Populism and democracy: Political discourses and cultures in contemporary Ecuador', in *Latin American Perspectives*, 24(3), 12-24.

- Delfino, A. (2012) 'La noción de marginalidad en la teoría social latinoamericana: surgimiento y actualidad', in *Universitas Humanística*, 74(2): 17-34
- Dennis, R. (2015), 'Goodbye to Chavismo', online content accessed 12.08.16 at <http://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/11545>
- Dike, S. (2014) 'La Vida en La Colonia: Oscar Lewis, the Culture of Poverty, and the Struggle for the Meaning of the Puerto Rican Nation', in *Centro Journal*, 26(1), 172
- Domínguez, F. (2011) 'Venezuela's opposition: desperately seeking to overthrow Chávez', in Dominguez, F., Lievesley, G and Ludlam, S. (Ed.s) *Right-wing politics in the new Latin America: reaction and revolt*, London: Zed Books
- Donís Ríos, M. (2008) 'Una aproximación a la historia territorial de la provincia de Mérida en el siglo XIX', in *Presente y Pasado*, 13(26), 213-248
- Doyle, D. (2011) 'The Legitimacy of Political Institutions Explaining Contemporary Populism in Latin America', in *Comparative Political Studies*, 44(11), 1447-1473
- Duffy, M. (2012) *Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution: Power to the People?* doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Manchester
- ECLAC (2014), National Education profile for Venezuela, ECLAC CEPALSTAT database: accessed 02.06.14
- Edwards, M. and Hulme, D. (Eds.) (1995) *Non-governmental Organisations: performance and accountability beyond the magic bullet*, London: Earthscan
- Ellner, S. (1993) 'The deepening of democracy in a crisis setting: political reform and the electoral process in Venezuela', in *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 35(4), 1-42
- Ellner, S. (1999) 'Obstacles to the Consolidation of the Venezuelan Neighbourhood Movement: National and Local Cleavages', in *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 31(01), 75-97

- Ellner, S. (2009) 'The "Top-Down" and "Bottom-up" approach of the Chávez Movements and Government', prepared for delivery at the *Meeting of the Latin American Studies Association*, Rio de Janeiro
- Ellner, S. (2011) 'The distinguishing features of Latin America's new left in power: the Chávez, Morales and Correa governments', *Latin American Perspectives*, 39(1), 96-114
- Ellner, S. and Rosen, F. (2002) 'Chavismo at the crossroads: Hardliners, moderates and a regime under attack', *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 35(6), 8-12
- Emerson, R. G. (2011) 'A Bolivarian People: identity politics in Hugo Chávez's Venezuela', in *Humanities Research*, 17(1), 87-107
- Englund, H. and Leach, J. (2000) 'Ethnography and the Meta-Narratives of Modernity', in *Current anthropology*, 41(2), 225-248
- Enríquez, L. (2013) 'The paradoxes of Latin America's 'Pink Tide': Venezuela and the project of agrarian reform', in *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 40(4), 611-38
- Escobar, E. (1998) 'Whose Knowledge, Whose nature? Biodiversity, Conservation, and the Political Ecology of Social Movements', *Political Ecology*, 5(1), 53-82
- Escobar, A. and Alvarez, S. (1992) 'Introduction: Theory and Protest in Latin America Today' in Escobar, A. and Alvarez, S. (Ed.s) *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America: identity, strategy and democracy*, Oxford: Westview Press
- Fernandes, S. (2007) 'Barrio Women and Popular Politics in Chávez's Venezuela', in *Latin American Politics and Society*, 49(3), 97-127
- Fernandes, S. (2010) *Who Can Stop the Drums? Urban Social Movements in Chávez's Venezuela*, London: Duke University Press
- Ferrándiz Martin, F. (2004). The Body as Wound Possession, Malandros and Everyday Violence in Venezuela. *Critique of Anthropology*, 24(2), 107-133.

- Foley, J. and Irazábal, C. (2010) 'Reflections on the Venezuelan Transition from a Capitalist Representative to a Socialist Participatory Democracy: What Are Planners to Do?', in *Latin American Perspectives*, 37(1), 97-122
- Freire, P. (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books
- Friedmann, J. (1992) *Empowerment: The Politics of Alternative Development*, Oxford: Blackwell
- Foucault, M. (1980) 'Truth and Power' in *Power and Knowledge*, New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf
- Gandin, L. and Apple, M. (2002) 'Thin versus thick democracy in education: Porto Alegre and the creation of alternatives to neo-liberalism', in *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 12(2), 99-116
- Gans, H. J. (1982) *Urban Villagers: group and class in the life of Italian-Americans*, London: Free Press
- García-Guadilla, M. P., & Pérez, C. (2002) 'Democracy, decentralization, and clientelism: new relationships and old practices', in *Latin American Perspectives*, 29(5), 90-109
- Garrido, A. (2000) 'La historia secreta de la Revolución Bolivariana' in *Producciones Karol*, Caracas
- García, C., Pargas, L. and Aguilera, O. (1994) 'Imágenes de la ciudad: La violencia en Mérida', *Fermentum*, 4(11), 112-121
- Germani, G. (1980) *El concepto de marginalidad*, Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión
- Gilbert, A. (2007) 'The return of the slum: does language matter?', in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 31(4), 697-713
- Gill, A. (2012) *State-Managed Participatory Democracy in Venezuela: the case of the Communal Councils*, PhD Dissertation, Department of Latin American Studies, University of Liverpool
- Goldstein, D. (2013) *Laughter out of place: Race, class, violence, and sexuality in a Rio shantytown*, Los Angeles: University of California Press

- Gómez, M. and Puiggrós, A. (1986) *La Educación popular en América Latina: antología*. Vol. 1, Secretaría de Educación Pública
- Gott, R. (2011) *Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian revolution*, London: Verso Books.
- Gott, R. (2008) 'Venezuela under Hugo Chávez: The Originality of the 'Bolivarian' Project', in *New Political Economy*, 13(4), 475-490
- Gott, R. (2005) *The Bolivarian Revolution*, London: Verso
- Gottberg, L. (2011) 'The color of mobs: racial politics, ethnopopulism, and representation in the Chávez era', in Smilde, D., & Hellinger, D. (Eds.). *Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy: participation, politics and culture under Chávez*, London: Duke University Press
- Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London: Lawrence and Wishart
- Griffiths, T. G. (2010) 'Schooling for twenty-first-century socialism: Venezuela's Bolivarian project', in *Compare*, 40(5), 607-622
- Guevara, C. & Castro, F. (1989) *Socialism and man in Cuba*, New York: Pathfinder
- Harnecker, M. (2005) *Understanding the Venezuelan Revolution: Hugo Chávez talks to Marta Harnecker*, New York: Monthly Review Press
- Harnecker, C. P. (2009) 'Workplace democracy and social consciousness: a study of Venezuelan cooperatives', in *Science & Society*, 73(3), 309-339
- Harrison-Conwill, G. (2011) 'The Race toward *Caraqueño* Citizenship Negotiating Race, Class, and Participatory Democracy', in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 637(1), 165-183
- Hawkins, K. (2010) 'Who Mobilizes? Participatory Democracy in Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution', in *Latin American Politics and Society*, 52(3), 31-66
- Hawkins, K. (2010a) *Venezuela's Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge University Press



