The London School of Economics and Political Science

"We Shall Overcome":
Radical Populism, Political Morality and Participatory
Democracy in a Venezuelan Barrio

Matt Wilde

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Declaration

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In memory of Olivia Harris

Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic exploration of radical populist politics among working-class residents of a Venezuelan *barrio* (shantytown). It draws on fieldwork conducted over 19 months and focuses on the political ideals and practices of pro-government *chavista* activists in the context of the "Bolivarian Revolution". Specifically, it analyses the utopian desires that underpin activists' engagement with a number of political organisations in their communities, uncovering how political activism is embedded in broader projects that seek personal transformation, material betterment and moral redemption. It also examines state-led efforts to establish participatory democracy at the local level, tracing the experiences of grassroots activists as they attempt to build new political institutions in their communities. My approach involves a close attention to the relationship between political discourse, state policy and everyday practice, exploring the complex interactions that unfold between state agencies and community actors. Overall, the aim of this thesis is to understand the appeal of a radical populist project by looking beyond claims that political efficacy rests solely on the redistribution of resources. I suggest that the particular appeal of *chavismo* lies in the fact that it also asks its adherents to usher in a new moral order by transforming themselves, their communities and their democracy in profound ways. I explore many of the complexities that are inherent to this process, analysing how activists seeking radical change encounter disjunctures between an idealised future and a compromised and contingent present.

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Maps and Figures

List of Acronyms

AD	*Accíon Democrática* (Democratic Action Party)
ALBA	*Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América* (Bolivarian Alliance for the People of our Americas)
ASOPRODENCO	*Asociación para la Promoción del Desarollo Endógeno Comunitario* (Association for the Promotion of Endogenous Community Development)
CBs	*Círculos Bolivariano* (Bolivarian Circles)
CCs	*Consejo Comunales* (Communal Councils)
CLPPs	*Consejos Locales de Planificacion Publicas* (Local Public Planning Councils)
CTUs	*Comités Tierras Urbanas* (Urban Land Committees)
COPEI	*Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente* (Christian Democrat Party)
FIDES	*Fondo Intergubanmental para la Decentralización* (Intergovernmental Fund for Decentralisation)
FFM	*Frente Francisco de Miranda* (Francisco Miranda Front)
FUNDACOMUNAL	*Fundación para la Promoción y Desarrollo del Poder Comunal* (Foundation for the Promotion and Development of Communal Power)
FONDEMI	*Fondo de Desarrollo MicroFinancerio* (Micro Finance Development Fund)
FTAA	Free Trade Area of the Americas
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MPComunas	*Ministerio del Poder Popular para las Comunas y la Proteción Social* (Ministry of Popular Power for Communes and Social Protection)
MVR	*Movimiento Quinta* República (Fifth Republic Movement)
OPEC	Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries
PCV	*Partido Comunista de Venezuela* (Communist Party of Venezuela)
PDVSA	*Petroleos de Venezuela S.A.* (Venezuelan Petroleum Company)
PPT	*Patria Para Todos* (Fatherland for All Party)
PSUV	*Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (United Socialist Party of Venezuela
UBV	*Universidad Bolivariana de Venezuela* (Bolivarian University of Venezuela)
UBEs	*Unidades de Batallas Electorales* (Electoral Battle Units)

List of Key Characters

The Hernández Family

Rafael	Grassroots community leader, *chavista* activist
Yulmi	Grassroots community leader, *chavista* activist (wife of Rafael)
Cristina	Rafael and Yulmi's eldest daughter
Eduardo	Rafael and Yulmi's son
Yuleidi	Rafael and Yulmi's youngest daughter
Guillermo	Cristina's boyfriend, employed in a local café
María	Rafael's mother, community founder
Manuel	Rafael's father, community founder
Alejandro	María and Manuel's oldest son, *chavista* activist and state employee
Manuelito	María and Manuel's youngest son, *chavista* activist
Licha	Manuelito's wife

Political Activists

Rosa	*Chavista* activist, member of ASOPRODENCO, commune participant
Oneidys	*Chavista* activist, member of ASOPRODENCO, commune participant
Norma	Employee of Sala de Batalla Social, commune participant
Ernesto	*Vocero* (spokesperson) of local communal council, commune participant
Angel	*Vocero* of local communal council, commune participant
Carla	*Vocera* of local communal council
Esme	*Vocera* of local communal council
Juliana	*Vocera* of local communal council
Natalia	*Vocera* of local communal council

Others

Nucho	Local "handyman" and friend of Rafael
Pablo	Tenant of Rafael and Yulmi
Paula	Tenant of Rafael and Yulmi
Edgardo Parra	Mayor of Valencia
Hugo Chávez	President of Venezuela, 1999-2013

Figure 1: Portrait of Hugo Chávez, former President of Venezuela (Matt Wilde)

INTRODUCTION

It was towards the end of my stay with Rafael and Yulmi when they mounted the portrait of their president, Hugo Chávez, on the wall of their front room. The couple, who were committed supporters of Chávez – *chavistas*, as they are known in Venezuela – had asked a friend who specialised in family portraits to make it for the newly furnished room they had been gradually improving since my arrival in early 2009. As they explained at the time, the portrait was an expression of gratitude, loyalty and pride from a working-class family who had come to see their own

successes as intimately tied to the figure whose protective gaze now looked down from the wall. In the decade since Chávez had taken office in 1999, Rafael and Yulmi's lives had changed dramatically thanks to a series of "pro-poor" government initiatives and their own growing prominence as community leaders in the locality. As a result of the Chávez government's reforms, significant new opportunities for the family had emerged in education, political participation and employment, and by the time I left both were state employees carrying out important roles in what Chávez called the "Bolivarian revolution". The naming of this political movement was significant: Simón Bolívar was the Venezuelan general and statesman who liberated much of Latin America from the Spanish in the nineteenth century, and Chávez quite consciously reappropriated the nation's founding father and transformed him into a champion for Venezuela's poor (Salas 2000). As Rafael explained, this symbolism had a profound impact on many working-class Venezuelans, offering an accessible political language that linked their own contemporary struggles to Bolívar's against the colonial power. "What Chávez gave us was a national identity that didn't exist before," he told me. "Before, most people thought that politics was unimportant, or that it was dirty. Our identity was really weak. We didn't know about any of that history, and politics wasn't about social action." In the 14 years he was in power, Chávez became a ubiquitous and unavoidable presence in Venezuelan life. He spoke most days on television, adorned the walls of every town and city and appeared in everyday conversations up and down the country. For those who supported him, the president was a constant reference point who reminded people that they were engaged in a heroic moral struggle against imperialism and neoliberalism. The family's decision to erect a portrait of Chávez in their front room expressed the significance of the symbolic and material changes that had taken place over the course of a decade. Its presence attested to the totemic value Chávez came to play in their lives, indicating how everyday life had become politicised to such an extent that it was now at the heart of this family's moral world.

This thesis is an ethnographic exploration of radical populist politics among working-class residents of a Venezuelan *barrio* called El Camoruco, a self-built community located in the industrial city of Valencia.[1] It draws on fieldwork conducted over 19 months and focuses on the understandings, ideals and policies that

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[1] The term *barrio* means "neighbourhood" but in Venezuela is generally used as a byword for low-income, self-built shantytowns.

structured political practice among *chavista* activists and supporters. Taking my hosts' portrait of the late President Chávez as its starting point, it asks how a political project and its leader became significant enough to adorn domestic wall-space that is ordinarily reserved for saints and gods. It examines the interaction between political discourse, state policy and everyday practice and probes the moral sentiments and imaginaries that anchor political lives. It also investigates efforts to establish participatory democracy at the local level, evaluating grassroots activists' efforts to build new political and economic structures and the increasing role of the state in such endeavours. Overall, the aim of this thesis is to understand the appeal of a radical populist project by looking beyond its distribution of resources to previously excluded sectors of the population. My contention is that the particular appeal of *chavismo* lies in the fact that it also asks its adherents to usher in a new moral order by transforming themselves, their communities and their democracy in profound ways.

POPULISM, *CHAVISMO* AND DEMOCRACY

Populism is a peculiar analytical category that seems to generate almost as much debate about its conceptual utility as it does about the social phenomena it seeks to analyse. Commonly regarded as a pejorative term, it is often used as a byword for fiery but ill-defined political rhetoric (Laclau 2005: 18-19), and as a point of analysis has tended to reflect the shifting ideological and theoretical frameworks of the academic milieu (de la Torre 2000: 2-3). Some scholars define populism as a phase in capitalist development (Malloy 1977) and argue that it tends to involve the manipulation of "backward masses" by demagogic and charismatic leaders (Germani 1978). Others point to the role of wealth redistribution, reliance on import substitution as an economic model and the rhetorical defence of national sovereignty (Touraine 1989). Stein (1980) argues that although populist leaders tend to speak a language aimed at the poor, their movements are generally multi-class coalitions that explicitly reject class conflict as a political project. He highlights the centrality of an exalted leader around which these coalitions orbit, and emphasises the importance of state control as a means of maintaining a diverse social base through systems of patronage (1980: 9-10). Personal loyalty between the leader and their followers is critical to most definitions of populism, a point underlined in particular by Willner (1984), who

argues that followers tend to "blindly follow their leader's statements" (1984: 4). Conniff (1999) makes a similar case, proposing that populist parties often operate according to the "proxy control" of a central leader who responds to the "psychological desires" of supporters (1999: 193). Such trends are commonly associated with the weakening of liberal democracy, since populists are seen to bypass or manipulate democratic institutions in favour of distributing resources directly to their supporters.

Many commentators predicted that the consolidation of neoliberalism as a political and economic package during the 1990s would signal the end of populism in Latin America, the assumption being that without significant state resources at their disposal, populist leaders would lack the redistributive powers to maintain their bases of support. But the emergence of so-called "neopopulists" like Alberto Fujimori in Peru, Abdalá Bacaram in Ecuador and Carlos Menem in Argentina seemed to disprove this theory. As Weyland (1996) observes, neopopulism and neoliberalism found an "unexpected affinity" during the 1990s. Figures like Fujimori were able to take advantage of economic crisis and position themselves in opposition to a discredited elite, casting their politics as a necessary break with the corrupt establishment. They also used targeted welfare programmes to aid the poorest in society, thus gaining political capital by providing low-income supporters with a degree of protection from the worst consequences of structural adjustment (Rousseau 2009).

While its leaders typically speak a language of crisis and rupture, Carlos de la Torre (2000) disputes the claim that populism only arises in times of crisis. He contends instead that its continuing salience rests more on the consistent failure of Latin American societies to adequately incorporate the popular sectors into their democracies. Populism appeals, he suggests, because it purports to resolve this democratic deficit and places the poor at the heart of its political discourse. He draws on Laclau's definition of populist logic (1977; see also 2005), which rests on three central factors: the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating "the people" from power, an equivalent articulation of demands making the emergence of "the people" possible, and the unification of these demands in a stable system of signification (2005: 74). Building on this model, de la Torre argues that there are certain core traits that make populism an identifiable political form: (1) a Manichean discourse that presents a moral struggle between the people and an established elite;

(2) the social construction of a leader as the symbol of redemption; (3) the forging of coalitions between an emergent elite and popular sectors; (4) an ambiguous relationship with democracy, in which new groups are incorporated into democracy but the political rights of opponents are undermined (2000: 140-141). This final point is of particular note, since it highlights how populism can be viewed as "at once inclusive and alienating" (Spanakos 2008a: 543). Precisely because it rests on the division of society into mutually hostile social blocs and distributes resources according to them, populism challenges the pluralist checks and balances that are presumed to be central to liberal polities.

The emergence of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela was viewed by many scholars as consistent with the kind of characteristics outlined above. When Chávez was elected in 1998, he was already well known in the country as the radical army colonel who had attempted a coup in 1992 and been jailed for two years when it failed. Returning dramatically as a presidential candidate in 1998, Chávez rallied against the corruption, elitism and inequality that had come to define Venezuelan politics. His colloquial speech and charismatic presence struck a chord with a population that had seen its quality of life fall after forty years of two-party dominance and a decade of pernicious neoliberal reforms. Prior to his arrival, a political system known as *puntofijismo* had ensured that two centrist parties, Acción Democrática (AD) and the Christian Democrats (COPEI), monopolised political power. This system relied heavily on state control of the country's vast oil wealth (Venezuela is one of the world's largest producers of oil), which enabled a dense and expansive system of clientelism that penetrated civil society at all levels and ensured the loyalty of the Roman Catholic Church, the military, the business sector and the major trade unions (Karl 1987; Coronil 1997; Buxton 1999; Ellner and Hellinger 2003; McCoy and Myers 2004; Buxton 2008).

Although there is general agreement that Chávez's arrival marked a popular rejection of *puntofijismo* (Lopez Maya 2003; Castro 2007), there is far less accord over how to determine the most important factors that lead to his rise. McCoy and Myers (2004a) argue that *puntofijismo* declined due to structural pressures on Venezuela's lop-sided oil-dependent economy, internal contradictions in its political institutions and the failure of its political elite to adapt to changing economic conditions in the 1980s. Ellner and Hellinger (2003) place a heavier emphasis on the role played by class conflict in this process, suggesting that Chávez represents the

repositioning of class struggle to the centre of public and political life. For Ellner (2008), Chávez bears strong similarities to the radical populists of the 1940s, who explicitly positioned themselves against the established elite until being overthrown by a military coup. He contends that an overemphasis on institutional factors leaves a highly problematic implication in explaining the rise of *chavismo*: "that if only decentralisation and state reform had proceeded apace, the crisis would have been avoided and Chávez never would have reached power" (2008: 216).

Many of these debates are underpinned by a concern over democracy and citizenship, which have been central themes since Chávez took office. Almost all commentators agree that *chavismo* is a "hybrid" political formation that has expanded democratic rights and participation for some citizens, but many also argue that it has discriminated against others and impeded the checks and balances that should sustain liberal democracies. One of Chávez's first major political moves was to call elections for a Constituent Assembly, which was charged with drafting a new constitution. Ratified via a referendum in late 1999, the new Bolivarian Constitution changed the national parliament from a bicameral system to a unicameral one (the single house now being called the National Assembly) and shifted from an emphasis on party politics to one that privileged what Chávez called "participatory and protagonist" democracy. Not even mentioning political parties in the new constitution, this shift was explicitly opposed to representative democracy, instead seeking to establish a basic legal framework for the democratisation of the Venezuelan state in new terms (Alvarez 2003: 153). Citizens now had the right to revoke elected officials and judges in the second half of their terms, as well as impose their will on local, regional and national bodies through "citizen assemblies". Although the structural mechanisms for these policies would not come until several years later (see Part II of this thesis), the discursive tone of the Bolivarian Constitution placed "constituent power" (the democratic force of revolutionary innovation) over and above "constituted power" (the fixed power of formal constitutions and centralised authority) (Negri 1999). In doing so, it sought to open up channels for direct citizen participation in governance and provided a framework for future reforms. As Alvarez notes, however, it also strengthened the power of the national executive, not least by giving the president the power to independently convoke a Constituent Assembly through presidential decrees (2003: 155).

Indeed, critics argue that the Bolivarian Constitution is in fact "hyperpresidential" (Corrales & Penfold 2011: 17), highlighting its extension of the presidential term from five to six years and new executive controls over military promotions. Corrales and Penfold contend that Chávez manipulated the national electoral monitor, the CNE (Consejo Nacional Electoral), pursued a policy of "polarise and punish" against opponents and abused state resources in election campaigns (Corrales & Penfold 2011: 17-37).[2] After 2009, when he successfully won a referendum that removed the two-term limit on presidential terms, they argue that Chávez intensified these strategies by using oil revenues to buttress his own power through clientelism, cronyism, job discrimination and selective impunity towards supporters (2011: 37-46). For reasons such as these, scholars have argued that Venezuelan politics remain in a "grey zone" (McCoy and Myers 2004: 3) somewhere between liberal democracy and autocracy. Others claim, however, that such assessments underplay the importance of popular support enjoyed by Chávez. Roberts (2006) suggests that *chavismo* bears many hallmarks of "classic" populism, but points out that it has a far higher level of grassroots mobilisation than neopopulists such as Fujimori. Spanakos (2008a), meanwhile, defines *chavismo* as a particular kind of "left populism" and asserts that Chávez has successfully constructed a new form of citizenship closely tied to Bolivarian ideals, institutions and policies. In doing so, he argues that working-class Venezuelans have been granted greater access to democratic participation, enhanced consumer spending power and vastly improved public services, albeit in a "partisan environment where state/government/party differentiation is often non-existent" (2008a: 543). A related viewpoint is put forward by Hawkins (2010), who highlights Chávez's decision to formally adopt "twenty-first century socialism" as a distinctive feature of his populism. While formal adherence to an "outside" political ideology is largely untypical of populist projects, Hawkins argues that the Venezuelan case illustrates how a class-based ideology can co-exist with a populist language and political style. Socialism (the ideology) remains subordinate to Bolivarianism (the discourse), but the two have thus far proven to be largely compatible (2010: 84-85).

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[2] The authors argue that Chávez's response to the oil industry walkout in 2003 was typical of this "polarise and punish" policy. Having regained central control over the state oil company, PDVSA, he sacked 60 percent of its employees (largely those in lower and middle management) and sent in the army to restart the industry's production (Corrales & Penfold 2011: 24).

Although these debates are of undoubted importance to the understanding of the political causes and consequences of the Chávez era, much of the literature cited above seems premised on the assumption that a particular form of liberal democracy is necessarily the most desirable system a society should strive for, or indeed that every society will eventually arrive at this system with the right set of conditions and reforms. Many commentators seem to lament the "demise" of Venezuela's representative democracy, despite simultaneously conceding that *puntofijismo* was a fundamentally exclusionary system that institutionalised inequality and left huge swathes of the population without adequate means to articulate political claims. As Mitchell Dean (2001) points out, liberal democracy is itself entirely compatible with authoritarian techniques of governance; indeed, it is often underpinned by them.[3] Moreover, recent anthropological approaches to democracy (Gutmann 2002; Paley 2008) have highlighted how scholarly understandings of democracy often reflect a normative ideal of Euro-American liberalism, glossing over different histories, understandings and practices that provide a more complicated and diverse picture of democratic possibilities and experiences. The model commonly held as an ideal is therefore perhaps better regarded, as Nugent (2008) argues, as one particular articulation of democracy among many possible formations. This is not to say, of course, that Venezuelan democracy under Chávez does not require some close examination. Rather, particularly given that the Bolivarian government seeks to change the nature of democratic practice in the country, I suggest that our analytical lens needs to shift focus in order to make a contextually appropriate evaluation.

To a large extent, approaches to populism have analysed the discourses and policies of leaders and the structural conditions in which they rise and fall. The problem with this focus is that it largely obfuscates the meanings, motivations and actions of the rank and file activists who make these movements possible. General populations are of interest only insofar as they determine political successes or failures by voting or not voting for certain leaders; their own political desires, understandings and strategies are essentially rendered invisible. In the case of

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[3] "Governing in the name of freedom," writes Dean, "is a plural, pragmatic and heterogeneous task. It concerns how to use the full range of governmental and sovereign technologies, from persuasion, encouragement, seduction, enticement, obligation, petty humiliation, shame, discipline, training and propaganda through to violence – in its different forms – and the symbolics and threat of violence, in a manner which can be reconciled with the claim, always understood nominalistically, to govern liberally, to govern in a free political culture, to govern in the name of freedom, to respect individual liberty or to govern through freedom" (2001: 58).

Venezuela, such approaches have arguably overlooked the presence of significant social dynamics because they have paid scant attention to politics beyond "formal" spheres. McCoy argues, for example, that under *puntofijismo* "political parties mediated between state and society to such an extent that autonomous, nonpartisan civil society organisations scarcely existed" (2004: 271). Yet recent ethnographic and historical studies of grassroots *barrio* organisations (Fernandes 2010; Velasco 2011) show that this is simply not the case. Grassroots organisations in *barrios* have played a significant role in the country's political life for the best part of half a century, and were hugely important in both Chávez's acquisition of power and the development of the Bolivarian project as a whole. McCoy's reading of Chávez's working-class supporters has strong echoes of the view that populist movements are constituted by those who "blindly" follow their leaders. Venezuela's urban poor, she writes, "flocked" to support Chávez's candidacy in 1998 because they are "most susceptible to mobilisation by a personalistic movement when their quality of life has declined and they perceive themselves to be excluded or discriminated against in the policy-making process of the existing political regime" (2004: 293). Such viewpoints leave inadequate space to explore the grassroots political cultures that predated Chávez's arrival, the complex relationships that working-class *chavistas* have with the movement's political leadership, or the effects of government policies on interactions with the state. They also provide no tools for analysing the deeper moral projects that activists undertake as part of their political activism. This thesis, as I discuss in more detail below, seeks to break this trend by focusing on the moral and imaginative motivations of grassroots *chavista* actors.

In the small number of studies that analyse populism from the point of view of the rank and file, two points come across. The first is that although populist movements invariably offer some kind of material benefit to those who form its core social base, these benefits do not by themselves offer ample explanation for their political successes. Daniel James's (1988) historical study of the relationship between unions and Peronism in Argentina, for example, shows how the formation of working-class traditions closely tied to Peronism produced a loyalty among workers that transcended campaigns for higher wages or better working conditions. During the 1930s, Argentina's working classes lived through a period of deep impoverishment and suffered endemic social stigmatisation. As a result, Peron's powerful discourse offering dignity, equality and citizenship to workers had a profound impact in the

1940s. Calling this discourse "heretical", James argues that the great success of Peronism was its ability to align itself with the poor and portray itself as above and beyond the pettiness and sectarianism of party politics. It offered, instead, "a sort of protean, malleable common-place of working-class identification" (1988: 264) that gave its supporters a critically important sense of pride and self-esteem.[4] The second point, exemplified by Javier Auyero's (2000) ethnography of Peronist problem-solving in a Buenos Aires shantytown, is that loyalty to a given political movement often stems from long-term, enduring and personalised links with party brokers. Support for a party is the result of dense social networks involving clients and brokers in which everyday economic problems are solved through what he calls "politically mediated problem-solving" (2000: 214). These linkages are not reducible to simple pragmatism, but rather "involve professed emotions, long-lasting ties, expressed commitments [and] declared loyalties" (2000: 173). Political rallies, he contends, are not merely instrumental exchanges of goods and services for political support, but instead dramatisations "of the *already existing* informal networks and shared cultural representations" (2000: 13, emphasis in original). According to Auyero, if we want to understand how populist movements work, we need to pay far greater attention to the everyday practices and understandings that cultivate and solidify political bases.

This brings me to the central aims of this thesis. My first aim is to move beyond the limitations of many accounts of populism and analyse what I call the *political morality* of grassroots *chavista* activists. I argue that *chavismo* has proven successful because it has constructed a working-class identity that offers dignity and pride to previously excluded Venezuelan citizens. For *chavistas*, this identity is premised on a moral struggle to overcome both socio-political exclusion at the structural level and perceived moral degradation at the subjective level. Both of these problems are attributed to the contaminating legacies of *puntofijismo*, neoliberalism and Venezuela's long-standing relationship with oil. Although much attention has focused on the socio-economic and political inequalities that *chavismo* rails against, precious little has looked at how individuals and groups see their political participation as a moral project that seeks to subjectively decontaminate individuals. My focus is on how activists perceive this struggle to be one in which they must

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[4] Such political successes, of course, are not immortal. Auyero argues that by the 1990s, the Peronist identity was no longer coterminous with working-class identity in the way it had been in the 1970s (2000: 191).

change not only the political and economic structures of their nation, but also the moral foundations of themselves and their communities. Building on recent anthropological work on morality (see below), I suggest that this political morality gives radical populism a vital mobilising energy through everyday attempts to transform selves, recuperate lost values and build new community structures. Exploring the moral terrain of political subjectivity, Part I of this thesis explores the workings of this political morality in different spheres of *barrio* life.

My second aim is to analyse the changing nature of neighbourhood organisations in the Chávez era and evaluate the government's attempt to stimulate participatory democracy at the grassroots level. Since populism is often regarded as an attack on liberal democracy, one of the major defences of *chavismo*, particularly among the international left, has been the claim that it is building an alternative form of democracy "*desde abajo*" (from below) (Motta 2010). This claim is important to assess, since the drive to establish participatory democracy as both a present challenge and future alternative to liberal, representative democracy is central to what is seen to make *chavismo* "different". In proposing this shift, Chávez drew explicitly on Negri's (1999) articulation of the conflict between constituent and constituted power. Part II of this thesis analyses this drive among *barrio* residents in El Camoruco, focusing in particular on the complex and ambiguous relationships between grassroots activists and state institutions. I argue that there are significant contradictions between the aim of building participatory democracy *desde abajo* and the increasingly state-managed framework in which this occurs.