- Heath, O. (2009) 'Explaining the Rise of Class Politics in Venezuela', in *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 28(2), 185-203
- Hellinger, D. (2005) 'When "No" Means "Yes to Revolution": electoral politics in Bolivarian Venezuela', in *Latin American Perspectives*, 32(3), 8-32
- Hellinger, D. (2011) 'Defying the Iron Law of Oligarchy 1: how does el pueblo conceive democracy?', in Smilde, D., & Hellinger, D. (Eds.) *Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy: participation, politics and culture under Chávez*, London: Duke University Press
- Hickey, S. and Mohan, G. (2004) *Participation - from tyranny to transformation? Exploring new approaches to participation in development*, London: Zed books
- Hurtado, S. (1991) 'Matrilinealidad o crisis familiar en Venezuela', in *Fermentum*, 1(02), 85-94
- Ireland, R. (2011) 'Citizenship and Democratisation in Brazil's Favelas: The End of the Dream?', in *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research*, 17(2), 147-162
- Jugo Burguera, L. (2004) *El Desarrollo Integral de las Comunidades Populares*, IMC, Mérida. Accessed online 12.08.16 at <http://www.saber.ula.ve/handle/123456789/84>
- Jugo Burguera, L. (2014) 'De la Mérida desarticulada: 1958-2012 Hacia el reto intergeneracional: Mérida sostenible sustentable 2012-2058 Una propuesta: Mérida Ciudad Educativa-Ciudad Parque', in *Consciencia y Diálogo*, 4(4), 91-112
- Juris, J. (2007) 'Practicing Militant Ethnography with the Movement for Global Resistance (MRG) in Barcelona', in Shukaitis, S. and Graeber, D. (Ed.s) *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigation, Collective Theorization*, Oakland: AK Press
- Kaufman, M. and Alfonso, H. editors, (1997) *Community Power and Grassroots Democracy: the Transformation of Social Life*, London: Zed Books
- Knight, A. (1998) 'Populism and neo-populism in Latin America, especially Mexico', in *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 30(2), 223-248

- Koonings, K. and Kruijt, D. (2007). *Fractured cities: social exclusion, urban violence and contested spaces in Latin America*, London: Zed Books
- La Escuelita (2012) El Sabado de la Basura: Barrio Pueblo Nuevo, Mérida, Venezuela, video accessed online 1.8.16 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dU6w1aDBqJU>
- Laclau, E. (2005) *On Populist Reason*, New York: Verso
- Laffaille, J. and Ferrer, C. (2005) El terremoto de Mérida de 1812: escrudiñando entre las páginas de una novela inconclusa en busca de información acerca de una historia real, *Revista Geográfica Venezolana*, 46, 217-232
- Lalander, R. (2016) 'Gendering Popular Participation: Identity-Politics and Radical Democracy in Bolivarian Venezuela', in Kettunen, H. and Korpisaari, A. (Ed.s) *Multidisciplinary Latin American Studies*, Helsinki: Renvall Institute Publications
- Leal, P. (2007) 'Participation: The Ascendancy of a Buzzword in the Neo-Liberal Era', in *Development in Practice*, 17(4/5), 539-548
- Lerner, J. (2007) 'Communal Councils in Venezuela: Can 200 families revolutionize democracy?' ZNET article, accessed 09.10.12 at: [www.zcommunications.org/communal-councils-in-venezuela-by-josh-lerner](http://www.zcommunications.org/communal-councils-in-venezuela-by-josh-lerner)
- Leary, J. (2009) 'TV Urgente: Urban Exclusion, Civil Society, and the Politics of Television in Venezuela', in *Social Text* 99, 27(2), 25-53
- Lewis, O. (1966) *La vida: a Puerto Rican family in the culture of poverty, San Juan and New York*, London: Random House
- Lezama, P. V. (2012) 'El Caracazo (1989) y la tragedia (1999): Economía moral e instrumentalización política del saqueo en Venezuela', in *Cuadernos Unimetanos*, 30, 5-15
- Lopez, G. (2009) *Experiencia y Aprendizaja Aquiridas en el Area de comunicación Y Organización Comunitaria*, Unpublished portfolio, Pueblo Nuevo, Mérida

- McCoy, J. and Myers, D. (2006) *The unraveling of representative democracy in Venezuela*, New York: JHU Press
- Mainwaring, S. and Scully, T. (Eds.) (1995) *Building democratic institutions: Party systems in Latin America*, Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Matos Mar, J. (1960) *Informe Sobre las Zonas de Ranchos de Parate Bueno y Pinto*, Bogota: Instituto de Investigación de Recursos Biológicos Alexander von Humboldt
- Motta, S. (2009) 'Venezuela: reinventing social democracy from below?' in Lievesly, G. and Ludlam, S. (Ed.s) *Reclaiming Latin America: experiments in radical social democracy*, London: Zed Books
- Murmis, M. (1969) Tipos de marginalidad y posición en el proceso productivo, in *Revista Latinoamericana de Sociología*, 2, 413-421
- Negri, A. (1999) *Insurgencias: Constituent power and the modern state*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press
- Hernández de Padrón, M. (1998) 'La Historia de las Organizaciones de base en los barrios populares de Mérida. En el contexto de consolidación democrático y urbanización creciente (1958-1980)', in *Fermentum*, 8(21), 77-96
- Hernández de Padrón, M. (2000) 'El dilema entre lo social y lo político: El caso del Movimiento Vecinal', in *Fermentum*, 28, 197-215
- Paster, Z. (2014) *Higher Education in Brazil: The Role of Grassroots NGOs in Preparing Low-Income Youth*, Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University
- Paulston, R. (1980) 'Education as Anti-structure: non-formal education in social and ethnic movements', in *Comparative Education*, 16(1), 55-66
- Perlman, J. E. (1979) *The myth of marginality: Urban poverty and politics in Rio de Janeiro*, Berkeley: University of California Press
- Perlman, J. E. (2005) 'The myth of marginality revisited: the case of favelas in Rio de Janeiro', in *Becoming global and the new poverty of cities*, Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, USAID