In order to be clear, it is worth clarifying my use of different terms. Although some scholars, particularly those who have adopted an ethnographic approach to Chávez-era Venezuela (e.g. Fernandes 2007, 2010), have chosen not to use populism as an organising concept, I retain it because my fieldwork experience threw up characteristics that made the term impossible to avoid. While Fernandes focuses predominantly on social movement organisations that largely pre-dated the arrival of Chávez and maintained independence from the *chavista* state, my research examines ground-level involvement in state-initiated projects and institutions. Without exception, the activists I worked with also displayed a genuine adoration for Chávez, and I suggest that this phenomenon requires anthropological attention. A critical approach to many "surface-level" approaches to populism does not mean we should reject the term entirely; rather, there is a need for ethnographic excavations of its

appeal. I call *chavismo* "radical populism" because I contend that as a political project it has made significant changes to the social, political and economic alignment of power in Venezuelan society. There are also critically important continuities from previous eras, but as Ellner (2008: 215) notes, the "intense hostility" directed towards Chávez from both internal elites and Washington shows that fundamental interests are under threat from his project.

Throughout this thesis I will also discuss both *chavismo* and Bolivarianism, and I regard these to be distinct, though closely related, categories. I understand *chavismo* to encompass the movement's key political actors, its infrastructures (both state and non-state) and its policies. In turn, I define Bolivarianism as the discursive and ideological thought that underpins these politics. If the former encompasses the functioning of a political movement and its use of the state to achieve particular aims, the latter describes the ever-evolving set of ideas that accompany this process. As I explore in Part II of the thesis, there is a complex relationship between the structures of the political movement and its diverse ideological underpinnings and, at times, this relationship can be highly conflictual. Before turning to these themes, however, the remainder of this introductory chapter will outline the concept of political morality and provide a brief history of the Venezuelan state, *chavismo* and Chávez-era policies. It then introduces my research setting and methodology, before opening with an analysis of my respondents' relationships with the late Hugo Chávez.

POLITICAL MORALITY AND *CHAVISMO*

In Chávez-era Venezuela, a pervasive discourse concerning the perceived immorality of both *puntofijismo* and neoliberalism was at the heart of political aspirations for the future and attempts to transform selves. As I have already suggested, my analysis of *chavismo* will pay close ethnographic attention to the kinds of moral understandings and subjective life-projects that underpin everyday political activism. The recent anthropological turn towards morality (Howell 1997; Laidlaw 2002; Rydstrøm 2003; Robbins 2004; Zigon 2008; Heintz 2009) provides some useful insights that have yet to be applied to investigations of political activism and organisation. Much of the debate in this burgeoning literature centres on the extent to which an anthropology of morality should move away from a Durkheimian framework. James Laidlaw (2002)

argues that Durkheim (1915, 1953) treated morality as essentially coterminous with the preservation of the collective good. In line with his broader concern with the social reproduction of society, Durkheim viewed morality as a governing law that held society together through the establishment of unconscious logics and values. For Laidlaw, the problem with this presumption is that it "leaves no conceptual space" (2002: 31) for either decision-based ethics or a Kantian notion of human freedom, instead dissolving all moral beliefs and actions into the reproduction of social norms. In this sense, "the moral means everything and nothing" (2002: 313). Traversing Kant and Nietzsche, Laidlaw suggests that a more useful anthropological theory of ethics can be found by drawing on Foucault. Foucault argued that morality operates in far wider terms than simply "the following of socially sanctioned moral rules" (2002: 321). Instead, he understood ethics as grounded in processes of self-fashioning that endowed individuals with the capacity to create certain kinds of selves through care and attention to their bodies, their souls, their thoughts and their conduct – these are the "techniques of the self" that anchor the *History of Sexuality* (Laidlaw 2002: 322; Foucault 1986). Laidlaw contends that this focus on the subject rather than the collective offers more fertile ground for an anthropology of morality, since it asks how freedom becomes accessible to subjects when they step outside of their "taken-for-granted cultural representations, or habitus, or 'discourse'" (Laidlaw 2002: 234). As Laidlaw reads it, freedom was understood by Foucault not to mean "the total absence of constraint or relations of power" (Laidlaw 2002: 323), but rather the capacity to make choices in a necessarily contingent and culturally conditioned context. In the act of taking a "step back" from an acquired logic or moral code and viewing such traits as objects, the subject makes a *choice* and asserts freedom. Reflective consciousness, in this view, is at the heart of moral action.

Joel Robbins (2007) attempts to refine Laidlaw's model by seeking a mid-ground between Durkheimian social reproduction and Foucauldian ethical freedom. Drawing on Dumont and Weber, he suggests that cultures can be understood as organised according to a set of hierarchical "value-spheres" that have their own set of distinct rules and rationalisations. While Dumont seemed to regard these spheres as largely stable, Weber saw them as existing in constant conflict with each other (2007: 299). For Robbins, there are two forms in which morality appears: (1) the unreflective social reproduction that occurs "within domains of culture in which value hierarchies are stably organised and hence the relations between values are well worked out"

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(2007: 300); and (2), the instances in which there is conflict between values, when people become aware of the fact that they must make a choice *between* different spheres. As he puts it, "And it is because in such cases people become aware of choosing between values that they come to see their decision making process as one engaged with moral issues" (2007: 300). Robbins suggests, therefore, that an anthropology of morality should make a distinction between "stable conflicts" that are inherent to cultural systems, and those that come about as a result of cultural change – those, that is, that involve some kind of competition between new and old value-spheres. His argument, drawn from research on Christian conversion among the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea, is that, "Over time, new stable structures may arise, but during the course of the change conflict is likely to be the norm. This is why people's sense of the moral weight of their actions is strong during times of change" (2007: 302). In such periods, people live with a sense of "heightened moral consciousness" (2007: 305) because stable value hierarchies have been upended, thereby pushing the morality of choice and freedom to the forefront of social life (2007: 311).

Although acknowledging Robbins's contribution, Jarrett Zigon (2009) contends that his competing value-spheres are not so different from Durkheim's morality-as-reproduction, replacing it with several spheres rather than only one. In his view, the weakness of this model is that it still lacks sufficient space to examine plurality, contradiction or contestation *within* value spheres. Morally-charged thoughts and actions, he contends, should be understood not only as conflicts between overarching value systems, but also as distinct subjective experiences in which individuals question the frameworks they live by and attempt to work out how they should act (2009: 254-256). Zigon instead proposes three separate ways in which morality appears in social life: (1) in institutions, meaning the formal and informal social organisations that provide normative models of morality; (2) in public discourses, meaning the articulations of moral beliefs, conceptions and hopes that do not come *directly* from institutions (though they may be closely related); (3) in embodied dispositions, meaning a kind of habitus (Mauss 1973, Bourdieu 1990) of moral orientations that individuals perform without reflection and without noticing (2009: 258-60). The distinction between morality and ethics, as he sees it, is that ethics take place when an individuals steps away from one of the above modalities of morality and reflects on how they wish to act:

In stepping-away in this ethical moment, a person becomes reflective and reflexive about her moral world and moral personhood and what she must do, say or think in order to appropriately return to her nonconscious moral mode of being. What must be done is a process of working on the self, where the person must perform certain practices on herself or with other persons in order to consciously be and act moral in the social world. Ethics, then, is a conscious acting on oneself either in isolation or with others so as to make oneself into a more morally appropriate and acceptable social person not only in the eyes of others but also for oneself (2009: 261).

According to Zigon, the key difference between the two models is that while Robbins's notion of moral freedom only seems to occur during major disruptions that are relatively rare, his articulation of ethics is far more commonplace. It is a "moral breakdown" that takes place when "a range of possible moralities available do not adequately 'fit' the context" (2009: 263). As he sees it, the subject is always seeking to return to the unreflective state of moral dispositions, rather than being in a perpetual state of moral torment produced by overlapping and conflicting value-spheres.

In putting forward the notion of political morality, I am not seeking to privilege either of these perspectives in particular, since in my view the commonalities they share outweigh the differences. Political morality can build on the theoretical groundwork provided by Laidlaw, Robbins and Zigon (among others) by examining how political discourse, ideology and policy can shape the moral imaginaries, subjectivities and practices of actors who are strongly influenced by normative political projects. In periods of significant political change such as Venezuela during the Chávez era, Robbins's attention to conflicting value-spheres may be of particular use, since such periods throw up attempts by both political leaders and grassroots activists to fashion new moral cultures that correspond to their political visions. In the ethnography that anchors this thesis, actors are constantly making assessments about how they and others should act, often by viewing everyday events in terms of overarching political visions. There is an important temporal dimension to this practice that potentially gives political morality an important distinguishing feature: invariably, normative political projects are premised on a particular vision of how social life should be in a *better future*, meaning that politically-motivated subjects are constantly striving towards this desired ideal, assessing occurrences in the present according to what the future is supposed to look like. This is where Zigon's focus on moral breakdowns within particular systems is of

use, albeit viewed from a slightly different angle. Political moralities are generally aspirations for superior moral conduct premised on the belief that the morality of the incumbent political culture is either inadequate or, indeed, immoral. As a result, they are necessarily inchoate and "in process", expressing attempts to fashion new moral codes and practices that will lead to a brighter and more harmonious future. Because they are not fully formed, moral breakdowns can occur when individuals find themselves unsure of whether their actions fall in line with the desired ideal, leading to constant questioning and self-examination as they attempt to amend their behaviour according to what they think their political morality should be. Ethical choices emerge in the temporal gaps between vision and reality, future and present, and it is in these spaces that an ethnography of political morality must reside.

This thesis seeks to provide such an ethnography by paying attention to what Goodale (2009: 196) calls the "co-instantiation" of values and practices in everyday *barrio* life.[5] Many *chavistas* understand Venezuela's problems as stemming from the corrupting influence of capitalist values, the cultural influence of North America and the country's reliance on oil wealth, all of which create a need for moral cleansing and radical change. In 2005, when Chávez announced that Venezuela was now officially on the road to "twenty-first century socialism", it was not only a statement of political intent. The decision to adopt socialism provided a discursive foundation for the articulation of a moral struggle against these past contaminating influences. As West and Raman (2009) argue, socialist projects always envision a fundamental break with the past, but in practice they invariably unfold as "assemblages drawn from a repertoire of overlapping cultural and political practices, where the forms of the past continued to shape the present" (2009: 5). Precisely because a "clean break" is impossible to achieve, moral discourses took on a heightened importance for my informants. They sought to compensate for the gap between the normative and the real, resulting in the "what is to be" saturating the "what is" (Coronil 2011a: 232).

My focus on political morality in the context of a socialist discourse provides a useful counterpoint to the recent anthropological interest in governmentality. Foucault's (1979, 1991) major contribution was in showing how power forms the

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[5] Goodale (2009), focusing on the operation of what he calls "moral imagination", calls for an anthropology of ethical practice. Writing about contemporary Bolivia, another country at the forefront of the so-called "leftwards turn" in Latin America, he states: "[T]he moral imaginary has become the primary lens through which the meanings of socio-political change are refracted. By moral imaginary I mean those socio-cognitive spaces in which individuals within collectives construct their own visions of life…" (2009: 194-195).

very conditions of a subject's existence, and how social regulation takes place through diffuse webs of domination in social institutions and relationships. Yet Verdery (1991: 304-305) and Anagnost (1997) point out that socialist states or movements generally lack the consolidated systems of governance that produce the "less visible forms of power… whereby subjects come to govern themselves" (Montoya 2007: 71). Socialist projects, instead, seek to make up for this absence through the power of words. They deploy signs on the surface level, and produce a panoptic that is "not invisible but hypervisible" (Anagnost 1997: 166). My attention to socialist political morality, then, explores the ways in which individuals in my fieldsite assessed the actions of themselves and their neighbours as they interacted with a powerful normative discourse that emanated largely from the central state and Chávez.

BOLIVARIAN VENEZUELA: HISTORY, POLICIES AND DISCOURSE

Recent anthropological approaches to the state have sought to challenge the assumption that states are unitary or fixed entities that exist in isolation from "society" (Sharma & Gupta 2006: 8; Fuller & Bénéi 2001), instead highlighting how states are constructed through particular material, ideological and imaginative processes. Some have argued that the state is essentially a reified fiction or mystifying fantasy construction (Abrams 1988; Navaro-Yashin 2002). Others have highlighted the porous and heterogeneous nature of state infrastructures (Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Das and Poole 2004), while still others have focused on ascertaining how "the state" becomes the predominant power in a given locality (Joseph & Nugent 1994). This thesis is broadly in line with these approaches, but places a specific emphasis on the disjunctures that occur when a fantastical understanding of the state meets with its mundane experience in everyday life.

In his seminal history of Venezuelan state formation, *The Magical State*, Fernando Coronil (1997) showed how the discovery of oil in the early twentieth century helped to produce a national imaginary suffused with the belief that, by "sowing the oil", the state would provide prosperity for all citizens and lead them to a future of modernity and abundance. A weak and indebted agricultural nation characterised by conflicts between a series of *caudillos* (strongmen) for much of the nineteenth century, Coronil argued that Venezuela was transformed under the rule of

the dictator Juan Vicente Gómez (1908-1935). After oil exports began in 1914, Gómez used petroleum to centralise control of the state and treat the nation as his own person fiefdom. Coronil explained how Venezuela was imagined as having two bodies: "a natural body (the material source of its wealth) and a political body (its citizenry), both of which were represented by the state" (1997: 116). By gaining control of and unifying these two bodies, Gómez set in motion a political economy that remains predominant to this day. Fundamentally, the legitimacy of all Venezuelan political leaders has rested on their ability to turn petroleum rents into "marvels of power" that engendered "collective fantasies of progress" (1995: 5). As the point of unity between the natural and political bodies, the state has been regarded "as a magical theatre… a place possessed with the alchemic power to transmute liquid wealth into civilized life" (1997: 230). Successive political leaders have themselves been "possessed" by this belief, seeking to portray themselves as "magnanimous sorcerers" (Coronil 1997: 5) capable of harnessing the magic of *el oro negro* (the black gold), their political fortunes rising and falling, very often, with the ebbs and flows of world oil prices. According to Coronil, Venezuelan politics of the twentieth century can thus be broadly understood as a class struggle over how this oil wealth is used (1997: 223-4). The Chávez era marks a significant shift in the balance of power that has coalesced around the oil rents, albeit while maintaining the same reliance on petroleum as the overwhelming source of national wealth and state power.

From Dictatorship to "Pacted" Democracy

After a brief flowering of democracy following Gómez's death in 1935, Venezuela returned to dictatorial rule following a coup against the elected government of Rómulo Gallegos in 1948. Several years of political infighting ensued, before Marcos Pérez Jiménez, a military officer, took firm control in 1952. Like Gómez, Pérez Jiménez saw himself as a nation-builder, and used the rapid rise in oil revenues to embark on a modernising plan that was buttressed by the brutal suppression of dissent. Between 1945 and 1957, government income from oil increased eleven times, and by 1957 it provided 70.7 percent of total state income (Aranda 177: 141, cited in Coronil 1997: 201). But Pérez Jiménez accrued debts with the private sector and was never popular with the country's poor majority. In 1958 he was deposed from power

through a combined military and civic uprising, and Venezuela's Fourth Republic was born.

The political system known as *puntofijismo* characterised the period from 1958 to 1998, and was named after a democratic pact agreed by AD and COPEI in the city of Punto Fijo in 1958. The pact aimed to overcome the legacy of military governments by committing the major political parties, the Roman Catholic Church, the military, the business sector and the major trade unions to political restraint and broad centrist policies (Karl 1987; Ellner and Hellinger 2003; Coronil 1997; Buxton 1999; Ellner and Hellinger 2003; McCoy and Myers 2004; Buxton 2008). In return for agreeing the pact, all parties involved would receive subsidies, protectionism and corporate benefits financed by the oil industry, as the continuing magic of Venezuela's subsoils was shifted in support of a new democratic system. This so-called *partidocracia* (Mollina 2004), or "limited pluralist polyarchy" (McCoy and Myers 2004: 3), functioned in both inclusionary and exclusionary terms. Whilst it enhanced and deepened the power of AD and COPEI it excluded previously powerful blocs such as the Communist Party, which had been a considerable opposition force during the Pérez-Jiménez era. It also guarded against both military coups and left-wing insurgencies (Hellinger 2003: 29) and centralised power in the hands of Caracas-based AD and COPEI "oligarchs" (McCoy and Myers 2004: 3). *Puntofijismo* was buttressed by high social spending in the 1960s and 70s, as rising oil revenues and a fully nationalised state oil company (PDVSA) enabled the political elite to contain class-based dissent in a era of debt-financed growth and rapid rural to urban migration (Buxton 2008: 7-13).[6] Owing to its economic growth and political stability, Venezuela was heralded as a Latin American "exception" in this period, yet overreliance on oil rents eventually led to social, economic and political crisis by the late 1980s. A debt crisis precipitated by falling oil prices engulfed the region in the early 1980s, leading to the devaluation of the Venezuelan *bolívar* in 1983.[7] Social spending and wages began to fall dramatically in this period, and in 1989 the country adopted a structural adjustment programme recommended by the IMF, following the

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[6] The state oil company, Petroleos de Venezuela, C.A (PDVSA), was fully nationalised in 1976 (Ellner 2008: 72-73).

[7] The *bolívar* (Bs.) was Venezuela's national currency until 2007, when the Chávez government launched a new currency, the *bolívar fuerte* (Bs.F). In an effort to combat inflation and simplify the handling of money, the value of the *bolívar fuerte* was 1 Bs.F = 1,000 Bs.

trend of "creative destruction" (Harvey 2006: 151) that had become the norm across the continent.

In February 1989 a week of rioting and looting broke out in Caracas in response to an economic austerity programme put in place by the recently elected president, Carlos Andrés Pérez, who had won the election on an anti-IMF platform. Known colloquially as *el caracazo*, the uprising began when petrol and food prices rose by up to 100 percent as subsidies were removed and shops began to hoard foodstuffs.[8] The events are remembered most keenly for the massacre of hundreds and perhaps thousands of people by the army, who opened fire on looters and protestors in Caracas and other cities after martial law had been declared (Coronil and Skurski 1991; López Maya 2003). *El caracazo* represented growing discontent across the country as social spending contracted and incomes fell. Both real industrial wages and the minimum wage decreased to 40 percent of their 1980 levels in this period (ILO 1998: 43, cited in Roberts 2003: 59), and by 1995 the number of people living below the poverty line had risen from 36 percent in 1984 to 66 percent. Those living in extreme poverty also rose from 11 percent to 36 percent during the same period (República de Venezuela 1995: 23; Organización Panamericana de Salud 1998: 5, both cited in Roberts 2003: 59). The myth of Venezuela's oil-funded all-class alliance had largely unraveled by the late 1990s, as voters turned to a string of new parties and personalities as the decade wore on (Molina 2004: 168-170).

The Three Stages of Chavismo

Hugo Chávez emerged in the midst of this socio-political crisis. After his failed coup attempt in 1992, he was elected with 56.2 percent of the vote in 1998 after spending much of the 1990s organising a broad leftist coalition, the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR), against the backdrop of rising poverty and social inequality. According to Wilpert (2007), Buxton (2008) and Ellner (2008), there have been three identifiable phases to Chávez's presidency, with a steady radicalisation of reforms appearing to mirror Chávez's own personal radicalisation in the face of unrelenting opposition from both inside and outside the country. In the early phase of his presidency Chávez focused principally on political reforms, with the agreement of the Bolivarian

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[8] I describe these events in more detail in Chapter 1.

constitution signalling a desire to make a major break with the Fourth Republic (*chavistas* now refer to the current period as the Fifth Republic). He also introduced progressive land reforms, halted the privatisation of the social security system, moved to re-establish central control over PDVSA and sought to increase income from oil revenues by strengthening the bargaining power of OPEC internationally (Ellner 2008: 112-13).

In the second phase of his presidency, dated from around 2003, a more explicit move away from a neoliberal model was mounted, with social spending rising significantly in areas such as health, social security and education as a state-led model of economic development was privileged over the previous commitment to the free market. Emblematic of this shift was the launch of the flagship *misiones sociales* (social missions) that began providing free adult education, subsidised food and free healthcare to millions of poor Venezuelans. The figures for these initiatives are impressive. In 1998 there were 1,628 primary care physicians in the country, by 2007 there were over 19,000 (Weisbrot 2007: 1). 1.3 million adults who had not finished school benefitted from the missions in literacy and primary education (Wilpert 2007: 127), and the number of students in school increased from around 270,000 in 1999 to over 1 million in 2005 (*ibid*: 28). By 2006 the poverty rate had fallen from 55.1 percent in 2003 to 30.4 percent (*ibid*: 2).[9] In El Camoruco the results of such spending were evident throughout the community: two free health clinics, an old person's centre, a subsidised Bolivarian bus service and discounted food stores had all arrived in recent years, and many of my respondents testified to the improvements to their lives that had come with such initiatives. Accompanying these shifts in domestic policy were moves to provide alternatives to neoliberal trade agreements internationally, with the launch of ALBA, the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, explicitly setting itself against the US-backed Free Trade Agreement for the Americas (FTAA) (Ellner 2008: 112). Again Venezuela's oil wealth aided such developments, helping to fund alternative trade agreements with other left-of-centre Latin American governments such as Cuba, Brazil, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Ecuador and Argentina (Buxton 2008: 35).

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[9] Critics, however, claim that Chávez's social spending was uneven and often highly partisan. In the case of public health, for example, Uzcategui (2011: 156-158) argues that traditional public hospitals have been underfunded due to their professional association with the political opposition.

The third phase of *chavismo* came after a number of attempts to remove Chávez from office by the political opposition. Having survived a brief military coup (2002), a temporary lockdown of the country's oil economy (2002-03), a recall referendum (2004) and numerous local and national elections, in 2005 Chávez openly stated for the first time that Venezuela would be moving towards "twenty-first century socialism". After winning the presidential elections in 2006 with 63 percent of the vote, his administration launched a string of programmes that laid out a more radical agenda for social change. At the heart of this agenda was the push to establish participatory democracy as a cornerstone of political and community life. The Communal Councils Law was passed in 2006, followed by the launch of the communes in 2008 (see Chapters 5 and 6). On top of this, the government strove to pursue a more radical economic policy by nationalising key sectors of the economy, providing funding for workers' cooperatives, promoting co-management, expropriating companies deemed to be exploiting workers or consumers, redistributing large tracts of privately owned land to peasants and enforcing a strict taxation policy (Ellner 2008: 121-127). Finally, in 2007 Chávez moved to convert his loose leftist coalition into a more coherent and centralised party called the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). The new party had over 5 million members by the end of the year (Ellner 2008: 127).

My arrival in Venezuela in late 2008 thus coincided with what might now be termed as the "late Chávez era". By then the country had become highly politicised and deeply polarised (see Chapter 1). The Bolivarian government was making significant efforts to establish a new social, political and economic model, but the precise shape of twenty-first century socialism remained highly unclear. As Ellner (2008), Uzcátegui (2010) and Coronil (2011a) all point out, Venezuela's reliance on its oil revenues had in fact deepened under Chávez. In order to maximise the dollars it received for oil exports, the government priced the *bolívar fuerte* artificially high, leading to chronic problems with inflation. Moreover, in an effort to stop capital flight after the oil lockdown of 2003, controls on dollars were implemented, resulting in a parallel economy that made dollars and euros highly sought-after currencies.

Simon Bolívar, Race and Class Struggle

Benedict Anderson's (1983) seminal work on nationalism argued that its origins could be found in the development of print capitalism and the workings of colonial statecraft in Spanish America. In broad terms, he defined nationalism as a shared fraternity built around a united polity, highlighting how a kinship idiom is used to engender a sense of togetherness across time and space. Although this definition has become an accepted touchstone in social theory, Lomnitz (2001) suggests that Anderson's emphasis on the ideal of fraternity glosses over a critical point: that nationalism creates different categories of citizens and hierarchies between them. As he writes, "[N]ationalism does not ideologically form a single fraternal community because it systematically distinguishes full citizens from part citizens or strong citizens from weak ones (e.g., children, women, Indians, the ignorant)… The fraternal bond is critical, but so are what one might call the fraternal bonds of dependence that form a part of any nationalism" (2001: 12). This observation is useful to bear in mind when considering the discourse articulated by Chávez and adopted by my respondents. The national identity that Bolivarianism offers is not one of all-class fraternal unity, but rather one that regards the victory of the working-class over the oligarchy as essential for national redemption. It is also one that speaks to a history of racial exclusion often elided in official histories of the nation.