Petras, J. (1997) 'Imperialism and NGOs in Latin America', in *Monthly Review*; 49(7), 10-27

Prato Vicuña, R. (2013) 'El Espacio Urbano en los Desarrollos Espontáneos, Casos estudios: Barrio Escondido el Palmo y Barrio Pueblo Nuevo Simón Bolívar', Mérida-Venezuela: Cuadernos de Vivienda

Project Alcatraz (2014) *Vision Revenga*, online content accessed 31.07.14 at: [http://www.proyectoalcatraz.org/english/vision\\_revenga.htm](http://www.proyectoalcatraz.org/english/vision_revenga.htm)

Raby, D. (2006) *Democracy and revolution: Latin America and socialism today*, London: Pluto

Ramakrishnan, K. (2014) 'Disrupted futures: Unpacking metaphors of marginalization in eviction and resettlement narratives', *Antip*, 46(3), 754-772

Ray, T. (1969) *The Politics of the Barrios of Venezuela*, Berkeley: University of California Press

Reyes, J. (2012) 'State-civil society relations during student mobilisations in Chile in 2006 and 2011', in Cannon, B. and Kirby, P. (Ed.s) *Civil Society and the State in Left-led Latin America Challenges and Limitations to Democratization*, London: Zed books

Roberts, K. (2003) Social correlates of party system demise and populist resurgence in Venezuela, *Latin American Politics and Society*, 45(3), 35-57

Roberts, B. (1995) *The making of citizens: cities of peasants revisited*, London: Arnold

Roberts, K. (2006) 'Populism, political conflict, and grass-roots organization in Latin America', in *Comparative Politics*, 38(2), 127-148

Robertson, E. (2013) *Where is Venezuela's Political Violence Coming From? A Complete List of Fatalities from the Disturbances*, online content from Venezuelanalysis.com, accessed on 3.8.16 at <http://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/10580>

- Rogler, L. (1967) 'Slum Neighbourhoods in Latin America', in *Journal of Inter-American Studies*, 9(4), 507-528
- Romero Salazar, A. and Rujano Wilde (2016), R. (2007) 'Impunidad, anomia y cultura de la muerte: los linchamientos en Venezuela', in *Espiral*, 13(39), 139-161
- Romi, S. and Schmida 1, M. (2009) 'Non-formal education: a major educational force in the postmodern era', in *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 39(2), 257-273
- Sanders, S. (2013) 'The Mexican student movement of 1968: national protests in national and transnational contexts', in Mor, J. (Ed.) *Human Rights and Transnational Solidarity in Cold War Latin America*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press
- Saskia, R. (2016) 'Clientelism and the Utility of the Left-Right Dimension in Latin America', in *Latin American Politics and Society*, 58(1), 72-98
- Schamis, H. (2006) 'Populism, socialism, and democratic institutions', in *Journal of democracy*, 17(4), 20-34
- Scheper-Hughes, N. (1992) *Death without weeping: The violence of everyday life in Brazil*, Berkley: University of California Press
- Sherif, B. (2001) 'The ambiguity of boundaries in the fieldwork experience: Establishing rapport and negotiating insider/outsider status', in *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7(4), 436-447
- Schiller, N. (2011) 'Points of departure for a constructive critique of the Bolivarian Revolution', in *Dialect Anthropol*, 35, 255-260
- Schiller, N. (2011a) 'Liberal and Bolivarian Regimes of Truth: toward a critically engaged anthropology in Caracas, Venezuela', in *Transforming Anthropology*, 19(1), 35-42
- Schiller, N. (2011b) 'Catia sees you: Community television, clientelism and the state in the Chávez Era: Venezuela's Bolivarian democracy', in Smilde, D., & Hellinger, D.

(Eds.) *Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy: participation, politics and culture under Chávez*, London: Duke University Press

Schultz, T. P. (1971) 'Rural-urban migration in Colombia', in *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 53(2), 157-163

Slater, T. (2010) 'Ghetto Blasting: On Loïc Wacquant's Urban Outcasts', in *Urban Geography*, 31(2), 162-168

Smilde, D. (2011) 'Participation, politics and culture: emerging fragments of Bolivarian participatory democracy', in Smilde, D., & Hellinger, D. (Eds.). *Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy: participation, politics and culture under Chávez*, London: Duke University Press.

Sosa, C., Rangel, L. and Salcedo, F. (2011) *La Escuelita: Escuela Alternativa de Barrio Pueblo Nuevo*, documentary film, Fundacon Cayapa, accessed online on 17.07.16 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sA6DF5Y-K6Y>

Spanakos, A. (2008). 'New Wine, Old Bottles, Flamboyant Sommelier: Chávez, Citizenship, and Populism', in *New Political Science*, 30(4), 521-544

Stretesky, P. and Pogrebin, M. (2007) 'Gang-related gun violence: socialization, identity, and self', in *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 36(1), 85-114

Suttles, G. (1968) *The social order of the slum*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Tedesco, L. (2004) 'Democracy in Latin América: issues of governance in the Southern Cone', in *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 23(1), 30-42

Telesur (2014) Venezuela Celebrates 9 Years Free of Illiteracy, online content accessed 31.07.15 at <http://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/Venezuela-Celebrates-9-Years-Free-of-Illiteracy-20141028-0011.html>

The Economist (2005) Venezuela's revolution reaches the classroom, January 25th, accessed 27.07.2015 online at <http://www.economist.com/node/485739>

- Tijerino, R. (1998) 'Civil spaces: A critical perspective of defensible space', in *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, 15(4) 321-337.
- Torres, C. A. (2011). 'Dancing on the deck of the Titanic? Adult education, the nation-state and new social movements', in *International Review of Education*, 57(1-2), 39-55.
- Tran, M. (2007) 'Venezuela quits IMF and World Bank', *The Guardian*, accessed online 12.08.16 at:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2007/may/01/venezuela.imf>
- Turaine, A. (1977) 'La marginalidad urbana', in *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, 39(4), 1105-1142
- Uzcategui, R. (2010) *Venezuela: Revolution as Spectacle*, Tuscon: See Sharp Press
- Vekemans, S. and Giusti, J. (1969) 'Marginality and ideology in latin american development', in *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 5(11), 221-234
- Velasco, F. (2011) "'We are still rebels": the challenge of popular history in Bolivarian Venezuela', in Smilde, D., & Hellinger, D. (Ed.s) *Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy: participation, politics and culture under Chávez*, London: Duke University Press
- Wallerstein, N. and Bernstein, E. (1988) 'Empowerment education: Freire's ideas adapted to health education', in *Health Education & Behavior*, 15(4), 379-394
- Walton, J. (1979) 'Urban political movements and revolutionary change in the Third World', in *Urban Affairs Review*, 15(1), 3-22
- Wacquant, L. (2003) 'Toward a dictatorship over the poor? Notes on the penalization of poverty in Brazil', in *Punishment & Society*, 5(2), 197-205
- Wacquant, L. (2008) *Urban Outcasts: a comparative study of advanced marginality*, Cambridge: Polity Press

- Weisbrot, M., Ray, R. and Sandoval, L. (2009) *The Chávez administration at 10 years: The economy and social indicators*, The Centre for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR), Washington DC, February, 5.
- Weyland, K. (1996) 'Neopopulism and neoliberalism in Latin America: Unexpected affinities', in *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 31(3), 3-31
- Wiggins, N. (2011) 'Popular education for health promotion and community empowerment: a review of the literature', in *Health promotion international*, 46. 356-371
- Wilde, M. (2014) "We Shall Overcome": Radical Populism, Political Morality and Participatory Democracy in a Venezuelan Barrio, PhD thesis, London School of Economics
- Wilde, M. (2016) 'Contested spaces: the Communal Councils and participatory democracy in Chávez's Venezuela', in *Latin American Perspectives*, 16-36 <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/62020/>
- Wilson, F. (2000) 'Indians and mestizos: identity and urban popular culture in Andean Peru', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26(2), 239-253
- Wolford, W. (2003) 'Producing community: the MST and land reform settlements in Brazil', in *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 3(4), 500-520
- Yap, L. (1976) 'Rural-urban migration and urban underemployment in Brazil', in *Journal of Development Economics*, 3(3), 227-243
- Zarazaga, R. (2014) 'Brokers beyond clientelism: A new perspective through the Argentine case', in *Latin American Politics and Society*, 56(3), 23-45
- Zuquete, J. (2008) 'The Missionary Politics of Hugo Chávez', in *Latin American Politics and Society*, 50 (1) 91-121



# Appendices

## Appendix 1. List of focus groups and interviews

### Focus Groups<sup>1</sup>

Focus Group	Location	Date	Main theme
1.	CEDEL Community Centre, Pueblo Nuevo	22.04.14	Community organising, politics and history
2.	CEDEL Community Centre, Pueblo Nuevo	08.04.14	Drugs, policing, street violence

### Interviews Cited in Text

Participant Groups		Interview Locations	
FC	Staff and volunteers at Fundación Cayapa	PN	Inside people's homes in Pueblo Nuevo
CC	Communal Council spokesmen and participants	MC	Various locations in Mérida City centre
BA	Barrio Adentro staff	SB	Barrio Simon Bolivar
PN	Other residents of Pueblo Nuevo	CD	At the CEDECOL Community Centre
SB	Residents of Simon Bolivar	PO	At various Public Offices in Mérida City centre
MC	Other people from Mérida		
OF	Public officials		
FR	Members of city-level community organisations		

<sup>1</sup> These two focus groups were collected somewhat opportunistically as a result of the course I taught on research skills. I used these discussion topics as a way of showing the advantages and disadvantages of how a focus group can work to draw out differences of opinion.

Number	Name	Initials used	Date	Location	Group
1.	Marleny Angulo Quintero	MA	19.04.14	PN	PN
2.	Jose Luis Angulo Quintero	JA	19.04.14	PN	PN
3.	Orlando Velásquez	OV	09.04.14	PN	PN
4.	Pastor William	PW	05.05.14	PN	PN
5.	Dafne Vega	DV	19.09.13	PN	PN
6.	Marco Angulo Quintero	MA	21.9.13	PN	PN
7.	Gabriel Montoya	GM	09.04.14	PN	PN
8.	Jesús Navarro	JN	06.05.14	PN	PN
9.	Pablo Javier	PJ	01.07.14	PN	PN
10.	Roberto Andrea	RA	10.04.14	CD	PN
11.	Martín Messano	JM	11.04.16	PN	PN
12.	Vannesa Rosales	VR	21.07.14	PN	FC
13.	Lisbeide Rangel	LR	16.05.14	PN	FC
14.	Juan Valeri	JV	05.06.14	PN	FC
15.	Gerardo Lopez	GL	04.07.14	CD	FC/CC
16.	Andry Rangel	AR	03.06.14	MC	FC
17.	Janeath Lopez	JL	24.05.14	PN	FC
18.	Joshua Wilson	JW	31.05.14	SB	FC / BA
19.	Miguel Parra	MP	16.04.14	CD	FC
20.	Griseda Briceño	GB	20.04.14	MC	BA
21.	Maria Perez	MP	23.07.14	CD	BA
22.	Nico Huero	NH	30.04.14	PN	CC
23.	Ramón	RS	11.05.14	PN	CC
24.	Reyes Lobos	RL	24.07.14	PO	OF

25.	Yonny Camancho	YC	27.11.13	PN	CC
26.	Ricki Sanchez	RS	22.11.13	CD	CC
27.	Maria Nunez	MN	28.05.14	MC	OF
28.	Gudilo Rangel	GR	04.06.14	PO	OF
29.	Noriada Gomez	NG	06.06.14	PO	OF
30.	Reyes Lobo	RL	12.05.14	PO	OF
31.	Gabriel Madera	GM	28.05.14 and 02.06.14	PO	OF
32.	Herberto Martinez Torres	HT	05.06.14	MC	OF
33.	Bridget Rodriguez	BR	22.04.14	PO	OF
34.	Danilo Alvarez	DA	12.05.14	PO	OF
35.	Gudilo Rangel	GR	04.06.14	GN	OF
36.	Caramoto Briseño	CB	15.07.14	SB	SB
37.	Luciana Diaz	LD	15.07.14	SB	SB
38.	Yoleria Ortiz	YO	15.07.14	SB	SB
39.	Mani Toledo	MT	18.04.14	SB	SB
40.	Dionisio Vincenzo	DV	12.04.14	MC	MC
41.	Maria Cotta	MC	03.07.16	MC	FR
42.	Angel Vierno	AV	29.05.14	MC	FR
43.	Luis Belasario	LB	03.07.16	MC	FR
44.	Jesús Cruz	JC	11.10.13	MC	FR
45.	Juan Bartoli	JB	29.05.14	MC	FR
46.	Luciano Luis	LL	07.04.16	MC	MC
47.	Gabriella Verón	GV	14.04.14	MC	MC
48.	Charlie Ortiz	CR	09.09.13	MC	MC

## Appendix Two: three videos by and about Fundación Cayapa

Three videos made by participants at Fundación Cayapa describe the work of the school up to 2011, the collective response to the *basura* - or refuse – crisis of 2012, and the new adult high-school class I taught on as part of my responsibilities while living in Pueblo Nuevo. Several of the people mentioned in the thesis are introduced in the different videos.