Long before Chávez came to public prominence, Bolívar was the binding trope in his political philosophy. Inspired from a young age by Bolívar's reputation as philosopher-*guerrero* (warrior), Chávez studied Bolívar's life and teachings avidly in his youth and developed his own burgeoning radicalism out of a fascination with the heroic deeds of Bolívar and Ezequiel Zamora.[10] As several commentators have noted, Bolívar was an ambiguous and conflicted figure. An undisputedly brilliant general who dismantled the bulk of the Spanish empire in wars that lasted from 1811 until 1822, he was committed to independence for Latin America and, until his death in 1830, espoused a belief in the righteousness of liberty and equality (Lynch 2007: 284-287). But as president of Gran Colombia, the Pan-American state covering much of modern Colombia, Panama, Venezuela and Ecuador, he sought "strong government" above all else. Faced with internal divisions and regional uprisings, he declared himself dictator by decree in 1828, stating that it was a temporary measure in the

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[10] Ezequiel Zamora was leader of the Federalists in the Federal War of 1859-1863.

interests of reform and order (Lynch 2007: 287). By 1830, however, Gran Colombia had collapsed and Bolívar was to die of tuberculosis as he tried to flee the continent following an attempt on his life. In his sympathetic account of Bolívar's life and works, Lynch argues that he should be regarded as a reformer rather than a revolutionary. Bolívar's policies on land distribution, the abolition of slavery, racial equality and pro-Indian decrees were founded, for Lynch, on his belief in liberty and equality, but he resisted – and feared – a more radical and racialised politics (2007: 287-292).[11]

Having died in exile and isolation, Bolívar was reborn in mythic form twelve years after his death. In 1842 his body was brought back to Caracas in a state ceremony that saw a procession of the nation's most important governmental, military and religious figures follow his remains to the city cathedral. Taussig (1997: 101) describes the event as a "second funeral", and it is seen as the moment that marked the birth of the cult of Bolívar. A new generation of journalists, historians, priests and politicians took inspiration from Bolívar as a liberator, teacher, war hero and role model (Lynch 2007: 299-301). As the perfect symbol for a postcolonial nation seeking to imagine a new community (Anderson 1983), Lynch argues that what began as a cult *of* the people soon became a cult *for* the people, as Venezuela's leaders strove to channel Bolívar's heroic mystique into a magic that could sustain the state itself. Under the rule of Venezuela's post-independence *caudillos*, the cult of Bolívar became synonymous with a cult of the state, as statues and plazas glorifying the myth of the Liberator were erected in tandem with the often brutal consolidation of power by the nation's early rulers. Bolívar's writings were elevated to the level of national treasures and, in 1921, one hundred years after independence had been won, his childhood house in Caracas was reopened as an archive, gallery and effective "shrine" for the cult (Lynch 2007: 302).

Yolanda Salas (1987, 2000) argues that Bolívar should not be understood as a fixed historical figure, but rather as a mythological signifier whose meaning is contested in popular narratives. If the oligarchs of church and state have used Bolívar as a tool of co-option, popular mythologies have countered by reappropriating him as

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[11] As Krauze (2009: 10) notes, some of Bolívar's contemporaries delivered less favourable verdicts, most notably one Karl Marx, who in a letter to Engels in 1858 described the sarcastic account of Bolívar's life that he had written for the *New American Cyclopedia*: "[I]t is true that I departed somewhat from the tone of a cyclopedia. To see the dastardly, most miserable and meanest of blackguards described as Napoleon I was altogether too much. Bolívar is a veritable Soulouque" (Marx 1858).

a symbol for the rebellion and resistance of Venezuela's black and indigenous populations (1987: 39). In Salas's collection of oral histories from Afro-Venezuelan communities, the Liberator's ethnic and geographical origins are markedly different to those in official accounts. Bolívar is remembered as the son of a black servant or slave who was born in the rural pueblo of Cayapa, Miranda State, rather than the colonial heart of Caracas. Some claim to have great-grandparents who knew his family, and he is regarded as a *mestizo* (mixed race) liberator sent to free the slaves from the oppression of the colonial establishment. This ethnic reinscription is, for Salas, a process of redemption for those who have always been excluded from formal spheres of the nation's myth-making (1987: 25-50). Throughout Venezuelan history an overarching ideology of *mestizaje* (racial mixing) was the predominant attitude towards race. Foregrounding the notion of a single "tropical *mestizo* race" born from the merging of African, indigenous and European peoples (Salas Herrera 2005: 77), *mestizaje* sought to downplay the importance of racial difference in favour of creating a singular national identity. Though it purports to be a discourse of equality, Salas Herrera argues that at the heart of Venezuelan *mestizaje* is a reverence for whiteness, modernity and the European "civilising" project, which effectively renders indigenous and African peoples invisible through their dissolution into a single identity (Salas Herrera 2005: 77-79). Similarly, Wright (1990) notes that whilst discrimination is regarded "un-Venezuelan", a desire to whiten the population has consistently been present in Venezuelan *mestizaje*, albeit elided by this formal discourse of unity. This attitude was typified by the term *café con leche* (coffee with milk), which was coined by Acción Democrática's poet-politician, Andrés Eloy Blanco, in 1935. Blanco proposed a process of *blanqueamiento* (whitening) in order to solve Venezuela's "black problem", arguing that "diluting" blackness was the way to achieve progress as a people. Beneath the veneer of sameness, then, there exists a "chromatic scale that linked dark skin and African characteristics with lower class status," meaning that to *blanquear* oneself became a synonym for climbing the racially configured social ladder (1990: 5-6). Far from producing a colour-blind unity, twentieth century nation-making in Venezuela thus produced a hyper-awareness of difference (see Wade 2004), as class delineations became married to racial ones in a political economy of colour.

Chávez's adoption of Bolívar spoke to this history and sought to reappropriate the nation's founding father. By drawing on these collective memories of exclusion

and rebellion, he elevated a popular mythology to the level of political discourse, creating a messianic populism in which he was the inheritor of Bolívar's mission to liberate Venezuela's poor (Salas 2000: 215-217). Clearly this discourse reflected Chávez's own fascination with mythology, but it also provided a self-conscious identity for his movement built around class, race and a confrontation with the establishment. As he openly stated, the need to develop a new national consciousness was central to his obsession with communication: "[W]e have been able to plant the Bolivarian concept into the soul of the people to such an extent that the oligarchy that used to call itself Bolivarian no longer wants to be associated with Bolívar. They had hijacked Bolívar and now he is back with the people" (Chávez 2005: 106). This reclamation and re-imagination of Bolívar had a profound impact on the activists I worked with. As Yulmi described to me on one occasion,

> When I was young we learnt that Christopher Colombus had saved *us*, the Indians, can you imagine! We learned that he'd rescued us from ignorance. We didn't learn that he was a conquistador, about all the blood he spilled, about how he committed genocide. And there's still many Venezuelans who don't know about that. There's still a lot of the history of Bolívar that remains hidden. The oligarchy, the Spanish, have hidden the real history from the people and it's only now that we're recovering it.

Yulmi's identification of herself as an "Indian" was particularly notable here, illustrating how Chávez's retelling of Venezuela's national history allowed the urban poor to identify with the struggles faced by Venezuela's indigenous population. Such statements highlighted how Chávez's discourse sought to imbue everyday politics with the weight of historical significance. As well as a political project, Bolivarianism can thus be understood as a moral struggle over how Venezuela's national mythology is told.

A Personality Cult Seen From Below

Having initially set out to find autonomous grassroots actors and organisations that aligned themselves with *chavismo*, I was surprised by how dominant Chávez was in my respondents' political imaginaries and everyday conversations. The idea that no social movements existed prior to Chávez has been proven to be hugely flawed, as has

the argument that local-level actors were wholly dependent on the president before his death. As Sujatha Fernandes puts it, "To see Chávez pontificating from above, or popular movements as originating in autonomous spaces from below, would be to deny the interdependencies between them that both constrain and make possible each other's field of action" (2010: 5). That said, my fieldwork experience was markedly different from that of Fernandes. While she highlights the strong social movements that pre-dated Chávez's arrival and the autonomous identities they maintain whilst participating in *el proceso* (the revolutionary process), my focus turned out to be much more on actors who readily identified as *chavista* and who often felt that this was their first coherent political identity. Chávez was a central element in my collaborators' political subjectivity, and if the definition of a personality cult rests on the elevation of an individual to a position of "sacrality" (Plamper 2011: xvi), then my collaborators were unquestionably participants in such a cult.

The respect Chávez commanded among my respondents owed much to his ability to weave himself into the quotidian rhythms of everyday life. In El Camoruco, Sunday was the day that his voice could be heard with the most regularity. Until he became unwell in 2011, Chávez would address the nation each Sunday via his flagship television show, *Aló Presidente*. The show was perfectly timed to coincide with the hot, lazy afternoons when people were often nursing hangovers, doing washing and cleaning, or preparing *sancochos* (casserole-like soup) and barbeques for the visits of friends and family. Usually their one free day of the week, Rafael and Yulmi would often pass their Sunday afternoons in this way, with Yulmi pottering around the kitchen and backyard and Rafael lying on his bed in front of the TV. Chávez was a regular backdrop to these afternoons, his distinctive, booming voice competing with the eclectic mixture of music that could be heard from the road outside.

Aló Presidente was like a kind of weekly cabinet meeting in which the whole nation could participate vicariously. The show took place in a different part of the country each week, usually in places where Chávez was unveiling a new community project such as a clinic or school. One week he might have been overseeing a rural cooperative in Bolívar State, the next an agro-industrial plant in Zulia. As particular projects were unveiled, individuals from the host community would be invited to speak to Chávez and the nation, giving their descriptions of what the community had achieved and concluding almost invariably with, "*Gracias mi comandante*" (Thank

you my commander). Usually sat behind a large wooden desk, Chávez would be surrounded by an audience of red-clad devotees drawn from local political figures and members of the host community. He would speak informally, even coarsely at times, and addresses his live audience with affectionate colloquial terms commonly used by most Venezuelans: "*Vente aquí negrita*" (Come here little black), "*Hablanos mi rey*" (Talk to us my king).[12]

During the show the president delivered news of the government's latest projects, discussed his meetings over the previous week and addressed core issues of strategy and ideology relating to the revolution, keeping the nation directly informed of the government's progress. Much like a school teacher, he would explain how the new oil extraction machinery in the Orinoco Belt would work, or what a "multipolar world" would mean for the Caribbean Sea. Interspersed with these updates were often folk songs, recollections from his childhood, selections of important readings (among them Eduardo Galeano, Antonio Negri, Noam Chomsky, Jesus Christ and, of course, Bolívar) and celebrations of Venezuelan art, poetry, music and food. There were moral lessons and fables, and lectures on the meaning of socialism and participatory democracy. He could shift, however, and become more aggressive and combative, even macho, when the moment arose, looking directly into the camera as he issued stern warnings to enemies of the revolution near and far. Heads of state, business leaders and corrupt politicians alike were denounced in turn as frauds, liars and murderers. On one occasion, which Chávez later admitted to regret, he fired a number of state workers on air by calling out their names one by one and blowing a whistle as each one was struck off (Chávez 2005: 152).

As Zúquete (2008: 111) argues, *Aló Presidente* could be understood as a weekly national rite, even a "ritual of obedience" (Michelutti 2009: 20). It was perfectly designed to combine the mythological drama of Chávez's discourse with his close personal relationship with *el pueblo* (the people). Together with his regular appearances at international meetings, the show's regular visits to popular districts all over the country helped to create the impression that Chávez was a kind of earthy superhuman, omnipresent and yet grounded, who was able to represent Venezuela's interests among the world's leaders while still finding time to oversee the opening of

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[12] Terms such as *negrita* and *blanquito* (literally "little black/white") are common and generally affectionate terms of address in Venezuela. They reference a person's colouring but are not seen as discriminatory.

a socialist *cachapería* in Cojedes.[13] This appearance of omnipresence first struck me on a typical afternoon in the house of Señora Carla, who was watching television pictures showing Chávez opening a new Bolivarian school. Carla and I had been discussing some of the problems with the local communal council (see Chapter 5) and she was reflecting on this as Chávez appeared on screen. "He never rests," she said casting her eyes to the TV. "I wonder if he knows about the problems we have with the communal councils here. I suppose he must do." The idea that Chávez knew what was going on in El Camoruco typified the notion that he was accessible, that the president himself was on hand to personally deal with the community's problems. Carla's belief was shared by Rafael, who thought it inevitable that he would one day meet Chávez. Each time Rafael travelled to Caracas for meetings or conferences he would comment on the possibility of this encounter, even trying to convince me to join him on one occasion by saying that I would have the chance to meet Chávez too. In a sense this belief was entirely plausible. Almost every week Chávez did visit communities like El Camoruco and did meet people like Carla and Rafael. His warm, colloquial style, so distinctive of someone from Venezuela's popular sectors, worked to further enhance the belief in such possibilities because it made the connection seem all the more tangible and direct, purposefully set against the detached, technocratic style of most mainstream politicians. Oneidys, another local *chavista* activist described what she called her "spiritual connection" with Chávez:

> I swear I have some kind of connection with Chávez. Sometimes we'll be talking about something during the week and then come *Aló Presidente* on the weekend he'll be talking about it himself. Like on Sunday he was talking about the importance of names and finding names that mean something, not just any old name. I was talking about the same thing last week at the meeting! It's like there's a spiritual connection with him, or maybe he's recording everything we're doing and knows about it! A lot of people interpret things Chávez says badly, and that's when we have problems. He's only a guide, he throws ideas out there and we have to grab hold of them and make them work for ourselves – he can't do it all for us.

Oneidys's description highlights an ongoing dialogue, both real and imagined, between activists and the president. From one end he would "throw" the ideas which they had to make real, and at the other he seemed able to receive their everyday thoughts and desires, reflecting their local struggles back at them in narrativised form. In this way he was able cast himself as both a lightning rod for action and a receptor

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[13] *Cachaperías* sell *cachapas*, which are sweet cornflour baps usually filled with ham, cheese or pork.

for the public mood.

Part of this sense of dialogue rested on Chávez's ubiquity in symbolic form, with his regular addresses to the nation supplemented by a relentless propaganda machine that churned out television adverts, t-shirts, caps and posters bearing the image of the president and slogans in support of PSUV and the revolution. Perhaps even more significantly, his image also appeared on the walls of every new clinic, school and social mission launched by the government, his persona thus being permanently linked to the "magnanimous sorcery" of state-led development. Such trends were classic hallmarks of what Weber termed the "routinisation of charisma" (1947: 367), which defined the means through which charismatic authority is drawn from a given leader and funnelled into the institutions, discourses and practices of their movement.

Present in each space of political activity, these signifiers were woven into the everyday practice of community activists. During the course of fieldwork I attended countless meetings – meetings of the communal councils (see Chapter 5), a proposed commune (Chapter 6), grassroots neighbourhood organisations, local PSUV activists and the local Alcaldía (municipality) – and in every single meeting, without exception, Chávez was present. This presence went far beyond his visual representation on posters or t-shirts, extending into the everyday dialogues of activists as a repeated reference point during discussions. Many activists would deploy Chávez in support of an argument they were making. "It's like Chávez said on Sunday," Oneidys would say, or "As our *comandante* said last night," Rafael would begin. Sometimes these references would relate to specific questions of strategy or legislation, such as the role that communal council spokespeople would have when the impending amendment was passed, or what the new education law would mean for schoolteachers. In these instances, Chávez was cast as a source of knowledge that activists needed to keep up with. "When the president speaks about something, we need to know about it. We need to research it for ourselves so that we understand it and so that we're enacting it ourselves," said Rosa on one occasion. Equally common was the deployment of Chávez as a source of inspiration when individuals seemed to feel that morale was lagging or that a meeting needed reanimating. "I'm convinced," Rafael stated firmly on one occasion as he pointed to a poster of the president on the wall, "that there's no-one more revolutionary than that *coño e' madre* [motherfucker]

over there. And we've got to *echarle bola* [work our balls off] in order to keep this revolution going with him." Like Chávez, activists would implore one another with moral arguments, and like his performances on *Aló Presidente*, they would alter the transmission of their speech, shifting its delivery in moments of importance or high emotion. Commonly this would involve standing to speak in order to emphasise a point, with wild arm gesticulations and curses adding gravitas. Sometimes people would stand suddenly in mid-speech, as if the importance of the statement itself had lifted them up. These actions seemed to be efforts to add weight to their utterances, imitations of Chávez's style in the hope of summoning his charisma.[14]

If *Aló Presidente* functioned as a national ritual, a weekly cementing of the bond between Chávez and *el pueblo*, then we might think of these political meetings as localised manifestations of the same ritual, giving activists the opportunity to maintain their connection with the broader revolutionary narrative. In the physical absence of Chávez himself, the space could be filled imaginatively. So just as he is said to have stared at an empty chair left for Bolívar in his early political meetings (Krauze 2009: 3), local level activists would invoke him by repeating his words and mimicking his style, thereby enhancing the meaning and significance of their speech and linking their local concerns to the wider drama of the revolution. The summoning of Chávez and the adoption of his words thus illuminated a highly performative dimension to political meetings. They provided a space in which people could learn how to comport themselves physically and rhetorically in order to mark themselves out as activists. In Yurchak's (2006) account of the Komsomol branches of the Soviet Union, state propaganda was reproduced at the micro-institutional level through "generated principles" (2006: 60) of language that Komsomol officers learned by mimicking the textual and rhetorical practices of higher ranking officers and the state media. These performances constituted learned styles of speech that granted their practitioners what Bourdieu (1991: 111) terms "delegated power", as they became "authorised spokespeople" through adoption of the stylistic traits associated with the state. A similar process was observable for *chavistas*, but with the absence of an authoritarian bureaucracy that could institutionally codify verbal and textual practices, the importance of the president's charisma was even greater. Political subjectivity was

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[14] Lucia Michelutti (2009) has shown how local political leaders often try to mimic Chávez's style with varying degrees of success. I consider questions of ground-level charismatic leadership more closely in Chapter 6.

enacted through a relentless stream of words and fashioned through speech in both its form and content.

Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981: 342-355) discussion of the *authoritative discourse* is enlightening here. "The ideological becoming of a human being," he wrote, "is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others" (1981: 341). Highlighting the fact that any subject is constantly bombarded by the words of others, Bakhtin argued that "alien" words and contexts are constantly challenging the existing discursive lens through which an individual perceives the world. For Bakhtin, authoritative discourses demand obedience; they have only a single meaning and are sealed off from the rest of discourse, permitting no blurring or contextual reframing. They cannot be altered or represented, only transmitted. By contrast, the *internally persuasive discourse* is affirmed through assimilation, interwoven with "one's own word" and brought into existence through a constant interplay with other internally persuasive discourses. It is always dialogically open to the influence of new contexts (1981: 342-46). Bakhtin contends that in most cases, ideological becoming involves a sharp gap between the authoritative word – from a political, religious or moral authority – and what is internally persuasive to the individual. But in rare instances there is a fusion between the two, when the authoritative voice is also internally persuasive to the subject (1981: 342). Chávez appeared to have achieved this rare unity, possessing both internal persuasion and external authority in the eyes of activists like Carla, Oneidys and Rafael, who were able to develop as political subjects by harnessing his discourse.

CHÁVEZ AS MORAL EXEMPLAR AND MASTER-SIGNIFIER

As well as providing grassroots activists with a blueprint of discursive energy and style, Chávez played a critical role as Bolivarianism's moral exemplar. *Chavistas* often spoke about the sacrifices he had made for the revolution: he had given up his marriage to "marry the nation"; he renounced wealth, living off only 5000 Bs.F ($1,162) a year; he only slept five hours a night; he never took days off. The circulation of stories and rumours of this kind helped to build a picture of someone who truly lived the values he espoused: Chávez was, for the *chavistas* I worked with, a moral exemplar for others to follow.

I came to this conclusion after several months of listening to *chavistas* in conversation with one another, after which it became clear that it was almost impossible to hear an activist criticise the president. Although the vast majority of my informants acknowledged that there were countless problems with the revolution at both the local and national level, it was virtually unheard of for any of these problems to be attributed to Chávez. Late 2009 was a particularly difficult time for the revolution at the national level, with the government being forced to introduce electricity rationing (including regular blackouts) as a result of depleted water levels in the Guri Dam, which supplies 73 percent of the country's energy. Then in November, Jesse Chacón, a long-time ally of Chávez and a cabinet minister, was forced to resign after his brother was found to be involved in a banking scandal that saw thousands of Venezuelans lose their savings. Meanwhile at the local level in Miguel Peña, activists faced continuing problems with the water supply, traffic, violent crime and a substandard public hospital, as well as having to deal with ongoing accusations of corruption in local *chavista* institutions. Suspicions existed at all levels of the political establishment, from concerns about relatively small-scale pilfering by local leaders right up to allegations that Valencia's mayor, Edgardo Parra, was using public funds to award building projects to his family members in the construction industry.

Yet amidst all of these accusations and negative self-portrayals, Chávez remained untouched and uncriticised. Even when some of his closest confidants were found to be involved in corruption, he remained pure, the vices of those around him only serving to magnify his own impeccable morals. It was common to hear statements such this one made by Miguel: "Chávez works so hard for us but it's the people around him – the ministers and the mayors and the governors – they're all corrupt and in it for themselves. Too many people think that all they need is a red t-shirt to be socialist; they don't understand that it's about so much more than that." In a certain sense, Chávez was immovable in the *chavista* cosmology precisely because people acknowledged that his vision was incomplete, and because most people seemed to fall short of the standards he embodied. As one woman put it during a meeting, "At the moment it [the relationship between the state and the people] goes Chávez – The State – *El Pueblo*. But it should go Chávez – *El Pueblo* – The State." Such utterances showed how Chávez's position was critical to achieving the symbolic unity between Coronil's (1997: 67) natural and political bodies. Yet they

simultaneously expressed his separation from the "profane" body politic of the citizenry; in the very act of unifying state with people, he was necessarily *detached* from the people and made sacred. Another activist summed up this relationship in particularly profound terms, eerily pre-empting the president's death before it came: "*Mira*: *Chávez ya no es Chávez. Es otra cosa… se sacrificó y convirtirse en un símbolo – nuestro símbolo* [Look: Chávez isn't Chávez anymore. He's something else… he sacrificed himself and turned himself into a symbol – our symbol]."

The fact that Chávez could be described in such immortal terms before his death serves to highlight the symbolic power he held in life. As such, we can perhaps regard him as what Žižek calls the "master-signifier" (1989: 93). Building on Laclau's notion of the "empty signifier" that lies at the core of populist imaginaries (2005: 104-106), Žižek defines the master-signifier as the nodal point that "quilts" a multitude of "floating signifiers" that exist in any ideological matrix. The master-signifier fixes signs, ordering them within a structured network of meaning so they cease floating and acquire a coherent identity built around a central core (1989: 87-89). Like Bakhtin's authoritative discourse, it is semiotically immovable. In a similar vein to the role played by Lenin in the Soviet Union of the 1970s (Yurchak 2006: 86, 95), Chávez became untouchable for *chavistas* because he was – is – the unifying point that fixed the varied signifiers that constituted Bolivarianism. Yet unlike Lenin, who only came to serve this role after his death, Chávez did so while he was still living, acting as both the "teacher" who threw revolutionary ideas to the people and the unifying symbol around which those ideas coalesced.

I have highlighted my collaborators' relationships with Chávez in some detail from the outset because they were central to understandings and expressions of political morality. His charisma was the source that activists turned to in order realise personal moral projects, as well as the symbol that made engagement with state-sponsored projects seem revolutionary. Since everyday material experiences of the state were highly diverse, this was clearly of huge importance to grassroots activists, but it also presented them with significant problems as they sought to realise their own projects on the ground. In the final published essay before his death in 2011, Coronil (2011a) argued that Chávez was attempting to create a "uniform society through the monological voice of the state" (2011a: 254). He pointed to the inherent contradiction between Chávez's discourse and his form of leadership, in that he championed grassroots political control while simultaneously fostering the belief that,

without him, it could never be realised. This disjuncture between the goal of establishing participatory democracy and Chávez's monopolisation of the imaginative content of Bolivarianism provoked serious dilemmas and contradictions for grassroots activists. By focusing on the relationship between political practice in terms of both morality and structure, the core material of this thesis centres on these disjunctures.

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Figure 2: Map of Venezuela[15]

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[15] Source: http://geology.com/world/venezuela-satellite-image.shtml (accessed 1 April 2013)

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Figure 3: Map of Valencia[16]

LIFE AND RESEARCH IN EL CAMORUCO

Founded in 1555 in Carabobo State, Valencia is Venezuela's third largest city and its industrial capital, generating around one quarter of the country's manufacturing output. Located in an expansive valley between the Lago de Valencia, a large freshwater lake, and the Caribbean coast, the city was central to the colonial-era trade in cacao, coffee and sugar (Caballero 1970: 18) and remains at the heart of an agro-industrial belt that also includes the city of Maracay. One of the first colonial towns in Spanish America to be built on the Hispanic grid system, Valencia played a significant role in the nation's political history. Just outside the city at the Battle of Carabobo in 1821, Bolívar fought his final decisive battle against the Spanish to win

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[16] Souce: http://www.google.co.uk/webhp?sourceid=toolbar-instant&hl=en&ion=1&qscrl=1&rlz=1T4SAVN_enGB527GB527#hl=en&qscrl=1&rlz=1T4SAVN_enGB527GB527&sclient=psy-ab&q=map%20of%20valencia%20venezuela%20parroquias&oq=&gs_l=&pbx=1&fp=dd74a73afd5f01a4&ion=1&bav=on.2,or.r_qf.&bvm=bv.44697112,d.d2k&biw=1280&bih=822 (accessed 1 April 2013)

independence. The city has also been Venezuela's capital three times (1812, 1830 and 1858), and was again embroiled in violence just five years after independence, when nationalists opposed to Bolívar's Gran Colombia took up arms and called for Venezuelan sovereignty – a struggle they eventually won in 1830.

Despite this historical and political significance, Valencia remained a relatively small city until the mid-twentieth century. Between 1873 and 1920 the population of Carabobo only rose from 113,715 to 125,514 (Martínez 2003: 124), and in 1950 it contained just four percent of the national population in (*ibid*: 129). However, changes began to occur with the discovery of oil, and during the 1930s a group of wealthy businessmen introduced light industry to the city as Venezuela embarked on the beginnings of industrialisation. This process was accelerated in the 1950s under the rule of Pérez Jiménez, as Valencia transformed itself into a major industrial centre. Emboldened by the burgeoning oil economy, Pérez Jiménez courted foreign capital through low tax rates, free currency conversion and profit remittances (Coronil 1997: 180), and encouraged post-WWII immigration from Portugal, Spain, Italy and Germany. Between 1951 and 1957, foreign investment in Venezuela more than tripled, with the majority of new companies arriving from the United States (*ibid*: 183). Many of these foreign enterprises chose to base themselves in Valencia, in a new 43-hectare industrial zone established to the southeast of the city centre. Between 1948 and 1958 the following companies mounted operations in the city: Cementos Carabobo, Sherwin Williams, Firestone, Coca-Cola, Good Year, Owens Illinois, Celanese C.A., Pepsi-Cola, Inlaca, Dupont, Colgate-Palmolive and Container Coro of America (Bello & Sevilla 1980: 100). The emergence of new work opportunities drew in large numbers of rural migrants from surrounding states such as Falcon, Cojedes, Guárico, Yaracuy and Aragua, leading to a rapid rise in the city's population. Numbering 91,678 in 1951, Valencia's population rose to 173,600 residents by 1961, 373,922 by 1971, 640,481 by 1981, 903,621 by 1991 and 1,021,020 by 2001 (Martínez 2003: 135). This growth reflected a broader trend in the nation at large, as Venezuela became an increasingly urbanised population. By 2012, 93.6 percent of Venezuelans lived in urban areas (CEPAL 2012), with around 2.2 million of them in Valencia and its surrounding metropolitan area.

In keeping with patterns across the country, the vast majority of those arriving to Valencia erected makeshift *ranchos* (shacks) in squatter settlements known as *invasiones* (land invasions). While these migrants settled largely in the south of the

city and slowly turned their settlements into more established *barrios*, very different forms of urbanisation occurred in the north. From the 1950s onwards, the outlying areas beyond Valencia's colonial centre were increasingly bought up by private contractors, who erected *urbanizaciones* (private urban developments) of high-rise apartments for the middle-classes and gated communities for the elite. During the oil-boom era of the 1970s, new affluent districts such as El Trigal, El Viñedo and Prebo became some of the most sought after places to live outside of Caracas, as a burgeoning business and professional class established itself. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, more and more of the middle-classes abandoned the centre of the city and moved out to these new private developments, while chronic traffic problems and underinvestment saw the colonial heart of the city largely fall into disrepair. By the time I arrived in early 2009, Valencia had become a city whose stark social divides were manifest in its geography: a wealthy north of tree-lined avenues and private shopping malls, a poor south largely made up of self-built *barrios*, and a crumbling colonial centre that acted as a de facto border between the two.

El Camoruco is a *barrio* with a population of around 4,000 people located in Miguel Peña, the largest urban *parroquia* (parish) in Valencia. Lying directly south of the city centre and largely consisting of *barrios*, Miguel Peña's population numbered some 500,205 people in 2010, and is projected to rise to over 640,000 by 2020 (IIES 2010). At the time of the last major census that covered employment, the *parroquia* had an unemployment rate of 8.29 percent (INE 2001). For those in work, 46 percent were employed in the informal sector, 50 percent in services and only 1.8 percent in industry (INE 2001). Like the south of the city in general, El Camoruco is regarded as a "no-go" area by most people who live in the north. Often, middle-class people were shocked to discover where I was living, needing several clarifications before confirming that it was the same community. For most people in the north, venturing into such *barrios* was considered unthinkable. Although El Camoruco did have its problems with violence and crime, it was also one of the better-served *barrios* in Miguel Peña, with two high schools, a number of social missions, relatively reliable amenities and bus connections to the city centre. The area surrounding the community was characterised by three different types of settlement. Together with other well-established *barrios* like El Camoruco, there was also a large middle-class *urbanización* called Los Mangos and a number of so-called *invasiones*, which had been formed in an area of vacant wasteland just to the north of El Camoruco and its

neighbouring *barrio*, José Felix Ribas. This mixture of communities in the zone had significant political ramifications, as I discuss in Part II of the thesis.

Rafael and Yulmi, my hosts, had lived in their house for almost twenty years when I arrived. Before the births of their three children – 21-year old Cristina, 16 year-old Eduardo and 9 year-old Yuleidi – they bought the plot of land on which it stood for a small sum and built the house from what Rafael described as "really ugly" foundations. "It was just four walls and a roof. We built everything else ourselves," he explained. One of ten siblings, Rafael began life in a *rancho* in what became Sector 1 of El Camoruco after his parents migrated to Valencia from the rural state of Yaracuy in 1969. Like many, they had come in search of a better life, drawn to Valencia in particular by the promise of employment in its expanding industrial sector. As a child, Rafael's father, Manuel, was in and out of work in the construction industry, and by the age of 15 he had started working independently as a *buhonero* (street vendor) selling newspapers locally and strawberries in the wealthy northern parts of the city. Yulmi's family, much smaller than Rafael's, had settled in a neighbouring *barrio*, but her parents separated when she was a teenager. She maintained regular contact with her mother and sister, both of whom still lived locally, but spent much more time with Rafael's large extended family, a thriving and respected kinship group who were known locally as *Los Hernández*.

I carried out fieldwork in El Camoruco from February 2009 to May 2010, and returned for a short visit in June 2012. My arrival in El Camoruco came via a contact in Caracas, who put me in touch with Rafael. I had been trying to establish contacts with *barrio* community leaders outside of the capital for some time, and was incredibly fortunate to be offered a place to stay in Rafael's house almost as soon as I arrived. He had previously received visitors from Australia on various pro-government solidarity tours of Venezuela, and immediately put me into this category when we met. I was given *chavista* clothing to wear and asked to do a series of interviews with local radio and television stations, where it was assumed I was there to "tell the real story" of the revolution. Although this was in a sense true, I made it clear that I had not arrived to write a propaganda piece for the Venezuelan government, but rather to understand what political practice meant to ordinary people. A few weeks into my stay, Rafael and I had a long discussion about my aims and intentions in the community and agreed some ground rules, one of which was that I would not wear *chavista* clothing. Assured that I was not a CIA agent, Rafael spent

the next few weeks introducing me to local friends, family and political comrades as I sought to establish a profile in the community. This involved teaching English to both school children and adults in the local social mission, attending Rafael and Yulmi's family parties and gradually establishing a small base of friends in the community, many of whom I would visit in the evenings. Winning the trust of *chavista* activists was not as difficult as I had imagined before arriving, with most people seeming to regard it as perfectly natural that someone was interested in their revolution. Although on occasions I was forced to explain myself to new acquaintances, in general people were happy to talk to me, and seemed to be proud that I was writing about their community.

For the first six weeks of my stay I lived downstairs in Rafael and Yulmi's house, sharing a bunk-bed with Eduardo. When my partner arrived a few weeks later, we moved into an upstairs annex. Most evenings we would eat downstairs with the family and then sit in front of the house enjoying the cool breeze that rolled in from the hills. This practice was central to life in El Camoruco: residents would sit outside their houses in small family groups watching the world go by and discussing the day's events. Friends, family members and local characters invariably passed by, bringing gossip, news and jokes as they came and went. The jovial cry of "*¡Epa!*" was a common refrain that could be heard in the *barrio* at night, a colloquial greeting often shouted across the street. The discussions I shared with my host family in the evenings formed a constant backdrop to my research, a site in which I became familiar with the "cultural intimacy" (Herzfeld 1997: 3) of my interlocutors and gleaned numerous important details that inform my theoretical arguments. Usually I would be jotting down notes from our evening conversations before I went to bed.

A major problem I encountered early on in fieldwork was the issue of safety. Having lived in Caracas for four months before arriving in Valencia, I had already been robbed three times, including at knifepoint and gunpoint. In part, these assaults were a result of my own foolhardiness and refusal to let middle-class paranoia hinder my desire to explore Venezuelan cities. But it was also true that a fair-haired *gringo* was an obvious target for would-be assailants (see Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion of violence and crime), particularly in areas where someone of my appearance was a less than common sight. About six weeks into my stay in El Camoruco, my partner and I were robbed with a friend as we entered the *barrio* from its neighbourhood community. After this incident, I became highly fearful of walking

around on my own, and Rafael and Yulmi became increasingly protective of me. For around a year, I did not venture far beyond my immediate block unless I was accompanied by a friend or travelling outside the community in a car or bus. This may sound extreme, but was in a sense merely an exaggerated version of how many *barrio* residents live. Because of the threat of gang violence, few people venture far from their homes after dark, and when they do it is invariably in cars, on motorbikes or in large groups. Most residents of El Camoruco were happy walking around their own community in the evening, but would not travel into neighbouring *barrios* unless accompanied. My own limitations, then, were relative to my degree of embeddedness in the community.

This concern for safety obviously had a major impact on my research. I had hoped to carry out household surveys and trace the relationship between political activism and social mobility, as well as to conduct research with members of the political opposition. El Camoruco was a predominantly *chavista barrio* (see the voting figures in Chapter 4), but there were opposition-supporting individuals and households and I planned to establish contact with them. The restrictions on my movement, however, meant that I was heavily reliant on Rafael and Yulmi, and as a result almost all of my local political contacts were *chavista*. Moreover, due to the highly polarised nature of everyday life in contemporary Venezuela, the very fact that I was living with Rafael and Yulmi – well-known and relatively high profile *chavista* leaders – made it harder still to establish firm links with anyone from the opposition. I did eventually have conversations with opposition supporters, but these were invariably highly guarded on their part since everyone knew who I was living with. Bitter political struggles had been fought in the community in recent years, and these were not easily forgotten.

An equally significant outcome of the safety issue was that I was unable to gather as much data from different households as I had hoped. Most of the details of *barrio* life in this ethnography come from four or five households, the majority of them part of the extended Hernández family. My main focus, however, was on Rafael and Yulmi's household, meaning that becoming part of their family was a central part of fieldwork. Much of my research for the first six months consisted of joining the family in their everyday activities. I cooked *arepas* each morning, walked to school with Yuleidi and Eduardo, accompanied Rafael and Yulmi on shopping trips and sometimes looked after Yuleidi in the afternoons. Some days I would shadow Rafael

in his work, while on the days that Yulmi was at home I would help her with domestic chores.[17] On the weekends I would often join Eduardo and his friends in games of *futbolito* (little football) in the street, and in the evenings there were usually family parties to attend. These were often raucous affairs centred around salsa dancing and large quantities of beer. They generally took place at Rafael's parents' house, and gave me the opportunity to develop relationships with other members of the family. These friendships later formed the basis for life history interviews, which helped me stitch together the community's history through the lives of individual residents. Although this close focus on a single family was not the ethnography I planned to write, the advantage of the safety restrictions was that the data I collected from the Hernández family was highly detailed. Despite covering a relatively small number of people, the parts of this ethnography that focus on family life depict an intimate portrayal of everyday life and politics, and show the myriad details and complexities that shape people's political moralities in subtle ways. Had I been able to move more freely, I may not have gleaned such detailed ethnographic data with *Los Hernández*, who were one of the most important and influential families in the community.

As my time in Venezuela wore on, my ethnography became focused more closely on neighbourhood organisations and participatory democracy. Increasingly, I spent my days shadowing Rafael and other members of a wide network of grassroots activists that spread well-beyond El Camoruco (see Chapter 4). This fieldwork involved attending workshops given by experienced community leaders to those hoping to form neighbourhood bodies, tracking the process of construction for such organisations, observing meetings with state and party officials and long, open-ended discussions with my closest informants about their political aspirations and frustrations. Un-structured, semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted with community leaders both within and beyond El Camoruco, and I collected life histories from a number of key *chavista* activists who feature throughout the thesis. For most of the interviews I conducted, I took formal notes and recorded the exchanges. More informal conversations that featured throughout everyday life were written down in my notepad and then typed up in the evening. I also carried out interviews with a number of state employees, local academics and various individuals who were neither *chavista* nor *barrio* residents. These included middle-class people,

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[17] Yulmi began working full-time about six months into my stay. I describe her working patterns in more detail in Chapter 3.

supporters of the opposition from outside the community and various friends and acquaintances who informed my overall understanding of Venezuelan life.

My days were generally divided between teaching at the mission (three days a week), shadowing activists, attending meetings and conducting interviews. These interviews varied from those with *voceros* (spokespeople) from my local communal councils (see Chapter 5) to others with actors from outside the *barrio*. In many instances, an initial interview would lead to an ongoing relationship, meaning that such individuals would keep me up to date with how things were going in their community. In the evenings I was invariably at a political meeting of one form or another. These included meetings of the local communal councils, PSUV (around election times), the local Alcaldía (municipality) and, perhaps most regularly, meetings of a proposed commune that was an ongoing project throughout my fieldwork period (see Chapter 6). I chose not to record meetings, instead writing down important quotes verbatim and summarising key debates and discussions as they occurred. I also paid attention to the form of meetings as well as the content, and would stay behind after meetings to speak to individual activists. Attending as many meetings as possible helped me keep track of the narratives underlying a particular project, and I was able to trace the ebbs and flows of different activists' participation and enthusiasm. During meetings plans would be made, notes taken, responsibilities assigned and, almost invariably, another meeting arranged for a fortnight or month in the future. When they were over, particularly at weekends, the "meetings" would then turn into impromptu parties, during which activists would drink, dance, talk about disputes, occasionally argue and then reaffirm their commitments to one another. Ethnographically, the meetings thus served as a point of entry into the wider world of political activism and the social networks that underpinned it.

Participant observation was central to my research and informed all other aspects of my fieldwork. I took note of family events, parties, everyday conversations, consumption of media, shopping habits, common complaints, arguments, hopes and fears. I did this in all areas of everyday life, usually noting particular points of interest when I had a spare moment, or writing things down as soon as I returned home. The discussions that form Chapters 1-3 in particular are informed by reflections on Venezuelan attitudes to life in general, while those in Chapters 4-6 come more directly from political meetings and conversations that took place within activist circles. Gradually, I became less reliant on Rafael and Yulmi and more embedded

with these activist circles. I was included in group text messages, informed independently about meetings, offered lifts and invited to people's houses. I made sure to assist with the preparation for political events by delivering leaflets, sending text messages, preparing food and helping to organise the meeting spaces. I also allowed activists to use my camera and laptop, which became important tools over the course of my stay. These were critical shifts, since coming to be seen as part of "the team" enabled a broader and deeper picture of the "political lives" my respondents were leading, as well as allowing me to explore ideas, influences and attitudes that went well beyond the bounds of politics. As I sought to ground my research in the history of the city and zone, I supplemented my fieldwork with archival research at the Universidad de Carabobo.

Ethically, the most complicated part of my research was dealing with splits, factions and disagreements between different groups of *chavistas*. It took some time before I became aware of a significant power struggle between two *chavista* groups (see Chapter 6), but when I did there was a delicate balancing act to be performed. Fortunately, although I was known to be closely associated with one faction, leaders from the other faction were willing to talk to me, and indeed were keen to provide their side of the story. I never commented on different individuals in these exchanges, instead basing my investigation of the dispute on a desire to understand the differing points of view. Elements of this factionalism became quite fraught and antagonistic on occasions, however, and particular individuals explicitly asked me not to use their names. For this reason, I have chosen to use pseudonyms for all individuals and local communities, although the *parroquia* and city remain unchanged. The only personal names I have not changed are those of high-ranking political figures.

THESIS OUTLINE

In Chapter 1, I explore the construction of political subjectivities by analysing Rafael and Yulmi's accounts of how they came to identify as *chavistas* and socialists. I examine enduring moral themes that figure commonly in Venezuelans' opinions about their country, and suggest that Chávez's discourse offers a set of solutions to a national disquiet about oil wealth and capitalism. As part of this, I outline my respondents' stories of political "conversion" and look at the mythological and

religious overtones of Bolivarianism. I also explore how political activism and its moral projects can be utilised as a "technology of the self" (Foucault 1986, 1988) in a manner that both resembles and draws on religious doctrine. Since doubts and uncertainties are integral to this process, I highlight how subjects seek to align everyday ethical conduct with their adopted political ideals.

Chapter 2 builds on these observations by exploring the effects of everyday violence on the residents of El Camoruco and their political aspirations. I argue that family, as both a set of supportive relationships and a reified ideal, accrues a heightened political and moral significance as a result of insecurity. Because *barrio* residents live with the ongoing threat of violence, the strong kinship ties they hold become exemplars of a moral ideal for a better society. I show how they wrestle with deeply ingrained discrimination and cultivate political morality out of the struggles this produces. Efforts to establish a new moral order are, I suggest, part of an attempt to counter symbolic, structural and everyday violence.

This theme is further developed in Chapter 3, where I examine different households in El Camoruco and their shifting aspirations in the Chávez era. *Chavismo*, I argue, has deepened and accelerated the capacity of some families to improve their lives materially, but this is not distributed evenly across the community. I explore how strong households with extensive social resources have made successful use of Bolivarian projects, and compare them to families who are less able to do so. Being committed political activists can buttress careers in the *chavista* state, meaning that loyalty to *el proceso* and a burgeoning career in Bolivarian institutions go hand in hand. While working-class Venezuelans on the whole undoubtedly have more options available to them now, serious inequalities within *barrios* still persist. Gender is one domain in which contestation and struggle remain of critical importance, as new options for women also bring new burdens and demands. This chapter also explores the moral ambiguity of social mobility for self-identifying socialists.

In Part II of the thesis I focus more closely on the attempt to establish participatory democracy in and around El Camoruco, examining the efforts of both grassroots organisations and the state to establish a new form of political practice. Chapter 4 offers a theoretical basis for this analysis, detailing the hybrid political formations that have historically characterised *barrio* organisations, their evolving relationship with the state and the historical contingency of their political aspirations.

I look in particular at the experiences of members of a grassroots network that was set up with the aim of empowering local communities and developing political structures from below. The chapter shows how new pressures and challenges have emerged for local-level community leaders, and provides a critical analysis of the claim that *chavista* participatory democracy is an alliance between constituent and constituted power.

In Chapter 5 I carry out a case study of one of the government's key initiatives in participatory democracy, the communal councils (CCs). I examine how participation in the CCs is highly gendered and show how a separation has emerged between elected spokespeople and non-elected participants. I analyse changing relationships between grassroots activists and the *chavista* state, and pinpoint the tensions that emerge between elected representatives and local people. Everyday practice in the CCs, I suggest, is characterised by a myriad of different attitudes towards participatory democracy, with some residents willing to defer decision-making to *voceros* and others suspicious of leaders' motives.

These themes are developed further in Chapter 6, where I look at the attempt to build an inter-community commune in Miguel Peña. At the crux of this process was a power struggle between competing factions of *chavistas*. One faction was drawn from a pre-existing grassroots organisation, the other from a group of CC spokespeople who coalesced around a new state-managed organ brought in to supervise the project. I show how the dream of the "communal state" encounters significant difficulties when debates over leadership structures, decision-making, inclusivity and the influence of state ministries generate profound disagreements between activists. I also investigate the role of grassroots charismatic authority in this process, showing how community leaders find themselves effectively competing with Chávez. This chapter argues that there are a series of what I call "utopian disjunctures" that occur in the margins between state management and grassroots autonomy.

Figure 4: *Moral y Luces* (Morals and Enlightenment) on the wall of a local social mission (Matt Wilde)

PART I

CHAPTER 1

BOLIVARIANISM AND POLITICAL *FORMACIÓN* IN EL CAMORUCO

> *Filling an empty bottle with water, Miguel gestures to the bottle in his hand as he addresses those assembled. "This is what you can have, your life full of goodness. And if you fill yourselves with goodness and love, what comes out? Goodness and love. And you give that to others." He pauses, empties the bottle and holds it, now empty, in front of him again. "Now, here's the other bottle. If you leave yourself open to the world without the right* formación*, what will fill up inside of you? All the vices, the badness, the negativity from the world outside. And what will come out, what will you give to others? That same badness, that dirty water."*

– Fieldnotes, September 19th 2009

INTRODUCTION

The words of Miguel, a *chavista* activist and Evangelical, provide an appropriate starting point for a thesis that seeks to understand the appeal of a radical populist movement to working-class *barrio* residents. A dedicated and socially concerned activist, in his voluntary work for a grassroots *Escuela de Formación* (School of Formation), Miguel could often be found addressing groups of people with messages such as these, in which he would implore his listeners to consider their political participation as a commitment to remaking themselves morally and spiritually.[18] Like most of my respondents, Miguel supported Hugo Chávez's government and was keen to promote Bolivarian projects and goals, but his predominant concern was with the process quoted above. For the activists I worked with, the moral, intellectual and political formation of persons – what they called *formación* – was regarded as the most important task for revolutionaries. Chávez's vision of a new Venezuela was one they shared, but they believed that it could only be realised if the protagonists of twenty-first century socialism filled themselves, their families and their communities with the right moral substance, the right *formación*. This ethnography is, in many ways, an account of a group of activists' struggle to define and produce this substance, and to cultivate it in the people and institutions around them.

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[18] The *Escuela* will be described in more detail in Chapters 4-6.

The aim of this chapter is to present themes that will underpin the rest of the thesis. It focuses principally on the circulation of a political morality that was present in all elements of my research, allowing the chapters that follow to explore this morality in different practical settings (Chapters 2-3 focusing on family life, aspiration and economic strategising, Chapters 4-6 on community organisations, participatory democracy and the state). I begin showing how my informants created themselves as political subjects through their practical dialogue with the Bolivarian discourse. Adopting their notion of *formación* as an organising concept, I aim to show how ideology *interpellates* individuals, to borrow Althusser's (2008 [1971]) term, and how activists use it as a tool for imaginative and moral endeavours.

I explore four key themes in this process. Firstly, I recount the social and intellectual history of Bolivarianism through Rafael and Yulmi's narratives of how they became *chavistas*. Through these accounts, I argue that a major achievement of Bolivarianism has been the expansion of a political ideology into what Charles Taylor (2004) calls a "social imaginary": a set of ideas that reach beyond social theory by being "carried in images, stories and legends" (2004: 23). Rafael and Yulmi's story, I suggest, shows how this imaginary appeals to the poor in particular because it makes them the principal protagonists in a new national mythology. Secondly, I explore the content of this mythology by examining its origins in a national disquiet surrounding oil wealth and moral decay. Bolivarianism's appeal, I suggest, lies not only in the adversarial weight of Chávez's social and political demands, but also in its invitation for the Venezuelan people to transform themselves, so that the struggle to forge a new nation goes in hand with the struggle to make new moral persons. Thirdly, drawing on a number of activist testimonies, I suggest that the decision to "become" *chavista*, or to rekindle a previous interest in socialism, can be likened to religious conversions. Activists dialogue with Bolivarianism and strive for personal rupture, and in doing so understand their political engagement as an ongoing process of redemption. Finally, taking Che Guevara's articulation of the "New Man" [*sic*] as a desired archetype, I ask how my respondents deal with uncertainties about themselves and their comrades, exploring the role played by doubt in the making of socialist subjectivities. This chapter proposes that the notion of *formación* shows how a political ideology has become hegemonic, extending beyond the bounds of politics and into "a lived system of meanings and values – constitutive and constituting – which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming" (Williams 1977: 110).

The question of how and why people choose to adopt certain political ideologies has long preoccupied social theorists, particularly when individuals and groups decide to become activists and make a given cause the centerpiece of their lives. In this section I present the narratives of my hosts and principal respondents, Rafael and Yulmi, in order to shed some light on how working-class Venezuelans have adopted Bolivarianism and what their political lives look like. Althusser (2008 [1971]) developed the notion of *interpellation* in an effort to understand ideology from the point of view of the subject, seeking to isolate the point at which an individual chooses to identify with a particular cause (2008 [1971]: 48). Using the authority of the state as his example, he argues that when a person realises a police officer calling "Hey, you there!" is addressing them, they are created as a subject through mutual recognition: by answering the "hail", the individual accepts the state's authority and therefore their own role as a subject of that authority (2008 [1971]: 55). For Althusser, ideological subject formation rests on an analogous process of self-identification that takes place through the hail of an interpellating authority. It is an act of submission through which a subject willingly agrees to interpret the world in particular terms as "it recognises itself in the calling up of the ideological cause" (Žižek 1989: 3). I follow Žižek's take on interpellation by regarding ideology not as a delusion or mystification, but as "a fantasy-construction which supports our reality itself… the function of ideology is not to offer a point of escape from reality but to offer us the social reality *itself* as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel" (Žižek 1989: 44-45). In the accounts that follow, I present my respondents' narratives of political formation as "fantasy constructions" of this kind, tracing their interpellation as Bolivarians and socialists through shared national episodes and personal experiences that were pivotal in turning Bolivarianism into a living mythology. The subsections below are organised into three key periods that Rafael and Yulmi identified as critical to their development as political people.