1. **La Escuelita: Escuela Alternativa de Barrio Pueblo Nuevo. Mérida, Venezuela (2011).**

Watch in Spanish at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sA6DF5Y-K6Y>

Or watch with English subtitles at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHG89aHxHlo>

2. **El Sabado de la Basura: Barrio Pueblo Nuevo, Mérida, Venezuela (2012)**

Watch in Spanish at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dU6w1aDBqJU>

3. **Bachillerato de Adult@s: Escuela Alternativa de Barrio Pueblo Nuevo. Mérida, Venezuela (2014)**

Watch in Spanish at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vOtpRV5WkWQ>

## Appendix Three: Article written for Venezuelanalysis.com, November 2013

I wrote this article after conducting interviews with people in Mérida City during the period of price controls in 2013, described at the start of Chapter Three.

OPINION AND ANALYSIS: ECONOMY

### Venezuelan Public Make Use of Price Controls



By HARRY GREATOREX , November 18th 2013

#### TAGS

[Price Controls](#)

*Researcher Harry Greatorex walks the centre of the Andean city of Mérida to find out the public's impressions of the government's crackdown on high prices and speculation.*

This weekend saw queues around the block at selected stores across Venezuela as bargain-hunters arrived in search of discounted electronics goods, clothes and medicine as the Venezuelan Government stepped up its fight against price speculation and hoarding. The enforced discounts are being implemented by Venezuela's consumer protection agency where prices are judged to have been artificially inflated. While the private press has widely reported the limited instances of looting, on Saturday a relaxed environment prevailed in Mérida's town centre as officers from the National Guard entered several stores to supervise reductions. Their involvement continues the late president Hugo Chavez's long-standing strategy of using military manpower to give impetus to projects to help the poorest.



Citizens queuing outside electronics store Yamil last Saturday in the hope of buying reduced price goods (all images courtesy of Harry Greatorex)



Numbering people's place in the queue has been a common practice to maintain order as the public has flocked to the shops to take advantage of the price reductions.

With Christmas around the corner and prices down by up to seventy percent in targeted stores, the government inspections are being felt in the pockets of Venezuelans consumers. At Kristy's clothes store, three generations of one family used the imposed store-wide 50% discount to buy new clothes. Alba, Morliana and Lilia described the reductions as a necessary action in the face of increasing price speculation. Alba said that "I hope that it will continue and not just be left at this. This has helped us so much... Before the prices were all different to what had been advertised so it was difficult to even bring the right money. At times they were as much as four times what the goods were really worth, with prices rising all the time."

At Yamil electronics store, goods arrived as faster than people could buy them as vans shuttled hoarded goods from the owners' warehouses. One shopper queuing to purchase a discounted television accused retail owners of using the official exchange rate to buy cheap dollars to sell on the black market. "We agree with the government's decision. In anywhere else in the world you make fifteen or twenty percent profit, not one or two thousand percent profit. It's economic warfare."



Other bargain hunters were less approving of the government action. Students Belkis and Renson saw the new scrutiny around prices as an attempt to centralise power over the retail sector. However, away from the selected stores, the public action is already having a broader effect on the cost of goods. One shopkeeper was already slashing prices on his own initiative, saying that he preferred to do so himself than be forced to. He added that he planned to leave the country as a result of the increased attention to his business practice, saying that 'there is no life here in Venezuela'. Other shopkeepers have simply chosen to lock up and leave town to avoid investigation of their accounts.

Outside the Traki department store, retail worker Fernando praised the enforcement of the regulations on pricing, saying that he had previously had to work for two weeks to buy two pairs of trousers. He commented that even opponents of the price controls were taking advantage of them, saying that "Everyone is content with this decision. The only ones who are not happy are the stores themselves."

*Harry Greatorax is a doctoral researcher for DEV at the University of East Anglia, UK*



## Appendix Four: Article written for Veneuzelanalysis.com, May 2014

I wrote this article to share the accounts of different people who took part in the May Day workers' march through Mérida City in 2014, including some members of my adopted collective, the Frente de Vanguardia de Hugo Chavez, discussed in Chapter Seven.

### OPINION AND ANALYSIS: PARTICIPATION | SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

#### In Their Own Words: Venezuelan Workers Reclaim the Streets



By HARRY GREATOREX, May 2nd 2014

#### TAGS

[Mérida](#)

[Workers movement](#)

[Workers' rights](#)

A familiar sea of red shirts, large banners and a revolutionary sing-along soundtrack: at first glance this year's march for the International Workers Day was business-as-usual in Mérida City, Venezuela. The celebratory atmosphere was due in part to the announcement by President Nicolas Maduro on 30th April of a 30% increase in the national minimum wage. A closer look, however, revealed a certain determination and a higher turnout as local activists reacted en masse to three months of blockades, violent attacks and assassinations by anti-government groups that are seen as representing the interests of the city's other social class.

As the National Guard moved in and removed Mérida's last and deadliest barricades last week, the expected violent response in Las Americas and the surrounding areas did not materialise. It seemed even the middle class residents who had supported the groups barricading their communities for the last three months had had enough of life under siege. Celebrations were short-lived. Even as the helicopters left and shops and roads reopened, rumours were spreading of a

second phase of anti-government violence based around targeted hit-and-run attacks on individuals and institutions.

The murder of former soldier and renowned revolutionary Eliecer Otaiza in Caracas on Tuesday 29th April and the deaths of two public sector workers in Guairico the following day were seen by some as confirmation of this new stage of political violence, and meant heightened tension for the thousands of Venezuelans taking to the streets in solidarity with international workers on 1ST of May. In Mérida City, I talked to some of those marching about why they were reclaiming the streets for the working classes.