The 1980s: Liberation Theology and Youth Radicalism

A strong link between politics and religion played a significant role in Rafael and Yulmi's lives from an early age. Both came from families with strong Catholic

mothers at the heart of the household, and described how the values they were taught at home played a central role in their *formación* as political people. As teenagers, the couple met one another through the *Juventud Obrera Católica* (Young Catholic Workers), known locally as *La Joc*, who ran outreach programmes for young people in many of the poorest parts of Latin America during the 1970s and '80s. Seeking to offer alternatives to the growing problems with delinquency, *La Joc*'s origins were in liberation theology, and the group's radical interpretation of Christianity had a profound impact on Rafael and Yulmi. In line with the core tenets of the movement, they preached the Gospel as a call to end poverty, fight social injustice and democratise religious leadership. They emphasised the importance of social action as a Christian practice, and replaced traditional Catholic notions of the meek and noble poor with more radical visions that saw them as the architects of alternative futures (see Gutiérrez 1974; Lancaster 1988; Levine 1992; Montoya 1995; Burdick 1996).[19] Rafael described how the pastor from the group had inspired him with his earthy spirituality and closeness to the poor.

> He was very close to God and to us, the poor. He was religious, and it was like he transmitted a message from God, but it was a message for the people. He was different to other Fathers. He was warm, and all his work was about *muchachos* [young people]. He was like us – he played football, he went to the cinema and he said rude things like *coño e madre* [a common Venezuelan curse]. He was involved in lots of things in the community like the *Asociaciones de Vecinos* [Neighbours' Association] and *El Teatro del Barrio* [Neighbourhood Theatre]. He had a philosophy: it was a philosophy for life, a philosophy for the people.

La Joc's efforts to develop class consciousness and empower young people radicalised Rafael and Yulmi, and the group's focus on popular participation, social action and community-mindedness cultivated values and techniques of community leadership that the couple were still using when I carried out fieldwork. As Yulmi recalled, "What we learned in *La Joc* were certain values. It was about solidarity, about finding to solutions to problems and working together." The experience also exposed them to radical critiques of established orthodoxies, leaving a political and intellectual legacy that would later chime with Chávez's attacks on the oligarchy.

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[19] As several studies of the movement show, the adoption of liberation theology has varied widely in different parts of Latin America. In places such as Brazil it became popular with large segments of the Catholic establishment (Burdick 1996: 2-5), while in Nicaragua the ecclesiastical hierarchy resisted its growth, with a base community movement emerging predominantly from below (Lancaster 1988: 55-56).

Yulmi's view on the Catholic Church, for example, stemmed from the radical discussions that had taken place with *La Joc*: "The Catholic Church has always been on the side of the right, of the fascists," she explained. "For 500 years there's been a system of domination, and it was the Church that dominated our minds, dominated up here [gesturing to her head]."

Having struck up a friendship through *La Joc*, Rafael and Yulmi began their relationship while they were still involved with the organisation and went on to become youth workers themselves, continuing its work as they became young parents and established their own home. Their early years as a family were hard, however, as the economic crisis of the 1980s passed into the neoliberal period of plummeting public spending and soaring unemployment. Poverty had always been a part of their lives, but the late 1980s and early 1990s were particularly difficult. Rafael tried working on the assembly line of a car factory for a brief period, but disliked the restrictive lifestyle and low wages that came with factory work, and was eventually sacked after becoming a union organiser. Yulmi recalled the sexual harassment, which she described as routine, for young women looking for work without qualifications or training. "If as a young woman you wanted to find work it was like, 'So what skills do you have? What qualifications do you have? Oh, nothing? Well then you'll have to… [making a sexual intercourse gesture with her hands].' That's how it was, you basically had to prostitute yourself to get work."

The couple struggled by, relying largely on the so-called informal sector (cf. Hart 1973) to support themselves. They sold homemade food and cheap clothes in the street, worked in bakeries and, in Rafael's case, found seasonal work in construction. Politics formed a backdrop to their lives in this period and became increasingly important as the country's economic stagnation led to rising social tensions. As a result of their time with *La Joc*, they identified with radical leftist politics and voted for La Causa R (The Radical Cause, LCR) during the party's brief period of electoral success between 1988 and 1993 (López-Maya 1997; Buxton 1999). Rafael remembered the hardships of the time, and recounted how some people were so poor "they were eating dogs – *literally*, eating dogs from the street." During the period, the sentiments of radical folk songs captured a sense of growing anger and yearning for change among working-class Venezuelans. The lines of one song in particular, he recalled, always stayed with him:

Que la tortilla, se vuelva,　　　　　　Let the tortilla, turn upside down,
Que los pobres coman pan,　　　　　　Let the poor eat bread,
Y los ricos…　　　　　　　　　　　　And the rich…
Mierda, mierda　　　　　　　　　　　Shit, shit

The burgeoning class anger that such lines expressed had long been present in Venezuela, but few predicted the events of February 27th 1989, when the poor took to the streets and the "tortilla" was turned upside down in dramatic fashion.

1989-1992: El Caracazo and Chávez's Attempted Coup

The popular disturbances of 1989 can be understood as the moment that the illusion of multi-class, colour-blind unity finally died in Venezuela, opening socio-political and imaginative spaces that Chávez has since endeavoured to fill. The riots, known colloquially as *el caracazo*, began on February 27th following an IMF-backed austerity programme put in place by the recently elected Carlos Andrés Pérez. Pérez had been president during the oil-boom of the 1970s, and ran on a nationalist, anti-IMF platform that promised to restore the prosperity of the boom years. Directly contradicting his pre-election promises with the austerity programme, in the week following the introduction of the measures petrol and food prices rose by up to 100 percent, as state subsidies were removed on staple goods and shops began to hoard foodstuffs. The events began as a series of protests against the rising bus fares and escalated into widespread rioting and looting, spreading from Caracas to other major cities between February 27th and March 3rd (Coronil and Skurski 1991; López Maya 2003). *El caracazo* is remembered most keenly for the massacre of hundreds and perhaps thousands of people by the army, who opened fire on looters and protestors in Caracas after martial law had been declared. Official records cite 277 deaths, but unofficial estimates – and what is held in popular memory – range into the thousands (Coronil and Skurski 1991: 311). As a state-orchestrated massacre unravelled, the government and media blamed the violence on thugs and delinquents from the *barrios*. While the bodies of the poor piled up in the streets, it was a "barbarous mass" of dark-skinned, slum-dwelling hordes that was depicted as the source of the violence, and indeed as a threat to the civilised body politic of the nation (1991: 324-329). Coronil and Skurski regard *el caracazo* as both a point of rupture and of return, in which the colonial encounter was re-enacted in the semi-militarised spaces of the

neoliberal city: "[W]hile people inscribed with their bodies their presence upon the state, the state inscribed its power over their bodies" (1991: 332).

When Rafael and Yulmi recalled the events, they argued that *el venezuelazo* would be a more appropriate name, given that the disturbances and killings occurred all over the country. In Valencia, many people claimed to have witnessed the Guardia Nacional (National Guard) carrying out shootings in the streets (see Figures 1-4), but no records have ever been released. Rafael remembered the days leading up to the events, when rumours that something was about to happen had been circulating among local people in El Camoruco.

> We were waiting, and listening to the radio. We'd heard there were problems in Caracas. Then it [the looting] was totally spontaneous. In the *barrio* there was this *bodega* nearby. My friend wanted to rob it but I told her not to because it was in the *barrio*. When I tried to stop her, she slashed me with a bottle… it was horrible… there were gunshots everywhere in the streets.

In the south of Valencia, many looters targeted foreign-owned stores as the Guardia Nacional pursued them through the streets. Close to El Camoruco people remembered shoot-outs taking place between Chinese shop-owners and looters. In the hours that followed, many people were rounded up in places such as Plaza de Toros in Miguel Peña, as the photos below depict. When Rafael told his story, he would show a scar on his arm that he sustained when he tried to prevent a friend from looting the local *bodega* (convenience store), demonstrating his somatic link to the traumas of the nation and emphasising the permanence of the memory.

For the nation at large, *el caracazo* signified the beginning of the end for *puntofijismo*, marking a "rupture of the moral bond between state and *pueblo*" (Coronil and Skurski 1991: 315) that would have far-reaching political consequences. For Rafael, Yulmi and their neighbours in El Camoruco, it was a key moment that highlighted the willingness of the political establishment to use violence against its own citizens and the need to find alternative political vehicles. Indeed, many remembered the events as part of a much longer process of socio-political unravelling, in which growing civil disobedience was met with arbitrary repression from the state. During one demonstration a few years after the disturbances, William, an old friend of the couple, was arrested and detained for 20 days without charge. "I was beaten by the guards and the other inmates," he recalled. "They put us in joint cells with all the other criminals without any reason." This ongoing antagonism led to a steady build up

of resentment and political tension, generating a demand for change and a belief that it had to come from outside the existing establishment.

Figure 5: Looters at Plaza de Toros, Valencia (Nelson Maya)

Figure 6: The Guardia Nacional in *Barrio* Ruiz Pineda (Nelson Maya)

Figure 7: Protestors confront police in the centre of Valencia (Nelson Maya)

Figure 8: The Guardia Nacional in the streets of Valencia (Nelson Maya)
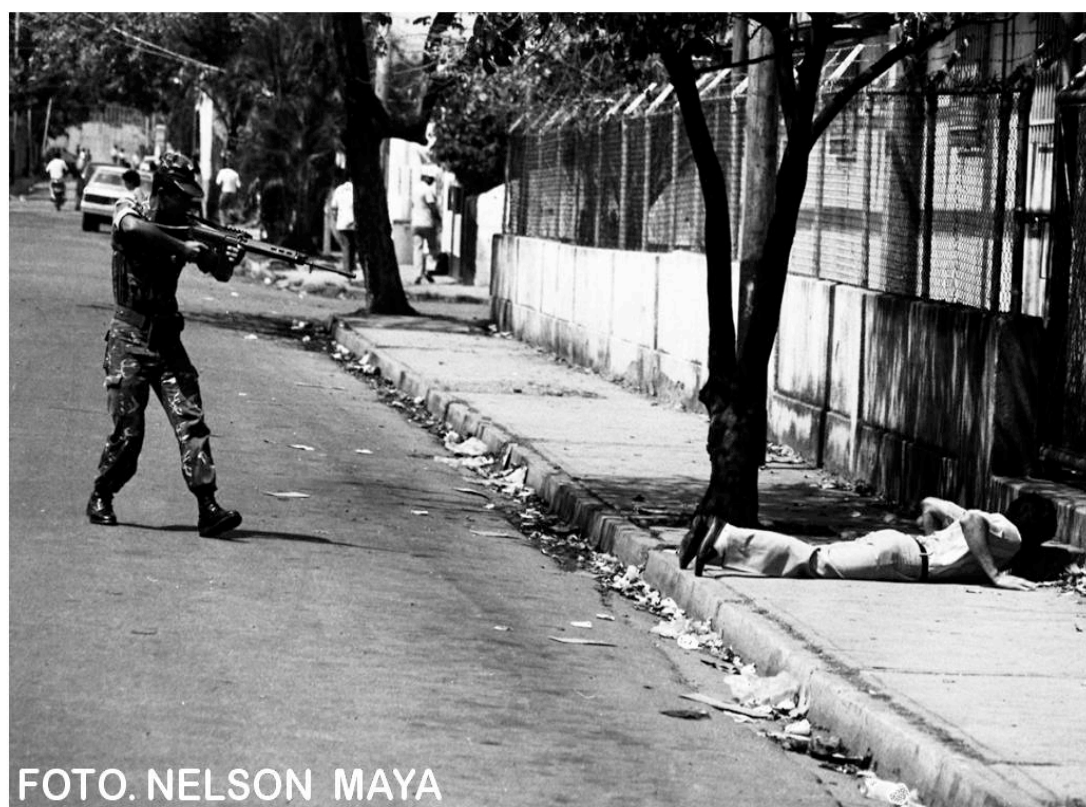
Figure 9: The Guardia in Sector Santa Rosa (Nelson Maya)

Chávez's attempted coup in 1992 can be understand as an attempt to meet this demand and, in Althusserian terms, "hail" the people with a new political identity. When his forces seized control of several large cities including Maracaibo, Valencia and Maracay, Chávez is said to have looked out at the hillside *barrios* of Caracas with his binoculars as he waited for *el pueblo* to appear in support. But a series of defections and errors led to his capture, and the popular uprising never materialised. Echoing Gramsci's articulation of the "national-popular collective will" (1971: 130), he later described the moment as a "failed sense of the collective" (Chávez 2005: 106). Yet although it may have failed in Gramscian terms, the coup attempt did seem to play a significant role in the interpellation of individuals such as Rafael and Yulmi. Yulmi recalled being pleased when news of the coup attempt broke: "I was happy. I thought, 'At last a man who's going to fight against this shit society.' I'd never worked in anything electoral or political before, but when he arrived I went to help and I worked for free [without pay] in the streets." As part of his agreement to surrender, Chávez requested the opportunity to make a televised address to the nation. Prophetically, he declared that his forces had failed to achieve their objectives "*por ahora*" (for now), before being taken away to prison. Oneidys, a *chavista* activist who worked with Rafael and Yulmi, remembered the impact of his alluding words: "It was like, wow, finally someone who's taking responsibility for things, trying to do something!" In granting Chávez his request for a televised address, President Peréz was unwittingly creating a piece of popular folklore that would come to feature prominently in Bolivarian mythology.

2002-2004: The Coup, "El Paro" and the Recall Election

Chávez was released from prison in 1994 and elected in late 1998, but soon faced a series of challenges to his position as the opposition attempted to remove him from office and *chavistas* mobilised in support. The first of these came in 2002, when a 36-hour military coup forced Chávez from Miraflores before he was dramatically reinstalled after a popular uprising and military rebellion. A critical moment in Bolivarian history, the coup is now regarded as the moment when the battle lines in Venezuela's polarised struggle over the state were formally staked out. If *el caracazo* marked the point at which the country's divergent class interests were symbolically cut loose from a hegemonic ideal of all-class unity, then the coup attempt can be

understood as the moment that these class interests came to face one another as two coherent political blocs for the first time.

In Valencia, as news of Chávez's removal filtered through a media blackout, Rafael and Yulmi spent the day driving around nearby communities, relaying the news and calling for people to join them in a protest outside the army barracks in Naguanagua, a few kilometres north of the city centre. They spent most of the day and night there, chanting at the barracks and passing messages from friends in other areas. Yulmi remembered how close friendships had been formed during the experience, and how angry she was with people who refused to join them. "We were trying to organise a group to go to the Guardia Nacional because we were saying, 'Our state is being attacked by a military coup.' But a lot of these people who wore the red hats and t-shirts [*chavista* activists], suddenly they had a headache or a stomach ache and couldn't come. There were a lot of headaches and stomach aches that day, I remember it." When Chávez dramatically returned to Caracas in a helicopter and was reinstated as president, many *chavistas* likened it to the Second Coming – like Christ, he had returned after three days in exile. Rafael made this allusion himself during a night of heavy drinking, when he recounted his memories of the event. Grabbing my pen and notepad, he drew an image depicting man and heaven. Chávez sat between the two, with a line showing how he had come to link heaven and earth at the dawn of a new millennium: "Just as God had to send a man to sacrifice himself all the way over there," he said, "so he also sent someone to us…"

Shortly after the coup attempt, Rafael was arrested following an allegation that he had thrown a rock at rival demonstrators on an opposition march. The arrest took place during a gathering of family, friends and comrades at Rafael and Yulmi's house, when armed police stormed into the front porch and dragged him away. His friends had tried to prevent the arrest, holding him back as the police pulled at him, but the police pointed their guns at the head of his son Eduardo, who at the time was only eight years old. In the end, a case never materialised because the mysterious witness behind the claims failed to come forward, and he was released after a day in the cells. But the event was a traumatic one for Rafael's family and friends and served as a lesson, in their eyes, of the workings of *la derecha* (the right) at the local level. Given that the arrest was made during a highly public gathering of *chavistas*, Rafael, Yulmi and their friends read it as a warning from the local oligarchy in Valencia. It underlined the power of the forces they were up against and, in doing so, helped to

demarcate and solidify the boundaries of their identities as *chavistas* and revolutionaries.

These identities were further strengthened during the oil *paro* (shutdown) that began in December 2002 and ran until February 2003, when the opposition attempted to strangle PDVSA through the combination of a management lockout and an administrative and professional workers' strike (Wilpert 2007: 25). The shutdown, which was regarded by *chavistas* as political and economic sabotage, led to food and fuel shortages throughout the country, and was only resolved when Chávez used the army, retired workers and foreign contractors to regain control of the company (*ibid*). In El Camourco, the *paro* was remembered by residents as *la navidad que nunca era* (the Christmas that never was). With low quantities of food, families and friends shared the traditional *hallacas* with one another, and modest celebrations took place in the streets rather than in people's houses.[20] "In some ways, that was one of the best Christmases we've had because there was real unity between people," Yulmi commented. Far from destroying the Bolivarian movement, the events served to foster solidarity among the president's supporters and further entrenched a growing polarisation in the nation at large.

The recall election of 2004 was the final episode that my respondents identified as shaping their formation as *chavistas*. Utilising a constitutional clause that permitted a national referendum against the president if 20 percent of the population signed in favour, the opposition was confident of victory after 3.4 million people supported the proposal. But using the recently formed Electoral Battle Units (*Unidades de Batallas Electorales*, UBEs) and Bolivarian Circles (*Circulos Bolivarianos*, CBs), Chávez was able to mobilise 120,000 community-level "electoral patrols" who went out to organise voters, distribute pro-government propaganda and count votes on the day of the election (Hawkins 2010: 1-3, 23).[21] Yulmi and her close friend, Rosa, had been members of these patrols, describing how they had gone three nights without sleep as they campaigned by day and vote-counted by night. Hostility between pro-government and opposition supporters reached fever pitch in the days

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[20] *Hallacas*, the traditional Christmas food in Venezuela, are cornflour rolls filled with meats and raisins and boiled in banana leaves.

[21] The Bolivarian Circles were the earliest incarnations of neighbourhood-level *chavista* organising bodies. They were principally political in character, acting as mobilising units during elections, and have since been superseded by a multitude of more issue-specific entities such as the missions, communal councils and PSUV *patrullas* (political patrols). A more detailed discussion of neighbourhood bodies in and around El Camoruco can be found in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

leading up to the vote. Yulmi witnessed a *chavista* activist being shot dead by an opposition supporter near the polling centre, and then described her shock as the same man calmly entered the building and began collecting votes. As she remembered it, the man had been threatening *chavistas* in the area for several days before the incident occurred. Terrified, she chose to confront him and show that she was not intimidated: "I said to him, 'Seriously, I'm from here [El Camoruco] and you don't want to threaten me because if you do you won't make it to the end of the road, believe me.' Of course I was bluffing but you have to make yourself look strong in these situations, otherwise they'll take advantage of you." Such experiences grounded political subjectivity in traumatic personal memories, so that the opposition became understood as a threat not only to the activists' political movement, but also to their very survival.

Organising Moments in Mythology

These critical episodes of political formation can be understood as what Olivia Harris (1995) called "organising moments". She identified the importance of *periodisation* in the making of mythologies, and described how such moments come to mark moments of rupture and transformation in mytho-historical imaginings, setting new temporal periods in motion. Harris argued that an organising moment is "a transcendental event upon whose axis history is created, a rupture from which fundamental categories of periodisation and identity are derived" (1995: 20). The episodes described here illustrate how interpellation occurred incrementally through such moments as Rafael and Yulmi's lives became intertwined with their president and his movement. Some of the most important experiences in their personal lives ran in tandem with the evolution of a political movement and ideology, so that a series of "hails" had occurred over the course of more than a decade as they established themselves as political subjects. Such organising moments were nodal points that allowed personal memories and mytho-historical narratives to be stitched together, offering the scope to unify the experiences of the president with those of *barrio* activists. During these periods of heightened political tension, the ideological became something *material*, creating the content of subject formation through the materiality of lived experience. Within this contextual background, Rafael's allusions to Chávez's divinity can be understood not as the deification of a charismatic leader who exists elevated above his

followers, but rather as the creation of a living mythology that ties the president to local memories of the everyday *lucha* (struggle).

By the end of 2004, individuals such as Rafael and Yulmi understood their nation's future as a battle between two social classes and two social imaginaries (Taylor 2004; Spanakos 2008). On one side were the private media, the business community, the upper echelons of the Catholic Church, the majority of the middle-classes and elite, and the United States – a Machiavellian presence known as *El Imperio* (The Empire) that lurked behind these domestic foes. As Chávez radicalised his discourse with each victory, *chavistas* developed a series of names to refer to this opposition bloc: the oligarchy, the opposition, *la derecha* (the right), *los capitalistas* (the capitalists) and, most commonly among my informants, *los escuálidos* (the squalid ones).[22] Pitted against this bloc were the president and his *pueblo*: *los pobres* (the poor), the *chavistas*, the socialists, the revolutionaries, the Bolivarians. If there were undeniable truths about Venezuela's social divisions contained in this binary, there was also what Spanakos terms a "strategic essentialism" (2008b: 4) that helped to foster the sense of a Manichean battle between good and evil (Hawkins 2010: 55). From the 2002 coup onwards, the struggles my informants faced were understood in terms of these opposing blocs, encapsulated in the revolutionary slogan that Chávez borrowed and adapted from Cuba: *Patria, Socialismo o Muerte: ¡Venceremos!* (Homeland, Socialism or Death: We Shall Overcome!). The slogan's emphasis on sacrifice and a refusal to compromise is clear, and can be regarded as a defiant marker that followed the intense struggles of the period between 2002 and 2004. By the time I arrived in El Camoruco, the phrase had entered the everyday vernaculars of my hosts, often being shouted at the conclusion of meetings or public events, when Rafael, Yulmi and their comrades would place themselves, fists clenched, as actors in a historic and mythological story.

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[22] The term *escuálido* means "squalid" but has a number of connotations. My respondents argued that it referred to both the "squalidness" of the opposition's campaigns against Chávez and to the physical appearance of those presumed to be his opponents – thin, scrawny and gym-obsessed narcissists who aspired to North American ideals of physical beauty and fitness. It contrasted implicitly with the jovial, round and warm self-image of working-class *chavistas*.

As the previous section demonstrates, Bolivarianism is a political discourse drenched in mythological and religious metaphors and imperatives. As a set of political and economic demands, it appeals to those who were effectively excluded from political representation in the Punto Fijo pact, and to those who were impoverished during the sharpest period of neoliberal restructuring. But it is the presentation of these demands in a mythological and religious language that gives them, I propose, an added hegemonic weight. Social and economic inequalities inevitably produce particular political demands and groupings; myth and religion work to hook them into a much broader set of ideals that allows ideology to shape imaginaries and subjectivities more comprehensively. I draw attention to the presence of myth in Bolivarianism in line with the work of Walter Benjamin (1970), Georges Sorel (1976) and Roger Lancaster (1988), who all point to its efficacious use in radical movements, as well as to the commonalities between religious and revolutionary thought. Sorel argued that orthodox Marxism's disavowal of mythological thinking in favour of a rationalist emphasis on the "revolutionary apprenticeship" (1976: 206) of workers had inhibited the imagination of socialists and hindered insurrectionary actions (in his case, the general strike). The point of using myth, he claimed, is that it animates action by stimulating the imagination and rejecting rationalist interrogation. It works to galvanise and inspire on the grounds of belief rather than science: "A myth cannot be refuted," he wrote, "since fundamentally it is identical to the convictions of a group, an expression of these convictions in the language of movement. Consequently, it cannot be broken down into parts which can be applied on the level of historical descriptions" (1976: 206). Sorel noted the similarity between religious and revolutionary thought, pointing out that both share convictions that are protected from criticism. He called for the fusion of Marxist rationalism with more visionary mythological imaginaries, placing "as a goal the apprenticeship, the preparation and even the reconstruction of the individual with a view toward a gigantic work" (1976: 207).

The urge for individuals to undertake imaginative and subjective transformations of an ambitious nature has struck a chord in Venezuela, where a recurrent theme that one encounters in everyday conversations is the belief that, as a people and a nation, the country is somehow lacking in moral substance. It is common

to hear Venezuelans say that they lack "culture" and social conscience, that corruption is ingrained in the national psyche, and that they are wasting their country's abundant natural resources because of poor education and faltering values. Among many of the middle-classes and elites, such conversations often take the form of racist and classist slurs against the residents of *barrios*, who are cast as indolent, backward and violent. Wealthy Venezuelans will often bring up Chávez in conversations with foreign visitors, making sure they distance themselves from the president and emphasising that they regard him as crude, ignorant and authoritarian – in short, as someone who does not represent *their* Venezuela. But working-class Venezuelans too will talk about themselves in deprecating terms, asserting a belief that the country's problems can be traced fundamentally to a moral and spiritual malaise among its people. While they are fiercely proud of the traits the country is most known for – beaches, hospitality, a laid-back and jovial attitude, natural landscapes and beautiful women – people repeatedly state that these blessings are squandered by a population whose collective essence is somehow faulty and destitute. Santiago, a young man who lived two doors down from Rafael and Yulmi, typified this view:

> Yeah I like my country. You know, it's a beautiful place, there are lots of beautiful women… But it's *jodido* [screwed/fucked] too, you know? You've always got to be aware here, you can't trust people because there's so much corruption, *so* much corruption. There are so many people who will screw you over. This country's been *jodido* for so long now and it just seems to be what we're like.

In a similar vein, Franklin, a *chavista* activist who lived in a squatter settlement not far from El Camoruco, had a damning take on his friends and neighbours: "We're thieves in this country! You could have someone living in a *rancho* who's got a lovely fridge worth 3000 Bs.F [$700], but when you look inside it, what's there? Just a bottle of water. That's the mentality in this country." The statements of Santiago and Franklin, which were indicative of countless more of a similar nature, identified two core problems with the national character. The first was the belief that Venezuelans always wanted something for nothing, that they would rather exploit or steal from another person than put in a hard day's work. The second expressed a more specific concern with consumption. Venezuelans, according to Franklin, would rather spend their money on expensive consumer items than good food to feed their families. His statement focused on the perceived inability of his neighbours to identify the correct priorities in life, and suggested an unhealthy relationship with consumerism.

The expensive fridge, despite appearing to signify success and comfort from the outside, revealed an emptiness and lack of forethought on the inside.

The ubiquity of these moralist misgivings in everyday discourse reflects, I contend, an attempt to explain why a country with the world's sixth largest oil reserves is characterised by chronic inequalities in wealth, a weak and unreliable infrastructure and some of the highest levels of violent crime in the world (see Chapter 2). Venezuelans of different social classes are divided on many issues, but the one theme they consistently agree on is the transformative power of oil. From the poorest *rancho* to the most luxurious gated compound, the same belief in black gold will be uttered: "With our oil, Venezuela is a rich country. We shouldn't have poverty here," *barrio* residents and Country Club denizens alike will say.[23] This belief in the country's subsoils dates back to the post-war boom of the 1940s, when a mythological coupling between nation and oil "achieved the force of timeless reality" (Coronil 1997: 67) in the national imaginary. But this faith is often accompanied by a discomfort with the perceived effects of a petroleum-based economy, a sense that the easy acquisition of wealth is morally tainted by the relative absence of human endeavour. The troubling question of why Venezuela has failed to live up to the potential its material riches seem to promise is thus a question that people frame in moral terms: have they made the most of this blessing and invested it in their nation's collective development, or have they wasted it due to an inability to correctly handle wealth? Franklin's story of the empty fridge can be read as a moral fable that captures a predominant and abiding national concern.

During the oil boom of the 1970s, the circulation of vast sums of rent money in the state machinery led, according to Coronil (1997: 321-360), to a series of high profile corruption scandals and murders involving politicians, lawyers and prominent business leaders, as "the relentless pursuit of money became a normative practice in ever-wider social circles" (1997: 324). As the depth of corruption unravelled and the number of those found to be complicit grew, Coronil argues that a shift in national self-image began occurring. Increasingly, Venezuelans came to regard the oil not as a blessing, but as a source of evil that would be better known as "the Devil's excrement", a term coined by Pérez Alfonso, the founder of OPEC (1997: 353). Oil

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[23] The Country Clubs (they are known by English names) are famous for being the wealthiest districts of cities like Caracas and Valencia. They are highly fortified gated communities that contain their own golf courses, gymnasiums and schools.

had always been thought of as "ready-made collective wealth whose private appropriation could be justified only if it promoted the collective welfare" (1997: 360). But the central involvement of the state in widespread and embedded corruption dramatically called that ideal into question. Endemic private appropriation of oil rents by the people's elected representatives led to a wholesale reimagining of this national myth:

> Petroleum was seen as a toxic substance, the excessive consumption of which was threatening the health of the nation, its institutions, and its populace. The absorption of massive quantities of petrodollars into Venezuela… constituted a threat to the body politic, whose digestive system was under assault and failing. The entire society was seen as breaking down under the corroding force of accumulated toxins, waste, and excrement (1997: 353).

The statements of individuals such as Miguel, Santiago and Franklin, which I present as archetypes, suggest that this belief in a pervasive national immorality permeates the way that ordinary Venezuelans perceive themselves and their fellow citizens in everyday life. As this thesis will show throughout, people continue to mistrust those handling money, to view large sections of the state as inherently corrupt and to believe that individualism and greed have become national traits linked to a collective addiction to oil and money. The argument I make is that the success of Bolivarianism as an ideology, although owing much to traditional leftist demands such as social justice and equality, rests in equal measure on its capacity to offer moral redemption from this perceived slide into petroleum-based gluttony.

One of the most striking features of Chávez's discourse is the language of religious redemption he employs, which places an onus on individuals to shed the model "of capitalism, extreme individualism and consumerist egotism" (Chávez 2006) that has, in his eyes, polluted them. In the election campaign of 1998, his campaign slogan was a passage from the bible that called for a spiritual awakening: *El que tenga ojos, que vea. El que tenga oidos, que oiga* (Let he who has eyes, see. Let he who has ears, hear) (Smilde 2008: 84). Since then, he has repeatedly emphasised the linkages between revolution and Christianity. In one early speech he stated, "God is the Christ who was crucified for fighting together with his people against an empire, the Christ who according to the Christians came down from the cross, was resurrected, and went through the world to fight on behalf of the dispossessed" (Blanco Muñoz 1998: 119). Zúquete (2008) argues that this discourse goes beyond

secular populism and into the realms of a "political religion" which sacralises politics and offers a totalised vision that is missionary in character:

> In this manner, politics goes beyond a mere identification with the "sovereign people". It offers a comprehensive view of the world; it claims to have the answers for ultimate questions, such as the purpose of life; and it aims to shape and purify the collective consciousness, thus bringing about a new society and a new humanity here on earth (2008: 96).

In a traditionally Catholic country such as Venezuela, one could make the claim that the grounding of politics in a religious language is a merely a sensible political tactic. As Smilde (2008) points out, Chávez courted the growing Evangelical population during his first election campaign, but was careful for his language to remain open to Catholics, Spiritists and other religious denominations too. Yet I contend that this religiosity speaks specifically to the concerns expressed by Miguel, Santiago and Franklin by advocating a form of personal redemption and renewal that parallels themes present in both liberation theology and Evangelicalism.[24] If Venezuelans have been *formado* (formed) in a culture of individualist capitalism and gluttonous oil consumption, it follows that they need to be reformed in moral terms for a new society to emerge.

Chávez's stress on the revolution being ethical and moral as well as political and economic (Chávez 2007: 77) has strong echoes of the fusion between Marxist-Leninist ideology and liberation theology that characterised Sandinismo during the Nicaraguan revolution. As Lancaster (1988) notes, Sandinismo's use of liberation theology equated Godlessness and sin with estrangement from the self. The Sandinistas understood the atheist as the quintessential individualist, a lost soul "infected" with the despair brought by this estrangement (1988: 60-81). Lancaster describes how class consciousness was built out of what he terms a "re-enchantment" of politics based on the generation of a new mythology that fought against sin and despair. As he writes, "In a word, revolution 78/g augurs the re-establishment of the traditional image of social order – real or mythical – lost when sin divided the community and capitalism stratified the society" (1988: 85). The moral disquiet evident in the words of individuals like Miguel, Santiago and Franklin bears many

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[24] There are of course significant theological and practical differences between liberation theology and Evangelicalism (see Lancaster 1988; Burdick 1992). But I follow my informants on this subject by suggesting that the basic focus on moral transformation and redemption provides enough commonalities to offer a shared theological "base" that political ideology can draw on.

hallmarks of this kind of discourse, a sense that not only have people been corrupted by capitalist social relationships and practices, but also that a purity or innocence has been lost as part of this process. The struggle to replace what Miguel terms "that badness, that dirty water" with "goodness and love" thus evokes a sense of return for individuals as well as for the nation. If the circulation of oil – a dirty water – in the national body politic has polluted the souls of Venezuelans, then some kind of cleansing must be undertaken at the subjective level for this return to occur. As I now describe, narratives of redemption were a strong feature of the *chavista* activists with whom I worked.

ACTIVIST TESTIMONIES: INDIVIDUALISM, CONVERSION AND REDEMPTION

In many ways, Rafael and Yulmi's lifelong involvement in community-based activism was exceptional. Their early integration with *La Joc* and subsequent involvement in El Camoruco's *Asociación de Vecinos* (Neighbours' Association – see Chapter 4) meant that they had essentially been at the centre of their community's political bodies since their teens. As a politicised couple, their familial and social lives were also significantly bound up in Bolivarianism (see Chapters 2 and 3), meaning that there was a consistency to their political involvement that was not typical. For many other *chavistas*, political participation seemed to ebb and flow in accordance with particular personal and national events. Some of the most committed activists I worked with had only "discovered" socialism since the arrival of Chávez, while others had rediscovered or reactivated a previous commitment they had not "practiced" since their youth. All of my respondents, without exception, also maintained religious beliefs. The majority would be best described as adhering to popular Catholicism (see Salas 1987), with Church attendance varying according to different individuals. Some believed in and practiced spirit possession together with their Catholicism, while others were converts to Evangelicalism.[25] This religious

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[25] The majority of Venezuela's population identify as Catholic, though Salas (1987) argues that for many this is a "popular Catholicism" that adheres to many core tenets of the faith without necessarily all of its religious formalism. As in much of Latin America (see Stoll 1991), Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism are also on the rise (see Smilde 2007), while spirit possession cults of various hues have become increasingly popular in recent years (see Briceño 1970; Martin 1983; Salas 1987; Placido 1998; Taussig 1997; Ferrándiz 2004).

backdrop to people's thinking had clearly influenced their understandings of political consciousness, as the accounts below demonstrate.

Many *chavistas* described the arrival of Chávez as something akin to conversion or a renewal of the self. The similarity of these accounts from people with a variety of different backgrounds was particularly striking. Often, becoming a *chavista* activist seemed to have occurred at moments that were retrospectively regarded as personal ruptures. Ernesto, a *vocero* (spokesperson) for the communal council (see Chapters 5 and 6) in Sector 3 of El Camoruco, had owned a successful business before the emergence of the president:

> I used to my own construction company. We were bought by an American company and I was earning a lot of money. I had three women, a great car, jewellery: all of it. Then it turned out that my administrators had been evading tax, and in one month it all collapsed. We lost everything, though they [the administrators] lost more because I can work with my hands [and therefore find work]… And after all that, because of all that, I opened my eyes.

Ernesto explained that he had identified with socialism since his teens, when he heard the music of the revolutionary folk singer, Ali Primera, for the first time. But through the course of his working life he felt that he had "lost his way" and become selfish and greedy. Following the failure of his business, which he had come to regard as a blessing in disguise, he now divided his time between his job as an engineer for a company in Valencia's industrial zone and voluntary community work with the communal council.

Since answering Chávez's call and "opening his eyes", Ernesto had become one of the most active *voceros* in the community and hoped to establish a network of "socialist companies" in the local area that could offer work to young people and channel the profits into community development projects. Describing his previous relationship with money, women and consumption as a kind of false consciousness, he was now concerned with cultivating a different set of values in the *barrio*'s young population. "The big problem we have here is with the young people," he told me. "If the father is drinking all day and the mother is too, who's looking after the kids? They end up going out into the street and it's like, 'Do you want to smoke?' and it [delinquency] starts. Then if this young kid wants a pair of Nikes that cost 500 Bs.F [$120], they just need to get themselves a gun so they can rob someone." Ernesto understood his own experiences with materialism as a lesson he could impart to

others, and would narrate his own apparent folly as an indicator of a wider social malaise. He often emphasised the value of voluntary community work in such discussions, and was plainly proud to be a *barrio* community leader. One on occasion, during an argument with a neighbour about whether he was "doing his job properly" as a *vocero*, he made this point clear: "No, this isn't my *job*. My *job* is with a private company. I do *this* voluntarily," he said firmly. Becoming an activist thus had a sacrificial quality that helped him attain a sense of self-worth and reconcile his past.

Miguel, whose words began this chapter, was an Evangelical who had separated from his wife and returned to Valencia from the Andean city of Mérida around the time of Chávez's election. He too had identified with socialism from a young age, and found himself becoming involved in pro-government activism as he attempted to rebuild his life in Valencia.

> When Chávez came to power, I was already a socialist. I became a socialist when I was 20, 21 years old. I was living with friends and at that time we shared everything. Soap, toothpaste, talcum powder, sometimes clothes! I used to go out in my *panas'* clothes at times.[26] So what I learned was the importance of sharing with others. Then, when I discovered Christianity, I learned to treat everyone as equals, that no-one is better than anyone else. So when the revolution began, I was already ready for it. And you know, maybe if I'd become a socialist through the revolution I would've become another *corupto* [corrupt person], because I'd have come from the *Adeco* and COPEI tendencies.

In this statement Miguel suggested that he had been prefigured for Bolivarian values thanks to his grounding in both socialism and Christianity. Importantly, these were both active processes of self-forming that he had already undertaken, giving him a self-belief in his capacity to be a good Bolivarian. The emphasis on sharing and equality pointed to a socialism grounded in community-mindedness and Christian decency, underlining the desire for a retrieval of lost folk values to form cornerstones of the revolution. A further important point was his assertion that those formed "through" the revolution – those, that is, who left AD or COPEI and became *chavistas* after Chávez's arrival – were more likely to fall prey to corruption. Central to this concern was the belief that there was an inherent contamination associated with the Punto Fijo parties and tendencies, a fear that somehow the pollution of the past was too ingrained to detoxify. Paradoxically, Miguel thus expressed both a desire for rupture and a concern that transformation might not be possible for everyone. I return

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[26] *Pana* is a term of endearment used between close friends. It connotes a high level of trust and affection.

to this point below.

One relatively recent convert to socialism was Rosa, who had worked as a manager in a private sector company for some twenty years before retiring to focus on community and political work a few years before I arrived. Her house, one of the largest in El Camoruco, had been inherited from her parents and, since her grown up daughters had moved to Caracas and Táchira respectively, she now lived there alone with her mother. Rosa usually had several lodgers staying in the spare rooms, with the rent she received from them providing the bulk of her income. She described how she had undergone a transformation when Chávez arrived, undertaking a reassessment of her life values as she was gradually drawn to political work.

> Before, I was a capitalist, an individualist. I had the good job at the private company, the good car: all that. I was only interested in my make-up and private schools for my girls. I had a nice car and was totally individualistic. I wasn't against [the left], but I didn't involve myself. I'd always been involved in community things, but not in a political way.

Rather than a sudden moment of realisation, she described her own political evolution in more gradual terms than Ernesto:

> My *papá* died of cancer the same year that Chávez was elected, and because we have a big space in our house I said that Rafael and Yulmi, who were working with the Bolivarian Circles, could use the space for meetings. I used to make coffee for everyone at the meetings, and they'd always ask me to join in, but I never did. My *mamá* was always the big *chavista* in the house, and one day she'd gone to Caracas. There was a meeting in the house and everyone was saying, 'Join in, join in,' so I did. After that it was a gradual process. It wasn't like there was a single moment when I suddenly changed, it was a process. I suppose it's still happening now. Even a few years ago I was still wearing the smart dresses and high heels to meetings, but now it's just jeans and trainers.

As these remarks make clear, an "interpellating authority" does not need to be a figure of power; it can also be a group of friends who implore someone to "join in". This point underlines the importance of social relationships to the process of political formation. *Chavistas* established new friendships and social networks by participating in community activism, and these worked to reinforce a sense of loyalty through shared experiences.

Rosa's comments on the evolution of her clothing were also revealing, indicating how fashion was used to denote a shift in subjectivity. By moving from smart dresses and high heels to jeans and trainers, she had made a move from the style

of a professional office worker to a more earthy and practical look. Jeans and trainers denoted a practicality and "on-the-move" readiness for action, as well as serving to match the clothes worn by most women from the *barrios* (unless they are attending parties, women almost always wear jeans when they are outside of the house). These outward changes helped Rosa align herself with a particular activist style shared by men and women, which usually consisted of light walking boots or trainers, jeans, waist bags (to carry activist essentials such as mobile phones, top-up cards, notepads and leaflets), t-shirts and caps. The t-shirts and caps usually bore *chavista* or generic socialist logos and slogans, with Che Guevara's image particularly popular. *Chavista* red was the most common colour for t-shirts and caps, but military camouflage was also ubiquitous, sometimes in the form of combat-style bodywarmers. The use of military clothing to denote revolutionary credentials has a long history, and it has been successfully recycled by Chávez, who generally wears his green paratrooper jacket in public and made his red paratrooper beret an international symbol of the revolution. As a sartorial package, the *chavista* look is one that denotes movement, discipline and preparedness. Rosa had successfully tapped in to this style, but always maintained a certain individualised smartness, particularly for important public meetings where *chavista* dignitaries were in attendance. As her style had evolved with her self-identification as an activist, her decorative choices became political signifiers too: the jeans and trainers would be offset by red nail varnish, red earrings and a smart red blouse.

A final important observation made by Rosa was that the process of becoming *chavista* was "still happening now". This statement demonstrated an awareness that her political formation was an ongoing process enacted through practice and repetition. Žižek, following Lacan, argues that interpellation "never fully succeeds" (1989: 43), stressing that subjects who adhere to ideologies pursue a holism they can never quite attain.[27] In her assessment, Judith Butler (1995) argues that subject formation is a process of "submission as mastery": individuals create themselves as political subjects by submitting to an ideological position and mastering its content through ritualised practice. As she puts it, "In this view, neither submission nor mastery is *performed by a subject*; the lived simultaneity of submission as mastery,

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[27] For Žižek, it is paradoxically the very incompleteness of ideology that provides its appeal: " …there is always a residue, a leftover, a strain of traumatic irrationality and senselessness sticking to it, and *this leftover, far from hindering the full submission of the subject to the ideological command, is the very condition of it…*" (Žižek 1989: 43, emphasis in original).

and mastery as submission, is the condition of possibility for the emergence of the subject itself" (1995: 15, emphasis in original).[28]

In this way, becoming *chavista* was an ongoing process of self-making that gave individuals the opportunity to remould themselves and join a moral and political community. Activists traced their involvement in politics to key transformative periods in their personal lives, constructing narratives in which their own stories of political conversion were aligned with a broader effort to both reclaim lost values and forge new ones in the national body politic. As such, a political ideology shaped by moral and religious sentiment was adopted as a tool for self-realisation and redemption, with ubiquitous tropes about a passage from individualism and apathy (sin) to community-mindedness and consciousness (salvation) framing an ongoing process that all revolutionaries were encouraged to undertake. I stress here that political formation cannot be regarded as identical to religious conversion, but there are certainly striking parallels. The desire for a rupture with the past features strongly in both religious and revolutionary doctrines, while the urge to work on the self in order to bring about wider social changes also straddles both bodies of thought. Undoubtedly, the framing of a political ideology in religious language and mythological metaphor gains traction among people who already understand their worlds in such terms. Bolivarianism appeals because it both draws on religious thought as a moral base and exhibits a religiosity of its own as a source of identity.

But to what extent were these tales of personal transformation permeated by uncertainties and doubts? And what clues might this comparison between religious conversion and political formation offer to this analysis? In the next section, I turn to the question of doubt, asking how *chavistas* attempted to ensure that the principles they valued were adhered to by both themselves and their comrades.

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[28] Drawing allusions with Bourdieu's (1990) *habitus*, Butler's argument centres on the way in which belief is spawned through performance "which is then incorporated into the performance in its subsequent operations" (1995: 17). Seeking to reconcile the space between symbolism and psychoanalysis, she claims that at the heart of interpellation is a need on the individual's part to "acquit oneself" from guilt.

The question of how to build a new society out of people who have been formed by an old, corrupt order has long preoccupied revolutionary thinkers. In Che Guevara's famous treatise, *Socialism and Man in Cuba* (1969), he sought to challenge the view that socialism required the suppression of the individual in favour of the collective. Instead he emphasised how the revolutionary process necessitated each individual working on themselves in order to become socialist "New Men" [*sic*] who would incubate historical change through a revolution "in our habits and minds" (1969: 2). Guevara outlined a dialectical model of social change involving the state and the people, but warned of the great challenge of changing consciousness. The individual, he wrote, is "an unfinished product":

> The flaws of the past are translated into the present in the individual consciousness and constant efforts must be made to eradicate them. The process is two-fold: on the one hand, society acts upon the individual by means of direct and indirect education, while on the other hand, the individual undergoes a conscious phase of self-education (1969: 8).

As Olivia Harris's (2006: 70-71) work on Evangelical conversion has shown, the demand for complete ruptures with past selves is often accompanied by doubts about the extent to which individuals have truly made such breaks (see also Lazar 2008). A parallel trend was observable among the *chavistas* I worked with, where activists who had become politically active at different stages would express doubts about the commitment or authenticity of their comrades. The following exchange, which took place before a large public meeting of *chavistas* not far from El Camoruco, exemplified such uncertainties. Its chief protagonist was a young man named Jaime, who was a recent graduate of Valencia's military academy.

> Jaime: You know what they [new *chavistas*] do? They get themselves the red t-shirt and the red cap and then it's like, 'Ok what do I need to say? Ok, 'Comrade,' that's a good one. What else? 'Compatriot,' nice and easy. 'Homeland, Socialism or Death.' Ok, great, thanks for teaching me, I'm ready to get out in the street and help the cause.' That's what they're like. But when you meet them – when a *real* revolutionary meets them – there's a clash. Because *you know*. So you know what I say to these people? 'I'm not *chavista*, I'm *Bolivarian*. And if you're so revolutionary, tell me when Bolívar was born and when he died. Because if you don't know these dates, you can't tell me that you're a revolutionary.'

> Second man: And Sucre [another independence hero]? Can you tell us the dates for Sucre?

Jaime: [Looking embarrassed] Well… I don't remember right now…

Second man: I'll tell you: Born February 3rd, 1795, died June 4th, 1830.

Jaime: [Recovering his composure] *Exactly*! But the point is…

Discussions of this kind showed how *chavistas* would jostle for position and test one other in an attempt to prove their own authenticity. In this instance, Jaime embarrassed himself by attempting to establish criteria for ascertaining who a "real" revolutionary was, only to fail his own credibility test. The second man, an older individual, was able to assert his own authority with a subtle put-down that acted, in my view, as a quiet warning concerning denigrating talk about others. The presence of exchanges of this kind suggested that a culture of doubt and suspicion pervaded *chavista* perceptions of themselves and their comrades, as a search for certainty and purity accompanied their everyday political engagements.

Long-standing activists such as Rafael and Yulmi, whose political involvement as community leaders pre-dated Chávez's arrival, took on a guardian-like role within the local *chavista* milieu, assessing the relative merits of new activists and categorising them according to their political and moral credentials. Yulmi described the complexities they encountered in this process:

> In many ways this is a beautiful community, but there are a lot of internal conflicts. It's a problem with the '*chavistas*'. We have *chavistas*, low *chavistas*, medium *chavistas*, high *chavistas* and 'light' *chavistas* – and us, the revolutionaries, of whom there are very few. The problem is that many of these *chavistas* don't have the ideological orientation to help the revolution. It's all about one man [Chávez] for them, and this scares me because what happens if he goes? They [the opposition] could kill us all. There are too many people who are only involved in the communal councils and the missions because Chávez has said, 'Get involved.' There are too many people who enter without understanding things, who only want things for themselves. These people don't have the *formación*.

Concerns such as these underlined a paradoxical problem for established community leaders. On the one hand, they wanted to politicise more people and strengthen their community's ability to be a political force, which entailed bringing new individuals into the fold. On the other, they worried about the capacity of new converts to achieve the necessary "ideological orientation" and rid themselves of capitalist and individualistic vices. Undoubtedly, the circulation of a kind of "revolutionary capital"

was used to establish status and delineate hierarchies between activists (see Weber 1946; Bourdieu 1984), as arrangements in other putatively non-class settings have shown (see Humphrey 1983: 433). But such anxieties were also grounded in historic experiences that meant principles such as solidarity were deemed essential to the struggle against the opposition and the Empire. As I described above, Yulmi had lost faith in a number of her *chavista* neighhours during the 2002 coup, when she felt that the number of illnesses seemed suspiciously high when it came to confronting the Guardia Nacional. She was uncompromising in her assessments of those who had not helped out: "This [complacency] is dangerous, because we're fighting against the extreme right here, and if they gain power again we're all in danger. There are going to be hard months ahead for us and the majority of *chavistas* aren't prepared for it, they aren't prepared. This scares me." When she made such statements, Yulmi adopted a dramatic tone and, on occasions, would become almost physically confrontational as she explained her fears. Her soliloquies would conclude with a common Venezuelan gesture that involved the drawing of the index finger across the throat in a slitting motion, followed by the flicking out of the wrist with the thumb and forefinger held together. The motion creates a "click" and stipulates a sudden, final end: "And *ya*; *listo*" (done; finished). The forceful delivery of these criticisms underlined how these uncertainties centred on the extent to which people could trust the activists around them, both in terms of their underlying motivations and their ability to make the required sacrifices in times of need.