### **Continuing a Rich History of Workers' Movements**

*Luis Belisario, from the Frente Vanguardia de Hugo Chavez. (Harry Greateorex)*

“We are here in defence of the Revolution, in one of the parts of the country most penetrated by North American imperialism. Today is a very special day, a day in commemoration of international workers, but particularly here in Venezuela we remember the oil workers who rebelled in the nineteen thirties, the peasant rebellion against the Spanish and the slave rebellions here- these are all part of the workers' movement. The famous uprising here in 1989 known as the Caracazo was also part of the Venezuelan workers' movement, a movement that saw Commandante Hugo Chavez arrive in power in 1999. And when that happened the world oligarchy, and the Venezuelan oligarchy and their people have tried to destroy this government of the workers.

This movement of the workers is not just Venezuelan, but Latin American, and when they attack it, they attack the workers' movements of the world. This date is very important not just for Mérida, not just for Venezuela, but for workers all over the world. There is a mega-march in Caracas today. Here we are organising against everything that has occurred when Mérida was occupied, with the barricades and paramilitary action. People are afraid, but the workers of Mérida are brave and they will defend their city, for that reason we are here in the street. There is danger, but we have to confront it. The message of the revolution is peace.”



*Luis Belisario, from the Frente Vanguardia de Hugo Chavez. (Harry Greateorex)*

### **Celebrating and Protecting Progress on Legislation for Workers Rights**

*Juan Luis Suarez, District Attorney for the State of Mérida*

“This is a spontaneous march at a national level, a mobilisation of the workers and trade unions of Venezuela. We are celebrating the fact that we have achieved a new law, a regional, national and international law given to us by President Maduro to indicate the minimum dignified conditions of labour for workers and confirming their right to participate in decisions concerning their work. We are re-writing all the neoliberal socio-economic concepts that existed before. This means that all of the progress made by workers internationally is enshrined in a law in Venezuela, to protect their salaries from the fluctuations in the price of oil that we have seen over the years.

The theme of industrial security is also a priority for us in the state of Mérida, so we also have a new law safeguarding the physical and psychological wellbeing of our workers with new institutions. And this new alternative will include the participation of all the sectors, the poor, agricultural workers, women, the young and the old.

The streets belong to the people and for that reason we will defend them. Today is an expression of the working people. We are teaching ourselves to defend ourselves like this- peacefully, by mobilising and defending our rights and deciding ourselves how we will engage with national and international economic interests. Education, work, health, security and the economy: these are the priorities of the revolution, of our President Nicolas Maduro, himself a former trade-union leader. We are expanding privileges to the masses that were enjoyed by very few people before. This is a revolution for all Venezuelans, including the middle and upper classes, including those who have no class consciousness as well. We have broken the rules that said that one man could exploit another man in Venezuela. We are looking for the maximum possible happiness for everyone.”



*Juan Luis Suarez is the District Attorney for the State of Mérida. (Harry Greateorex)*

### **Re-writing the Story of Venezuela**

*Marcelo Lischinsky, Community Organiser*

“The reason we commemorate and also celebrate the first of May in Venezuela is because the working classes of Venezuela have initiated an historic process of liberation, with the oversight of the late President Hugo Chavez: liberation from Venezuela’s position as a colony of North America. The Bolivarian Revolution has

not only given us strategic control of our own resources, such as oil, but has enabled us to recuperate our own collective memory: our memory of struggle, our memory of battle. The Bolivarian Revolution has converted the forgotten story of Venezuela into the official story of Venezuela. Where before we had the perspective of the dominant class, now we have the perspective of the dominated class.

This new official story is not a colonised story, it is a story of liberation, a story of the people, a story of oppression. The working class of Venezuela has achieved significant things even though we are still not in socialism. The Bolivarian Revolution is following a historic process, creating the conditions to advance socialism. The mark of this struggle, of this transition towards socialism, is the Organic Law of the Workers, which lays out the norms of the Venezuelan workers, in their rights, in the conditions of their work environment, in their social security. This extends not just their rights to fair pay. What has been protected by the Bolivarian Revolution includes the limitation of the working day to seven hours, so that workers have the possibility to share their lives with their families, to study, and to grow spiritually and improve as individuals, to improve from conditions of exploitation. That is where we are going.

We have succeeded in overcoming the barricading of communities, which was a serious strategy aimed at overthrowing the government. The 'soft coup' as they say, was intended to destabilise the government of Nicolas Maduro and to produce the conditions for an ultra-right-wing coup through a North American military operation. This strategy was a challenge for the Venezuelan revolutionaries, for their patience, for their serenity, but our people did not allow themselves to be provoked. It was not because our people did not want to confront the barricaders, because they are not brave. The Venezuelan revolutionaries did not confront the barricaders because it was an order from our President Nicolas Maduro. They did not allow themselves to be provoked and supply the conditions for a civil war. We know their strategy, and we remain alert."



*Marcelo Lischinsky is a community organiser. (Harry Greatorex)*

These comments reflect what is at stake for Venezuela's working classes as destabilisation attempts continue and international concern mounts. The significant achievement of the Bolivarian Revolution is in progressive legislation and in writing new national narratives, oriented to reflect the concerns and stories of the previously excluded. The 30% increase in the minimum wage is a clear example of this process. It is to protect these achievements that Venezuelan workers took to the streets on May 1st in support of their Revolution, despite the continued threat of anti-government political violence. Peaceful mobilisation, local political organising and innovation in development of communities and workplaces are the means not only to resist destabilisation but to continue Venezuela's path towards an inclusive form of socialism. It is for this status as a work in progress, as part of an ongoing dialectic, as an example of what begins

when the door is opened to the rights and agency of the working classes, that the Bolivarian Revolution ought to be supported.

*Harry Greateorex is a postgraduate researcher at the School of International Development, UEA.*

## Appendix Five: Article written for [collectivedevelopment.org](http://collectivedevelopment.org), March 2013

I wrote this commentary after the death of Chavez in 2013 – and after my return from my first scoping trip to Venezuela. The article shows something of my sympathy for the Bolivarian project, at a time before I had fully begun to use analyses of the discourse of Chavismo to unpack what I was seeing in Venezuela.

‘...Or Dictator?’ How media narratives mask the debate about Chavez’s Venezuela

[collectivedev](http://collectivedev.org) / [March 22, 2013](http://collectivedev.org)

When I arrived in Caracas in December, Chavez was in Cuba being treated for the cancer that would eventually take his life, sparking international debate around his character and legacy. For the Chavistas I know, the reactionary and sensationalist editorial policies of the Guardian and other supposedly left-wing broadsheets were nothing new. What was most concerning was the symbolic function of the ubiquitous “...or Dictator” narrative. The constant questioning of Chavez’s political legitimacy detracts very effectively from the detail of an important case study. A visionary leader, Chavez’s legacy is more than poverty reduction, growth and social empowerment: it is that of getting the arguments right. By association with a lazy negative stereotype, these arguments are rendered as something normatively irrelevant to important global debates over social organisation.