Yet although they were critical of others, activists also expressed concerns about the extent to which they could trust themselves, acknowledging how difficult it could be to shed the vices of the past. "It's really *arrecho* [tough or difficult]," said Rafael. "For years we were injected with all these *antivalores* [negative values]: selfishness, machismo, consumerism… and they don't just go away because we want them to. We have to have real cultural change if we want to build a new civilisation." As a community leader, Rafael had high expectations of himself. Most weeks he would have a series of meetings to attend, and would often be responsible for the *convocatoria* (announcement or convening) for these meetings too. Generally speaking, he would be among the first to arrive and the last to leave meetings, often providing counsel to individuals after the formal discussions had closed. There had, however, been a few occasions when he arrived late to weekend meetings after oversleeping following a heavy night's drinking the previous evening. Clearly

annoyed with himself for these misdemeanours, he then took the decision to abstain from drinking anything alcoholic the night before a meeting, even if family or friends were sharing a few beers outside his house. "If I have just one beer, we know what could happen," he explained. "I have to be an example, so it's better I don't drink anything."

Rafael's decision to stem his drinking may offer some explanatory clues as to what this discursive culture of criticism and self-doubt worked to produce. Because of the expectations that were placed on him by himself and others, he chose to change his behaviour in order to be closer to the ideal of Guevara's New Man. By sacrificing his own pleasure, he was both redeeming himself morally and setting an example for others to follow. His doubts about his capacity to be a good socialist thus led to a shift in practice as he sought to live up to Bolivarian values; self-doubt acted as a tool for action and subject formation. Such conclusions correlate with those made by Alpa Shah (2009), who argues that revolutionary subjectivities can be fashioned out of a desire for certainty in both ontological and epistemological terms. Drawing attention to the similarities between religious and revolutionary thought, she suggests that a dialectic between certainty and uncertainty can play a constitutive role in the crafting of subjectivities.[29] At the level of ontology, individuals may seek the certainty of revolutionary ideology for the clear worldview it offers, while they may look for an epistemological clarity in terms of the social relationships they can establish in revolutionary organisations. In Rafael's case, his search for certainty in Bolivarianism clearly produced doubts in himself, but these could be reworked into a project of self-making that strove to *vencer* (overcome) vices such as individualism and selfishness. As Pelkmans (2013) argues, doubt is inherently intertwined with belief, often producing agency through the subject's desire to erase or overcome uncertainty. Conviction can emerge from a perceived incompleteness within a given belief or ideology, or it can be dialogically produced through interactions with "non-believers" (2012: 29). The critical variation concerning doubt's effect on a subject is the action or non-action it comes to produce (2012: 31-32). For an individual like Rafael, the ability to turn doubts about others and himself into a productive energy suggested that

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[29] Shah cites Matthew Engelke's (2005) work on conversion in Africa, showing how ontological questions of "what is or ought to be" (Shah 2009: 273) can be central to the way that uncertainty shapes religious subjectivities.

there were particular factors that enabled the maintenance of his convictions. Much of the remainder of this thesis will explore what these factors were.

As such, doubts that *chavistas* had about their ability to cast off the polluting legacies of past polities and values worked, I contend, to produce Bolivarian "technologies of the self" (Foucault 1986, 1988) in which subjects strove to become idealised New People and struggled with the demands it placed on them. As Montoya's (2007) study of Sandinismo shows, socialist projects have a tendency to produce discourses that demand "moral exemplarity" (Anagnost 1997: 115) in their desire for a radical break with the past. Individuals adopt such ideologies precisely because notions of change and renewal are attractive, offering the chance for individual redemption and national rebirth, among a host of more specific demands. Yet the price for accepting this interpellation is that subjects must wrestle with their own perceived capacity to live up to these ideals. Montoya observes that a multiplicity of macro-structural problems in such movements run the risk of being reduced to a "matter of consciousness" (2007: 80) for each individual to contend with. Different people may respond to these demands in different ways, their capacity to turn doubt into action being shaped by the symbolic and material tools at their disposal.

The material presented here shows how the arrival of Bolivarianism in El Camoruco had a dramatic impact on the political and moral life of the *barrio*. Although not all residents recognised themselves as the subjects of Chávez's hail, many did, and this mutual recognition produced a new set of discursive and practical imperatives for the community to contend with. For those who welcomed the ideology into the intimacy of everyday lives, it offered a reservoir of political, moral and religious meanings that could be utilised to build new subjectivities and ambitions. As an indicator of the extent to which Bolivarianism had become an integral part of Rafael's *formación*, I offer this concluding example of how the ideology had come to shape his perception of himself. Having stayed up drinking one night, I was readying myself for bed when there was a knock at the door. Opening it, I found Rafael on the other side. Although we had spent most of the night talking, he was keen to tell me about a dream he had several weeks before. In the dream, Rafael discovered that two dates would be significant for Venezuela and for him personally: 2014 and 2027. In 2014 he would face a severe personal challenge that would be highly dangerous for him, and could lead to his death. If he survived this, he said,

2027 would be the year when a great struggle would take place in Venezuela, leading to a seismic shift in how its people lived. "People will sell us out, and those who are with us will have to fight to finally get want we want: true self-government."

Rafael would regularly reference his words from that night in the sober light of day, urging me to remember the dates and remember what his dream predicted. His insistence on the significance of the dream indicated that Bolivarianism provided a political and religious framing that made his everyday struggles rich with meaning and significance. As a technology of selfhood, its adoption allowed individuals to imagine themselves as actors in the same mythology as Bolívar and Chávez. All doubts and difficulties could thus be reinterpreted as part of this mythology, and as challenges that *chavistas* must overcome in their quest for transformation.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has described how Bolivarianism was adopted by residents of El Camoruco over a gradual period of time as it became a hegemonic political ideology at the national level. I have argued that it appeals to both long-standing community activists who were already involved in some form of political organising, and to newer recruits who were attracted to the call to break with past models of politics and articulate a new national identity. Focusing most closely on my hosts and principle informants, Rafael and Yulmi, I have detailed how their experience of political interpellation occurred through a series of critical "organising moments" that tied their personal histories to the rise of President Chávez. Taking their lead, I have argued that Bolivarianism appeals to many working-class Venezuelans not only for its emphasis on social justice and equality, but also for its moral message and religious tone and style. My contention is that the success of Chávez's "missionary politics" (Zúquete 2008) lies in its ability to wrap social and political demands within a mythological language that speaks to Venezuela's complicated relationship with its national identity. Because many Venezuelans believe that their oil wealth is a treasure that has been wasted, or that the national psyche has been corrupted and stultified by the circulation of petroleum rents, the call to simultaneously redeem the nation and *el pueblo* is one that appeals in both a political and personal sense. Class struggle,

understood in these terms, promises redemption for the individual and is used as a tool for expanding life horizons and social imaginaries.

It is puzzling that more studies on the parallels between religious and revolutionary logics and beliefs have not emerged, particularly given that figures such as Gramsci, Althusser and Sorel all used religion as a kind of ideal type in their analyses of ideology. In general, leftist or Marxist thinkers have avoided such comparisons, perhaps eager to ground their own epistemologies in "rationalist" orthodoxies rather than what is presumed to be mystified and alienated thought. Lancaster's ethnography (1988) is an exception to this trend, convincingly arguing that Nicaragua's popular religions evinced a "submerged class consciousness" (1988: 195) that was entirely compatible with Marxist thought. I place this chapter's conclusions in line with this argument, but have made them based more on the discursive trends I encountered among my interlocutors than "official" Bolivarian ideology. The focus on *formación*, a concept awash with religious overtones, has shown how redemption is a core part of *chavista* thought and practice, with narratives of conversion illustrating the extent to which political ideology can be used as a technology of the self.

The complicated relationship between belief, doubt and political morality is one that will feature throughout this thesis. The penultimate section to this chapter argued that uncertainty can play a key role in the formation of political subjectivities. Yet the issue that remains unanswered is what conditions or factors allow productive action to follow from doubt rather than disillusionment or paralysis? Sorel maintained that belief was critical to effective ideologies because, as he put it, "any new difficulty that comes into view is an episode in this war and must finally conclude in… victory" (1976: 200). The question that arises, then, is what factors keep this onward *lucha* (struggle) moving? How do *chavistas* maintain an "ontological firewall" (Holbraad 2011: 7) that bounces difficulties and doubts back into the revolutionary struggle? In the next chapter, I explore this question further by examining the relationship between political morality, family values and violence.

A MODEL TO FOLLOW:
FAMILY VALUES, INSECURITY AND THE SEARCH FOR SOCIAL ORDER

> Pedro: We need the death penalty here, these *malandros* [delinquents, thugs or gangsters] aren't scared of anything right now. We'd be better off just taking them all out into the street and killing them. Why can't all these *malandros* that are in prison be put to work building the new train lines? Because of 'human rights' they say. So instead they'll be out in three years after they've killed someone.

> Matt: But in the United States they have the death penalty and that hasn't stopped the levels of violent crime rising.

> Pedro: I don't know about the United States, I only know about Venezuela. And here in Venezuela it's crazy at the moment, soon it won't even be possible to leave the house. This is a rich country with a lot of potential, but the people lack culture. All this marginality, all the people in the *barrios*, they're no good for anything. I tell you what we need: we need a tsunami to come and wash everyone away and then we can start again.

INTRODUCTION

Conversations like the one above are highly ubiquitous in contemporary Venezuela. Although his words sound extreme, Pedro, a doctor, was in fact more left-leaning and socially progressive than many middle-class people I knew. He lived in a relatively large house surrounded by high walls in Los Mangos, the private *urbanización* that bordered El Camoruco, but voted for Chávez and supported many of the government's "pro-poor" initiatives. Yet having been robbed and assaulted at gunpoint as he returned home from work one night, he was now permanently in fear of the criminals he believed were living in his midst. He would make such comments in moments of frustration and anger when the conversation turned to the subject of violent crime and its seeming insolvability, but was not alone in calling for extreme measures. During my research period, a common refrain among taxi drivers was that Venezuela had a worse murder rate than Iraq, as an obsession with the number of weekly violent deaths abounded in the national media.[30] National newspapers such as

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[30] These refrains stem from reports in the national and international media that have drawn comparisons between Venezuela's murder rate and the figures for violent deaths provided by Iraq Body

Ultimas Notícias devoted special sections to "round-ups" of the weekend killings each Monday morning, while television news channels ran regular accounts of the day's most dramatic hold-ups, police raids and shoot-outs. In Valencia, *El Carabobeño* published a weekly *lista roja* (red list) that would detail the names and ages of murdered individuals and the locations of their deaths. Such *listas* contributed to the popular identification of particular *barrios* and zones as *candela* (hot or on fire), reinforcing a well-established stigma that associated the popular sectors and their residents with crime, violence and moral degeneracy. There is no hiding from the fact that Venezuela is a country with serious problems with violent crime. Yet while middle-classes and the elite can legitimately claim to be fearful of crime in the form of armed robberies or car-jackings, residents of the *barrios* have historically suffered from all four of the categories of violence outlined by Phillipe Bourgois (2001: 8): direct political violence, structural violence, symbolic violence and everyday violence. As well as having to live with the very real threat of police brutality and gang activity on a daily basis, *barrio* residents are routinely represented by middle-classes, the elite and much of the national media in the manner recounted above, where they are depicted as the source of backwardness, marginality and social anomie in the nation at large.

In this chapter, I ask how the everyday experience of *la inseguridad* (insecurity) shaped perceptions about the possibility of a socialist future and produced particular social practices in the search for social order. Building on the themes introduced in Chapter 1, I explore how residents who desired such a future were able to maintain hope in spite of the close proximity of violence. Diverging from recent work that paints a largely pessimistic view of the possibility for less violent futures in Latin America's cities, I show how social solidarity within and between kinship groups can provide powerful means for individuals and collectivities to protect themselves from violence and imagine social order without it. Indeed, politicised families such as Rafael and Yulmi's use the presence of violence in their communities as a negative archetype against which they position themselves morally. One of the effects of the continual representation of violence as a problem located in the bodies and minds of *barrio* persons is that it produces a particular discourse around ideas of

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Count (IBC). Simon Romero's (2008) *New York Times* article, "Venezuela, con más muertes violentas que Irak y Mexico," for example, compares the more than 16,000 reported violent deaths in Venezuela in 2009 to the IBC figure of 4,644 for the same year in Iraq.

moral decay and familial dysfunction. Consequently, in their search to understand violence and protect themselves and their families from it, individuals like Rafael and Yulmi have created a specific kind of political morality that attempts to reassert the importance of family values and community-mindedness in opposition to individualism and selfishness. As I will show, the persistence of violence strongly influences ideas of what constitutes a strong family, a good man and a healthy community. These values feed into the meaning that *chavistas* give to their political morality in practical terms.

In keeping with what I will call a guarded optimism concerning violence, this chapter begins with a description of the Hernández kinship group and their efforts to discursively and practically maintain a socially efficacious family unit. I then summarise recent ethnographic work on insecurity in Latin America and Venezuela, before exploring the "practices of insecurity" (Rotker 2002) that El Camoruco's residents adopted in response to the everyday fears and dangers they encountered. Probing how a hegemonic discourse about marginality is internalised by working-class Venezuelans, the following section tackles the localised forms of discrimination that circulate between different *barrio* residents. The chapter concludes by exploring masculinity, the pervasive figure of the *malandro* and the Hernández family's efforts to build and maintain a moral and political "model" for others to follow.

PORTRAIT OF A POLITICAL FAMILY

The importance of moral fibre and family values to the Hernández family, known locally as *Los Hernández*, was evident in my first encounters with Rafael's parents and siblings. Shortly after we met, his mother, María, questioned me about my religious beliefs and, apparently unsatisfied with my explanation of agnosticism, made her own position clear: "Catholicism is the best religion." María was a devout Catholic with a quietly imposing presence who, according to her children, was the driving force behind the family. She and Manuel had been part of the original land invasion that formed the *barrio* in 1969 and were still respected members of the community. Manuelito, Rafael's younger brother, felt that the family's political orientation could be traced principally to María's moral guidance. "I think originally it came from my mother," he told me. "Firstly, she knows everyone! She's loved by a

lot of people, so there's always been a connection with the community. Secondly, her religious beliefs gave us strong values and beliefs that have always stayed with us."

The centrality of mothers and grandmothers is a defining feature of what Moreno (1995) and Hurtado (1995, 2000) term the Venezuelan "popular family". Generally speaking, kinship structures in Venezuelan *barrios* are flexible and diverse, with female-headed households, multiple partners, fostering and half-siblingship all common (Peattie 1968: 45-47; Marquez 1999: 81-90).[31] In truth there is no single "ideal" family structure, and most families contain varied patterns of kinship which are often organised across a number of different households. In an earlier work on *barrio* kinship, Moreno (1989) argued that the father is very often an imprecise, fleeting and transitory figure, defined principally by absence and unreliability. It is common for Venezuelan men to have children with multiple women, but in many cases they do not contribute economically to more than one household. As a result, most *barrio* households are matrilineal and matrifocal, with the mother occupying a role that is fixed and unchanging and the relationship between her and her children forming the central unit of the household (Moreno 1995: 6-7).

Moreno distinguishes between matrilineage and matriarchy, arguing that though the mother's power is important in the Venezuelan family, it does not define it. Rather, it exists beneath a patriarchy which is "formally strong but in reality weak" (*ibid*: 6), since the couple as an institution is not the central unit through which reproduction and continuity occur (*ibid*: 7-9). Mothers create families through their children above all, with sons maintaining a structural continuity as their mother's child for their entire lives and daughters becoming "duplications" of their mothers (*ibid*: 9-17). The pervasiveness of this matrifocality is reflected by popular phrases such as *madre no hay más que una; padre puede ser cualquiera* (there is only one mother; father can be whoever) (*ibid*: 11), which pit the mother's innate centrality against the interchangeability of the father. Since many women also now work, it is often the *abuela* (grandmother) who anchors the home by looking after the youngest children as other family members come and go through periods of work, study and changing relationships. She functions as the central pivot around which the rest of the family orbits, both in a literal sense in individual households and in a broader, moral sense for larger kinship networks that stretch over several households. As one local

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[31] See also Besson 2002 for a description of similar kinship patterns in Jamaica, and Safa 2005 for a discussion of the historical legacy of matrifocality across the Caribbean.

grandmother put it to me, "Sometimes if the *abuela* isn't there, the house dies. My sister, who lived across the road, was like that in her house. When she died it was like the whole world had died."

For *Los Hernández,* María's role conformed to this pattern, but the wider family structure bore many elements of what Moreno terms the "Spanish tradition" (1995: 5), in that most of the brothers – Rafael, Chico, Antonio and José – had left to form their own nuclear families outside of the family home.[32] In keeping with the wishes of María, they had also married their partners, an increasingly uncommon trend in the *barrios* where most couples I knew co-habited without marrying. Alejandro and Morocho, the two brothers who were single, both still lived with María and Manuel, together with Manuelito, his wife Licha and their two small children. All three of Rafael's sisters – Mariana, Tania and Isabel – also lived with partners in nearby communities. Despite this wide dispersal of family members, the original family home, located about eight blocks from Rafael and Yulmi's in El Camoruco, remained the central household in the family structure. During the day, it was a busy and crowded place, with María and Licha looking after the children of several couples while their parents were out working. In the evenings, the brothers often spent several hours collecting wives, children or friends from various parts of the city, and the cars owned by Rafael, Manuelito and Antonio would be lent to other members of the family who needed them – on any given day, Rafael could arrive home in a different vehicle after an elaborate series of car-swaps with his brothers and their friends. The family would also come together regularly for birthdays and national holidays to hold *fiestas* that would often last until the sun rose, fuelled by ice buckets filled with *Polar Ice* (the beer of choice in Venezuela) and non-stop music, chiefly salsa, merengue and *reggaetón*.[33] Such events were never segregated between children and adults, and it was common for the children to still be up in the early hours, running around and playing games amidst their increasingly intoxicated parents. When the entire extended family was together, it numbered some 90 people.

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[32] Moreno distinguishes the Venezuelan "popular family" by highlighting matrilineage as its core determining feature. He contrasts it with other examples of Venezuelan kinship, such as the "Spanish tradition" and those in the Venezuelan Andean region (1995: 5). Both of these archetypes are commonly understood as being patrilineal. All translations of Spanish-language texts are my own.

[33] *Reggaetón* is a Latino variant of Caribbean dancehall music that derives from reggae and ragga. Known for its sexually provocative dancing and transgressive lyrics, it is most popular among young Venezuelans and often despised by older people.

The ethic of familial togetherness that such arrangements fostered was reinforced by terms of address in the Hernández family. Often, rather than using their given names, members of the family would address each other with their familial terms: *tio* and *tia* (uncle and aunt), *primo* and *prima* (male and female cousins) and *cuñado* and *cuñada* (brother and sister-in-law), the latter terms being applied to the partners of family members when it was clear that the couple were established (sometimes this occurred through co-habitation, other times through the birth of a child). These namings worked to reinforce the strength of the family as a unit, and together with an ongoing system of reciprocity in the shape of lifts, offerings of food and attendance at important events such as graduation ceremonies and birthdays, each person in the family was made aware that they belonged to a strong corporate group. The family supported each individual, and each individual was expected to contribute to the well-being of their kin in turn. As a large and dense support system, the Hernández kinship network was thus a highly successful social unit, its solidity providing its members with a foundation from which life projects could be launched (see Chapter 3).

As the Chávez era advanced, the Hernández family had taken up the mantle of political activism and, by the time I arrived in the community, all were committed *chavistas*. Rafael was central to this process, his infectious enthusiasm for activism beginning from a young age and rubbing off on his brothers, most of whom followed him into community leadership as he became an increasingly prominent figure in the locality. Of the seven brothers, five had become politically active in the Chávez era, with Manuelito and José working for a transport union and bus cooperative respectively, Alejandro working for a PSUV councillor at the Alcaldía (municipality) and Antonio involving himself in his local *consejo comunal* (communal council).[34] Becoming self-identified *chavistas* and socialists was, according to Rafael, a natural outcome of the *formación* they received in their upbringing. He admitted that the term "socialism" was not one he used before the arrival of the Chávez – "that language just didn't exist back then" – but argued that it fitted perfectly with the values that stemmed from María and ran right through the family. The rest of the family often echoed such sentiments, and it was evident that *Los Hernández* enjoyed celebrating their successes and extolling the virtues of love and togetherness. The regular parties

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[34] I focus more specifically on neighbourhood political practice in Chapters 4-6.

they held seemed to ritually reinforce the strength of their belief in themselves, and links between family values, love and political visions were often drawn. At one such party for Grandpa Manuel's birthday, Antonio, the eldest of the brothers, took the microphone from the DJ and called for quiet:

> When people talk about the revolution, a lot of them remember when Chávez was elected, or the attempted coup of '92, or *el caracazo*. But I'll tell you something. There was someone a long time before Chávez: Manuel Hernández. What our parents have given us, and what they've given this community: that's socialism. They taught us about values, they taught us about love, and they taught us about sharing with others. Look around you at all the people here, all the family and friends who come together so often. This is socialism, we're living it in our family right now. And those values that they taught us, they'll be passed down to our children… And it will continue to be passed down through the generations. That's where socialism is, in what we teach ourselves and our children.

Statements such as these emphasised the value of *Los Hernández*'s agency as moral and political actors. They drew attention to the family's ability to successfully craft lives for themselves, and used idioms of love to advocate a kind of "home-grown" socialism. They also possessed a mythological quality that evoked a sense of legacy, placing Grandpa Manuel on a par with the great historical events and figures of their time. In this way, the family maintained a mythology about itself that seemed to lay the groundwork for the more overtly political positions and practices that were subsequently adopted.

There is a good deal more to be said about both the Hernández family and their role in El Camoruco's political institutions, and I will address these issues in more depth in the chapters that follow. The point I wish to emphasise here is that the kinship group was underpinned by particular attitudes and values concerning self-sacrifice, mutual aid and a general ethic of community-mindedness. As a proud and successful *barrio* family who valued the moral labour – the *formación* – that went into making individuals, *Los Hernández* were almost dogmatic about the importance of family. Much of this dogmatism, I suggest, was heightened by the sceptre of gang violence that hung over their community, and the fear that their children could be pulled into it without the right guidance. Above all, the ideal of family worked as a pre-emptive counter to violence, and to the wider disruption of social order that came with it.

For Latin American cities with high and rising levels of everyday violence, it is now the common view in both academic circles and popular imaginaries that a close proximity to violence has become an endemic and defining characteristic of urban life, perhaps even "the principle problem in everyday life" (Koonings & Kruift 2007: 4) for the urban poor, who are less able to shield themselves from violence than middle-class and elite city-dwellers. Clearly a multifaceted phenomenon, I take the category "urban violence" to include all of the following: violent crimes such as robberies, car-jackings, kidnappings and murders; violence committed by the police against citizens; violence committed by state or para-state forces; and everyday physical aggression such as domestic violence or gang rivalries. Statistics on violence are notoriously unreliable due to under-reporting, discrepancies in the recording of different types of violence (eg. homicide is more likely to be recorded than domestic violence) and sabotage of evidence in the case of police/state involvement, as Moser (2004: 7), Rotker (2002: 11) and Samet (2011) have pointed out. However, for countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, Colombia and Venezuela, the general trend in all the available data points to either a rise in the number of violent acts or the continuance of already high rates, particularly in urban areas (Concha-Eastman 2002; Moser 2004; Briceño-León 2008).[35] The prevalence of violence is not uniform or evenly distributed across Latin American cities and countries – homicide rates remain low in countries such as Uruguay, Costa Rica and Chile, for example – but, particularly in parts of the continent with medium to high rates of poverty and high levels of urbanisation, more people are more likely to suffer violence than they were two decades ago.[36]

Even harder to measure than the actual figures for violent criminal acts, but no less socially pervasive, is the sense of fear and insecurity that dominates public discourses and the everyday experience of urban life in much of Latin America. In

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[35] Robert Samet (2011) argues that the Venezuelan government's reticence about providing homicide statistics may actually lead to an exaggeration of the problem in the national media, precisely because the data is so unreliable.