On paper, this is a revolution of the most progressive kind. The more I read, the more I imagine Chavez walking the floors of the Miraflores Palace with a copy of Pedagogy of the Oppressed in his back pocket. This was a man determined to avoid the mistakes of twentieth century socialism. Only reluctantly he constructed a party that could win elections against a US-backed opposition, consistently preferring a dialectic approach. From the collaborative drafting of the constitution to the fundamental place for communal councils in his vision for Venezuela, Chavez’s vision was of participative democracy founded on popular power.





London Candle Lit Vigil for Chavez Venezuela Solidarity Campaign

Chavez's revolution is not just about halving extreme poverty, reversing decades-long trends of inflation and economic decline, achieving consistent growth throughout a global recession, tripling pensions and healthcare access and eradicating illiteracy (see link below). But to participate meaningfully you must be fed, educated and healthy.

My experiences in Venezuela merge in and around this account, adding faces to the revolutionary story. This is no Catalanian utopia, not yet. Traffic is lethal and pollution is everywhere, from the gutter to the most breathtaking vistas. In Caracas, barrios seep to the horizon, beautiful and menacing, while in leafy suburbs the rich hide behind electrified fences. I am never robbed, rarely threatened, but I am warned constantly that I am not safe.

The upside is easily visible. An array of visible public goods include subsidised meals, groceries, telecommunications and public transport including free cable-cars and trams, new public parks and outdoor gyms and of course petrol as cheap as water. I stay in free student accommodation and receive excellent, free healthcare. I hear how the Communal Council system means residents have direct control of local decision making on spending, licensing, investment, infrastructural improvements and policing. I take to the streets with smiling activists, old and young, putting their bodies on the line as fears of opposition violence mount in Chavez's absence. I have never seen a protest for the government before.



In Venezuela, opinions of Chavez almost always divide along class lines. I meet middle-class students who feel threatened by having to compete for jobs with graduates of the free Bolivarian universities. I sit with rich expats on my flights in and out of Caracas who have been 'forced' to relocate to Belgravia and Hyde Park apartments to wait out the revolution. Their views contrast with the accounts of poor families whose experience of change is simple: now they have hope and self-respect. They are included.

Chavez's death, on the 5th of March, rocks the country and is reported all over the world. In Venezuela many are devastated, prostrate and weeping in the streets in their millions. Some, overjoyed, celebrate in their gated communities. In the British papers the eulogies are either derisory or undecided. Was Chavez hero or tyrant? Saviour or dictator? I hear these debates repeated by left-wing friends but little talk of the urgent questions concerning a country daring to follow a truly alternative path of development.



Crowds gather for the London Candle Lit Vigil for Chavez Venezuela Solidarity Campaign

This was a popular leader elected with a clear majority and a twelve point margin (compared to 26% of the electorate who voted for David Cameron). As President, Chavez has also overseen more elections in the last fourteen years than in the previous forty with a voting system regarded as among the fairest in the world. There is undoubtedly some centralisation of power, designed to circumnavigate an aging and famously corrupt bureaucracy. He is a leader who repaid World Bank loans in full while in national debt in the global North sky-rocketed, who consistently tolerated the hysterically anti-Chavez private press, insisting on the principles of press freedom. Venezuela's seven political prisoners are a marked contrast to a decade of illegal rendition by the US and UK.

Both in remembering Chavez and analysing Venezuela today, we would do better to ask: what is distinctive here? This is a revolution centred on social transformation: on devolving political decision-making, challenging clientelist dynamics and above all on rewriting the narratives at the heart of a society to challenge structures of disempowerment and material inequality. This discourse is especially relevant as people around the world suffer austerity and look for alternatives. Claims of radical, pro-poor, systemic change should be empirically interrogated in our media and our universities, not detracted from by tired tabloid slurs, even when they do have a question mark at the end.

Presidential elections are set for 14th April in Venezuela, where the media vilification of Vice-President Nicolas Maduro is already underway. He is widely tipped not only for victory but to continue policies that will deepen and strengthen the revolutionary process. Even in mourning, Chavez's supporters are adamant that his vision of popular empowerment will continue. This emancipation is his most important contribution.

### **Appendix Six: Article in *Pico Bolivar* describing the murder of Juan Carlos Dávila Barrios in September 2013**

This article from *Pico Bolivar*, Mérida's local paper on the 29<sup>th</sup> September 2013 describes the murder of Juan Carlos Dávila Barrios in the entrance to Pueblo Nuevo. The incident preceded an increase in anti-government student activity in the month preceding the *guarimba* occupations of 2014. The second article (inset) describes the use of the incident by the opposition MUD.

En la entrada al barrio Pueblo Nuevo

## Delinuentes

# Ultimaron a balazos a estudiante de ULA

■ Yesel Ruiz

Fotos: Yoni Gamboa / William Vargas

Un joven estudiante de la Universidad de Los Andes, miembro de la selección regional de karate y del movimiento estudiantil Fórmula 1 de esa casa de estudio, fue asesinado a balazos por amboscadas que minutos antes lo despojaron de sus pertenencias. El hecho ocurrió en la entrada al barrio Pueblo Nuevo, en el vado del Campo Elías, de la avenida 26 del municipio Libertador la noche de ayer a las 7-49.

El joven, identificado como Juan Carlos Davila Barrios (23), se encontraba en compañía de otro muchacho, ambos

camuflaban por la dirección referida cuando fueron interceptados por dos individuos, quienes los encasillaron y procedieron a robar sus pertenencias, posteriormente a hurtarle antes de huir los

factos de balas a Davila Barrios, dos en el abdomen y uno en el brazo derecho. Luego del suceso el muchacho fue auxiliado por ciudadanos que pasaron por el lugar, quienes inmediatamente lo trasladaron en vehículo particular al hospital Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz, sin embargo su estado de salud obligó a los médicos a remitirlo al Instituto Autónomo Hospital Universitario de Los Andes (Iahua), pero a los pocos minutos de su ingreso desafortunadamente falleció. El cadáver fue llevado a la sala forense del mismo nosocomio, donde se realizó la respectiva necropsia de ley.

El hoy occiso residía en el sector San José Obispo de la avenida 16 de Septiembre. Aproximadamente a las diez de la noche se logró conocer que electivos adscritos al Cuadro de Investigaciones Científicas, Penales y Criminológicas (Cicpc), analistas (Cicpc), derivaron a varias personas en el barrio Pueblo Nuevo, se presume que estarían relacionadas con el homicidio del joven karateca.



FALLECIÓ: El joven murió minutos después de ingresar al Iahua



OCISO: Identificado como Juan Carlos Davila Barrios (23)

## Candidatos de la MUD buscan generar focos de violencia en Mérida

Luego de las declaraciones emitidas por Liliana Guerrero, candidata a Concejal a la Cámara Municipal de Libertador, quien llamó a desestabilizar al estado "al dar un plazo de tiempo a las autoridades para resolver el caso del joven estudiante asesinado Juan Davila Barrios, de 23 años de edad, Daviana Muñoz, Secretaria ejecutiva del Movimiento por la Paz y la Vida en Mérida, dijo que con este tipo de declaraciones se evidencia el grado de amenazas, para generar focos de violencia en la enti-

dad. La autoridad regional manifestó su preocupación ante los señalamientos expuestos por lo que dijo: "las declaraciones emitidas por Liliana Guerrero, candidata a Concejal del municipio Libertador, quien está saliendo jubilada de la FCU-ULA, para optar por una concejalía, llamando a la violencia, están en contra de la paz y la vida, en contra de todos y jugando a una desestabilización en el estado, por lineamientos nacionales de la Mesa de la Unidad", dijo al culminar HM

Fotos: Tz ofis, ocario, 2009

## Appendix Seven: Chavista Pamphlet from November 2013

From all the Chavista pamphlets and literature I saw in Veenzuela, this pamphlet, circulated at Chavista meetings in Mérida ahead of the '8D' Nationals Municipal Elections in December 2013, gives the best example of the ways the PSUV represent themselves and their supporters. The pamphlet shows the continued use of Chávez as a symbol of the movement and explains "what it means to be Chavista". This includes following a leader who is "from the people", the values of solidarity, equality, diversity, the sharing of rights and a call to "fight against all forms of domination".

## ¿QUE ES SER CHAVISTA?

- Tener: amor, y seguir a un líder que nos pertenece al pueblo, porque vive en él.
- Escoger siempre al más honesto, que no se deje vencer.
- No debemos apoyar a nadie, por derecha o por izquierda por hybris, lo que importa.
- Que no haya ese machín de oro, ser querido con los demás.
- Ayudar a la patria, no como una tarea más, sino como un sentimiento que se logra en el pueblo y, en el pensar del gran con: orgullo "soy venezolano, cambio..."
- Sentirse respaldado dentro de la diversidad, sin exclusiones ni discriminación por ningún tipo.
- Defender los derechos de la nación, porque nos pertenecen.
- Compartir lo que tenemos y no lo que poseemos con nuestros hermanos y hermanas dentro y fuera de Venezuela.
- Luchar contra todas las formas de corrupción.
- Ser críticos por naturaleza para que nuestra vida sea mejor cada día.
- Ser participativos frente de la democracia y estar siempre del lado de los más necesitados.
- Pensar contra Chávez, para poder seguir construyendo una Patria más cada vez mejor.

MI MISION  
**MI MISION** MISION ROBISON  
**MISION RIBAS MISION SUCRE**

## SELECCIONAR TODO

	<b>CANDIDATO CHAVISTA</b>		
	<b>VOTO LISTA</b>		
	<b>NOMINAL A-1</b>		
	<b>NOMINAL A-2</b>		



**YO VOTO CHAVISTA VOTO POR TODOS**



### IMPORTANTE:

En el simulacro de votación realizado por el CNE se pudo detectar que en esta ocasión no aparece óvalo en la franja superior de "SELECCIONAR TODO". Por lo tanto, debemos informar al electorado



El 8D será no sólo una jornada democrática en la cual ejerceremos nuestro derecho al voto, sino también el **"Día de la Lealtad al legado de Hugo Chávez y del Amor a la Patria"**, como lo declaró el Presidente Maduro.

Al votar el 8D por los candidatos chavistas lo hacemos por los hijos de Chávez, nuestras hermanas y hermanos de lucha, APTA a quienes seguiremos construyendo la Patria nueva en toda la geografía venezolana.

El chavismo rescató la independencia, soberanía y dignidad de la Patria. Inmortalizó un nuevo sentido a nuestras vidas y a la participación del pueblo en la toma de decisiones en todos los niveles de la sociedad.

De ahí la importancia del 8D para nuestras aspiraciones individuales y colectivas: de bienestar y prosperidad, para continuar haciendo realidad nuestros sueños.

Pero los sueños se construyen, hay que ayudar a convertirlos en realidad, si queremos seguir adelante. Por eso es que debemos estar siempre dispuestos a responder al llamado de nuestro Comandante Chávez Eterna: **"los que quieren Patria ¡vengan conmigo!"**

El chavismo sigue siendo la única alternativa para el presente y el futuro de la Patria. La visión del pueblo es la mirada del chavismo.

### **?POR QUÉ VOTAR CHAVISTA?**

- Por lealtad a Chávez y su legado, porque somos, unidos, hermanos de **"sangre roja y tricolor"**.
- Porque ante cada crisis impuesta por la oposición, el gobierno del pueblo ha sido victorioso.
- Porque somos un pueblo amado, perseverante y digno.
- Porque desde una alcaidía chavista podemos ejercer junto al gobierno nacional, proyectos para beneficio de todos.

### **PORQUE EL CHAVISMO:**

- Nos transformó a todos, nos permitió crecer como seres humanos y nos dio la posibilidad de emprender iniciativas con esfuerzo propio para el sostenimiento de nuestras familias.
- Es por naturaleza, la fuerza de cambio, la alternativa para transformar la sociedad en beneficio de todos.
- Es nuestra oportunidad de **"echarle bolas"** a los problemas, y construir, juntos, nuestros sueños.
- Garantiza la permanencia y desarrollo de las misiones y otros programas sociales emprendidos en estos años por la Revolución Bolivariana.
- Piensa en la felicidad del pueblo.
- Nunca ha dejado a nadie desamparado y asume como suyos tus problemas y los míos.
- Asegura que nuestra voz sea escuchada, más allá de las estructuras administrativas tradicionales para, entre otras cosas, recuperar los espacios públicos y ponerlos al servicio de la comunidad.
- Respeta las reglas de la democracia y aceptará los resultados que emita el CNE el 8D.