[36] Briceño-León (2008: 20), for example, divides Latin American countries into four categories of violence according to homicide rates for every 100,000 people. Less than 8.8 is deemed to be a low level of violence (Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Uruguay and Paraguay), between 8.8 and 17.6 a medium level (Peru, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Dominican Republic and Panama), between 17.6 and 26.4 a high level (Brazil and Mexico) and above 26.4 a very high level (Colombia, El Salvador, Honduras and Venezuela).

places where gang warfare and street crime are deemed commonplace, violence and the talk of it has come to dominate the way that people imagine their cities and organise their lives, and the way that urban planning and governance is enacted in response. The effect that cultures of insecurity have had on urban spaces in both hemispheres of the Americas has been documented by Davis (1990), Caldeira (2000), Low (2001) and Guano (2002; 2004), who point to the profusion of shopping malls, gated communities and private security measures since the 1980s, as those who can afford it seek to insulate themselves from the perceived risk of crime in "urban jungles" thought to be increasingly out of control. Closely linked to such developments is the association of poor neighbourhoods and poor people with criminality. Low points out that residents of gated communities in the US often display a heightened fear of crime, despite statistics consistently showing that lower-income residents are far more likely to be victims of it (2001: 48). She argues that gated communities deepen social prejudices by encoding class and race segregation into the built environment and sharpening the fear of the "other" beyond the walls. Rodgers (2007) contends that such trends must be understood as indelibly political, deploying the term "urbicide" to suggest that the spatial division of cities into secure and insecure zones should be read as the most recent incarnation of class warfare in Latin America. In the case of Managua, "fortified networks" of the rich – homes, offices, bars, restaurants, malls and airports – are connected by high-speed roads that keep elites away from the majority population of slum-dwellers (Rodgers 2007: 11), while violent state-sponsored police patrols in the slums precipitate existing patterns of gang warfare and spatially reinforce the city's social and economic divisions (see also Goldstein 2004). As both the victims and perpetrators of everyday violence (McIlwaine & Moser 2007: 117), Latin America's urban poor thus find themselves and their "no-go" neighbourhoods routinely stigmatised (Koonings & Kruijt 2007: 4) and cast as the places in which violence is principally born, cultivated and enacted.

Since the late 1980s Venezuela's *barrios* have become synonymous with high and rising levels of violence, and the country now finds itself in the unenviable position of having some of the highest homicide rates in the world. According to the most recent report, 19,336 Venezuelans suffered violent deaths in 2011, an average of 53 a day at a rate of 67 murders for every 100,000 people – higher than both

Colombia and Mexico (OVV 2011).[37] Violent street crimes such as muggings and car-jackings are also regarded as everyday threats by Venezuelans of all social classes, a fear that is starkly manifested in the deserted evening centres of cities like Valencia, where residents stay off the streets after dark and only venture outside of their neighbourhoods in cars. A shopping mall culture that first emerged in the 1970s has now become the norm for middle-classes and the wealthy, with the abandonment of traditional street markets such as Sabana Grande in Caracas and Avenida Lara in Valencia in favour of high security and "high end" shopping malls in wealthier parts of the city. This decline in shared public space – what Briceño terms the "loss of the city" (2007: 96) – is further evident in the huge growth of private security firms employed by the wealthy. According to Magalay Sanchez, in 1997 $777,901,695 was spent on the purchase of arms for use by private security companies, and by 2001 Venezuela had as many as 200,000 operative private security guards (Sanchez 2005: 17-18). Amplified by a private media who routinely sensationalise violence and precipitate fear in an effort to destabilise the Chávez government (Golinger 2005), contemporary urban life in Venezuela is characterised by the overwhelming predominance of *la inseguridad* in people's everyday imaginings, narratives and decision-making.

To date, the bulk of the literature on this phenomenon has attempted to explain the causes of violence in socio-economic and political-legal terms. Many point out that its trajectory seems closely tacked to the consolidation of neoliberalism as a political and economic package from the mid-1980s onwards. In line with explanations elsewhere (see Auyero 1999; 2000), Venezuelan scholars have highlighted the link between rising poverty and rising violent crime in the neoliberal era, citing the unavailability of secure employment, the breakdown of family structures and an increased reliance on the informal economy as key factors that pushed people into criminal and violent activities from the 1980s onwards (Briceño-Leon 2007; Briceño-Leon, Ávila & Camardiel 2008). As in many parts of the world, the proliferation of the drug trade has played a key role in shaping patterns of criminality in Venezuela, transforming ad hoc street gangs into sophisticated criminal organisations who compete over territories, profits and reputations (see Rodgers 2006a).

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[37] The homicide rates for Colombia and Mexico are 32 and 14 for every 100,000 people respectively.

A number of commentators have argued that the sharp rise in violence in the early 1990s was also strongly linked to *el caracazo*, as a crisis of legitimacy for the Venezuelan state was manifested in a total lack of faith in the establishment, helping produce what Pedrazzi and Sánchez (1990) called a "culture of urgency" in the streets that mirrored a crisis for Venezuelan democracy off them (Lopez-Maya and Lander 2004). Ugalde et al (1994) similarly argue that *el caracazo* was a demonstration of the power of violence, legitimising its use and undermining the state's claim to impartiality and transparency (see also Smilde 2007: 62). With the state's use of violence against the urban poor still evident in the police "cleansing" *operativos* that target street children and young men in particular (Duque & Muñoz 1995; Márquez 1999), such assessments tally with those made by Caldeira (2000) in the Brazilian context. She argues that violence directed by the state against its citizens concurrently works to legitimise it as an effective tool of domination and de-legitimise official recourses to justice. Because police forces in Venezuela are known to supply weapons and drugs to gangs, *barrio* residents often view the security arm of the state as, to borrow Dennis Rodgers's phrase, merely another gang (see Caldeira 2000: 130-210 and 339-375; Rodgers 2006b).

Figure 10: "Guns prohibited in public spaces," at a local social mission (Matt Wilde)

PRACTICES OF INSECURITY IN EL CAMORUCO

One of my great fears in writing about violence, and my reason for linking it to family values and social order, is that I am falling prey to voyeurism of the exotic – what Bourgois terms a "pornography of violence" (2001: 18). Having wrestled significantly with whether or not to focus on violence in an ethnography about political change, I eventually resolved to include it for several reasons. Firstly, fear of violence was a defining feature of my own experience of life in Venezuela, and came to intimately shape my understanding of what *la inseguridad* actually feels like as a quotidian reality in one's body and mind. After being mugged four times in my first six months in Venezuela, including at knifepoint and gunpoint, I suffered from extreme paranoia and fear on a daily basis, feeling that I was permanently conspicuous and in danger and frantically profiling urban spaces and people as I moved through the city. Like Dennis Rodgers (2006a: 6), I considered either abandoning or radically altering my fieldwork, and probably only pushed ahead thanks to the warmth and openness of my friends in El Camoruco. Secondly, violence was undoubtedly the most common topic of conversation among Venezuelans of all backgrounds, with horror stories of robberies, kidnappings and murders rebounding on a daily basis throughout every strata of society. For an anthropologist, attempting to make sense of such a pervasive subject seemed to be an unavoidable challenge, particularly given that this culture of insecurity clearly plays into people's political imaginings in significant ways. As such, by coming to see my own daily battle with fear as an important insight into my informants' lives, I came to the conclusion that understanding how the residents of El Camoruco structured their lives in response to violence was a vital part of understanding how they made their worlds practically, morally and politically. In this approach I follow Kovats-Bertet (2002), who writes:

> [V]iolence is not separable from kinship, or market activities, or language, or any other social relations that from a distance may not appear to be modified by it. Here we see the importance of considering the fears and anxieties of the anthropologist on the ground; as a functioning agent in the local culture of violence (that is, as a subjective rather than an objective agent), the ethnographer is obligated to demonstrate how the pervasion [*sic*] of violence modifies her or his own field relations and how similar modifications extend to those ordinary relations of the local community as well (2002: 217).

Susan Rotker (2002) has argued that rather than simply describing how people "live with fear", more attention needs to be paid to the long-term modifications that

are made to lives when violence is an ever-present danger. She suggests that life in violent places is characterised by the modification of habits and relationships, calling such adaptations "practices of insecurity" (2002: 12-13) that permanently alter people's everyday decision-making and sociality. In El Camoruco it did not take me long to become acquainted with the talk of violence and its pervasive effects on everyday life. Shortly after arriving in the community I met Guillermo, the boyfriend of Rafael's daughter Cristina, who during our first meeting told me about his friend who had been shot dead a month before after being caught on the wrong side of the border between El Camoruco and its neighbouring *barrio*, José Felix Ribas (usually called José Felix by locals). A war between the gangs in the two neighbourhoods had raged sporadically for around a decade and Guillermo's friend had become involved in what is known as a *culebra* (snake) due to his association with members of José Felix's gang. *Culebras* are essentially blood feuds in which retribution killings are carried out to avenge the murder of a connected party. Anyone connected to the individual who carried out the act can be killed in response, which often leads to a "string of deaths and blood vengeance" (Ferrándiz 2009: 45) as extended personal networks seek revenge and draw even those not involved in gang life into *cadenas* (chains) that have no logical end and can claim numerous lives (Márquez 1999: 115; Ferrándiz 2004: 128; Smilde 2007: 64). Concerned that I had arrived at a dangerous time, I asked Guillermo if the situation was at a particularly tense point. "No, things are more or less *tranquilo* [calm] right now. It's just that some people still have *peos* [grievances] with each other," he replied.[38] He explained that the war between the two gangs had been at its worst about a year before I arrived. Since then things had calmed down significantly, with the murder of his friend the first in a while. Some people I spoke to locally felt that the arrival of education missions and improved employment options in recent years had led to this relative cooling, suggesting hopefully that young men were perhaps finding alternative ways of making a living. Others, such as Guillermo, rejected the optimism of such claims and put forward a more grim Hobbesian explanation: "It's because they all killed each other."

This recent history of gang violence and its continuing proximity had clearly left its mark on local people. Many described how El Camoruco had become notorious during the worst spell of the war, so much so that "the taxis wouldn't come

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[38] The term *peo* is slang that litereally means "fart" but is also used to mean arguments, admonishments or resentments that exist or have taken place between people.

here," as several people put it. Others recounted specific memories of shootings that had taken place, describing in detail the gun battles they had witnessed first-hand, or listing those they had known who had been killed over the years. Aware of the ease with which *peos* and *culebras* could emerge, many young men like Guillermo who were not involved in gang life still chose to own guns (Guillermo kept his in the glove compartment of his car), believing it was better to have the option "for self-defence" than to travel unarmed and find themselves defenceless. Although an understandable position to take, the obvious downside of this was that drunken arguments between people who were not gang members could easily end in tragedy if someone chose to reach for their gun. After being woken up one night by gunshots emanating from a nearby settlement of *ranchos* a ten minute walk away, I was informed in the morning that the shooting, which led to a fatality, had taken place between two men after a drunken argument over a girl at a party.[39]

Street crime, particularly in the form of armed hold-ups or car-jackings, was also a major worry for El Camoruco's residents. Since the *camionetas* (small buses) that took people to and from work often suffered from hold-ups in the evenings, and since people did not like walking outside of their own *barrio* after dark, concerns with safety pervaded the most mundane of everyday decisions: how to get home without a car from jobs, appointments or social engagements elsewhere in the city; whether or not a nearby party would be safe; when to travel at weekends; which group of youths were hanging around on the corner. My own familiarity with such concerns became particularly acute after I was robbed by a youth on a bike as I returned from buying a *perro caliente* (hot dog) from the small plaza near to Los Mangos. The robbery occurred on the border with José Felix and was particularly terrifying for my assailment's use of territorial gang language and his indication that he was about to pull out a gun: "Don't you know there's a *culebra* on? Are you from José Felix or El Camoruco? Where's your *plata* [money]? I *know* you've got money." Friends later explained that this territorial language had been used precisely to frighten me into handing over my phone and money, while the "knowing" I had money line referred to my colouring and appearance, since a *gringo* "must have cash".

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[39] A rough indicator of the levels of violence in the immediate vicinity can be gleaned from the fact that in my relatively short time in El Camoruco (15 months), two people known to me were murdered. Only one of these was known to be involved in a gang.

The result of this experience was that I began to carry out my own "practices of insecurity" with a more fervent discipline than before, as well as adding to them with my own accommodations that were perhaps unique to a *catíre* (light-skinned and fair-haired) foreigner. Among the many such practices I developed were the following: buying myself a baseball cap and attempting to disguise my appearance whenever I left the house; refusing to answer my mobile phone on public transport for fear that my accent would give me away; never travelling on *camionetas* after 6pm; and after the robbery described above, never once walking unaccompanied into another *barrio* other than "my own" (El Camoruco), even during the day. I also suffered from a number of panic attacks in parts of Valencia I felt could be unsafe, and began using taxis more and more. On weekend days when I wanted a break from research, I would take the bus all the way to the salubrious north of Valencia and spend hours walking around exclusive shopping malls like Sambíl – places I would normally avoid at all costs – simply because I felt safe there. Although some of these practices were certainly specific to the fact that I was a white foreigner, I take the view that my own experience of fear was essentially an exaggerated version of what my informants lived with every day.

For locals, practices of insecurity in relation to the recent history of localised gang warfare took the form of a routinisation of suspicion that was exemplified in moments of mutual mistrust that would often occur when unknown vehicles pulled up outside *barrio* houses. The residents of a given house, who would usually sit outside in family groups for much of the warm evenings, would become tense if they did not recognise the vehicle – drive-by shootings had been a common feature of the gang war, and since most car windows are tinted in Venezuela people had no way of knowing who was inside the car. Equally, if those inside the vehicle were unsure of whether or not they had the right house, they would hesitate to lower the window, fearful that they could be in danger without a *conocido* (known person) to identify them. What could occur as a result was a mutually mistrustful "stand-off" situation in which a car would pull up, keep its windows raised and make those outside the house nervous. In turn, the residents would not approach the car, and might even (as I witnessed on one occasion) go to reach for guns kept inside the house or call for help from nearby friends. Such nervous stand-offs would only be resolved when someone from within the car eventually wound down the window and identified themselves and the person they were looking for. If they were recognised immediately or known

as a *conocido*, the tension would instantly lift, replaced with warm handshakes, jokes and the offer of beers and a seat.

Encounters like these demonstrated how violence and the threat of it had amplified the importance of knowing and being known in the *barrio*. The centrality of this feature to social life was made clear to me during the first month of my stay in El Camoruco, when Rafael dedicated hours of his time to driving me around his friends and family to ensure that I was known by a sufficient number of people for it to be safe to walk around on my own. This practice was then repeated by numerous friends and acquaintances, who would introduce me to someone and then emphasise to me sternly, with a forefinger pointed to their eye, that it was *para conocer* (in order to know). This trait, which I came to understand as almost universal among *barrio* residents, attested to the importance of being known, being seen and being alert.[40] Although my appearance made me particularly conspicuous, Venezuelans visiting *barrios* other than their own were also acutely aware of the dangers of being an outsider. On occasions when I accompanied my informants to neighbouring *barrios* on foot (sometimes the greater safety of cars was not an option), their friends or contacts from those communities would meet us at the border of their *barrio* and escort us to and from our destination. Safety was thus intimately linked to being with a known person from that community. Darwin, a local youth, explained the extent of this territorialism to me: "If you're in a *barrio* and people don't recognise you, word will get around. It's not just the *chamos* [boys] though, even the *viejas* [old women] will say, '*El no es de aquí*,' [He's not from here] and within minutes everyone will know [that an outsider is present]." Evoking the "streetwise" behaviour described by Anderson (1990), these localised practices of vigilance showed how the ever-present potential for violence had increased the value of being known and augmented the capacity for suspicion of outsiders.

LOCAL "OTHERS" AND THE DANGER OF TALKING

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[40] *Ojo*, literally meaning "eye", is often used as a synonym for "pay attention" or "stay alert".

The territorialism that came to accompany these practices of insecurity could also manifest itself in neighbourhood rivalry and prejudice, as residents constructed a kind of localised alterity in an attempt to situate their community favourably in relation to others. Most *barrio* residents are intensely proud of their communities and, whilst admitting that violence is a widespread problem, will almost always compare their own *barrio* favourably to others in terms of danger and dysfunctionality. Although people in El Camoruco would admit that there were problems with drugs, gangs and familial breakdown, they would also claim that in general terms it was *sano* (clean or healthy) or *tranquilo* in comparison with other *barrios*, which were labelled *peligrosísmo* (very dangerous) or *candela*. Guillermo argued that Miguel Peña's *barrios* became gradually worse the further south one travelled. "Here the *barrios* are older so they're not too bad – there are families and people know each other. But the new *barrios* further to the south, the *invasiones*… *¡coño!* Round there the kids walk around with their guns out openly. They're crazy." Taussig (1987) observed that the construction of some kind of other is a way of fashioning reality through a projected *fiction* that justifies action in relation to that imagined other. Othering takes place precisely in the opaque space between truth and fiction, in which the very act of unknowing enables the construction of a specific reality that permits or generates certain actions. The key feature to this, he argues, "lies in the way it creates an uncertain reality out of fiction, giving shape and voice to the formless form of the reality in which an unstable interplay of truth and illusion become a phantasmic social force" (1987: 121).[41] Following Taussig, the point I emphasise here is that this derogatory talk about other *barrios*, which seemed to be based largely on hearsay, rumour and a wilful *unknowing*, reproduced the same discriminatory stereotypes that circulated about *barrios* as a whole among the middle-classes and the elite. Ferrándiz (2003: 117) argues that such statements are evidence of an inability to shake the hegemonic stigmatisation cast upon *barrio* residents in mainstream discourses surrounding violence, poverty and marginality. Much the same could be observed in El Camoruco: instead of challenging such stigmas outright, they were shifted along to

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[41] Taussig's descriptions centre in particular on the way the imagined fears of cannibalism that European colonists projected onto Amazonian Indians led to the creation of a "culture of terror" that laid the basis for capitalist extraction in the Amazon. As he puts it, "Far from being trivial daydreams indulged in after work was over, these stories and the imagination they sustained were a potent political force without which the work of conquest and of supervising rubber gathering could not have been accomplished. What is crucial to understand is the way these stories functioned to create through magical realism a culture of terror that dominated both whites and Indians" (1987: 121).

the nearest others, reproducing the same hierarchies that ranked different communities according to how violent, dysfunctional or marginal they were perceived to be.

I was particularly struck by this tendency on one occasion, when a teenage boy cycled past Rafael and Yulmi's house towing a trailer behind him. Inside the trailer was a ghetto-blaster blaring out loud *vallenato* music. *Vallenato* is a form of traditional Colombian music strongly characterised by accordions and lyrics that lament the woes of life. In Venezuela, partly because of an association of Colombians with the cocaine trade, the music has come to be strongly associated with gangs and violence – many people I spoke to claimed to hate the music because of what they felt it represented. "You don't see that much in El Camoruco. The *muchachos* here are usually more sophisticated than that," Yulmi commented as the boy trundled past. When I pushed her on this remark she explained that the more recently settled communities and *invasiones* were more typical of this kind of (apparently) unsophisticated behavior than well-established *barrios* like El Camoruco. "You know, there the communities aren't as strong. There are newer people, lots of Colombians and *marginales* [marginals]." Her use of the very same term – *marginal* – that is so commonly employed by middle- and upper-class Venezuelans to dehumanise *barrio* residents as a whole seemed to tally with Ferrándiz's observation: Venezuela's urban poor themselves struggle with this symbolic form of violence and at times reproduce it in an effort to differentiate themselves from individuals or communities that are deemed worse than their own.

Although I heard plenty of statements similar to Yulmi's throughout fieldwork, hers seemed particularly telling because it was so at odds with her usual rhetoric. As a lifelong community activist and self-avowed socialist, she would normally use romantic collectivist terms such as *los pobres* (the poor) or *el pueblo* (the people) to describe *barrio* residents as a whole, yet here she was espousing divisive, insulting stereotypes and even arguing that young men in her *barrio* were more "sophisticated" than those in others. I suggest that this discursive contradiction revealed two key elements concerning violence, marginality and representation. Firstly, it showed just how pervasive the discriminatory mainstream discourse on violence and marginality was, so much so that *barrio* residents often reproduced it in spite of themselves and in spite of their avowed commitment to class struggle. Secondly, it indicated that fear of violence – and indeed of "marginality" as a whole – was such a serious concern that it could override socialist "political correctness" even

in someone as thoughtful and politicised as Yulmi. Perhaps the struggle to build alternatives to the threat of social decay needed to set itself against something identifiable. Certainly, seen in this light, we might understand her reaction to the *chamo* on the bicycle as a defensive reaction to the perceived *contagiousness* of "marginality", an attempt to keep it separate from her world for fear that her family and community could be encompassed by it.

This point was underlined by a further element that characterised the practice of localised alterity in El Camoruco: that it was present *within barrios* with as much as it was *between* them. Although my respondents claimed to feel comfortable in their own *barrio* and, generally-speaking, were not afraid of walking around during the day, it was also known that particular streets – and particular houses – were places to be treated with caution. Archetypical of this in El Camoruco was the so-called *lugar de la banda* (literally "place of the gang"), which was a large house not far from the *cancha* that was known to be the local gang's headquarters. Occupying an important place in the local imaginary, the house was said to be the principle place in which drugs and weapons were sold. Prostitution was also rumoured to take place there. With small slats for windows that were covered with bars, it looked fairly delapidated from the outside and during the day often appeared to be uninhabited, except for the occasional sight of a young man poking his head out of the front door. At night there were often large groups seated outside and people would come and go from within. When local people spoke about it they often did so in hushed tones and would refrain from mentioning it explicitly, instead gesturing by moving their heads in its general direction and saying opaquely, "*por alli abajo*" (down around there). Rumour had it that there were as many as 28 people living there, of various ages. Carla, Rafael and Yulmi's neighbour, would whisper and check nervously that no-one was listening before telling me about the house: "It's *horrible*. There are terrible things that go on there. There are little girls sleeping with little boys, drugs, prostitution – all kinds of bad things. It's *horrible*."

Comments like this highlighted how the house served as a symbolic locus for what were termed *antivalores* (anti-values), which meant anything deemed to produce negative values in the community. For mothers and grandmothers in particular who saw it as their role to produce good moral values and the right kind of *formación*, the house was a presence that seemed to emit immorality and delinquency almost as a force that could suck young people in. By talking about the house and listing all of its

alleged damaging and immoral practices (violence, drugs, prostitution, abuse), women such as Carla produced an identifiable set of signifiers that could be cast as the exact *opposite* of the kind of values and practices that needed to be promoted.

It was noticeable, however, that many people preferred to talk about the gang as a collective entity or a generalised phenomenon than about the individuals themselves. This tendency frustrated me during fieldwork, since I had hoped to find out more about the gang and its relationship with the rest of the community. Surely these gang members, I presumed, must be someone's children? Surely other young people from the community would know them? Often my questions about the gang or the house were met with elusive responses such as this from Carla: "There are whole families here who sell drugs and who are *malandros*, but you can never be sure who it is so you have to be careful. We don't know who else is behind them. There may be others who aren't in the house who we don't know about." The likely conclusion from such statements was that women like Carla had a good idea of what was going on with the local gang but preferred not to say. Certainly, the allusions to rumoured links between the gang house and the wider criminal underworld that might lie "behind" it – perhaps drugs cartels, the police or more powerful gangs – would explain people's fears of talking about it. Yet whilst such a response might be expected from an older member of the community, younger people too clouded their responses in opacity. Orlando and Jaime, two local teenagers who had identified the individual who robbed me near José Felix, almost certainly knew who lived in the house and suggested as much. But again, in conversation they preferred to leave things unclear, albeit by describing the house with their own morbid adolescent relish: "El Camoruco is getting really *candela* again and that house is where they all meet and live. And they're growing and growing every day," said Orlando ominously.

It is highly likely that many of El Camoruco's residents were reluctant to talk specifically about the gang for a host of reasons. Among these would be uncertainty about my status and whether I could be trusted, fear for themselves should the wrong people find out, loyalty to their *barrio* – those revealed as *sapos* (informers) were considered beneath contempt – and a general sense that it was simply better to avoid talking explicitly about that world and those involved in it, particularly in a community that still lived in fear of *culebras*. Undoubtedly, as Rodgers found in the early stages of his fieldwork in the *barrios* of Managua (2001: 8), this is a common trend in Latin American shantytowns, where people are well aware of the dangers in

their own neighbourhoods. As I discuss below, there is thus an important distinction to be made between what the *malandro* or gang member means as a signifier and the actual lives of the young men and boys who are known to *barrio* residents.

KEEPING SILENT AND KEEPING SAFE

In truth, it was not only the opacity of my friends and neighbours that made it difficult to find out more about the gang, but also my host family's desire to keep me out of harm's way and my own reluctance to have any further encounters with guns or robberies, which had already seriously dampened my ethnographic adventurousness. Because of the restrictions that both the family and I placed on my movement, I was unlikely to acquire more detailed information on the gang without going outside of the relatively safe world I had built for myself in El Camoruco, which orbited principally around Rafael and Yulmi's extended family, a fairly large network of *chavista* activists and a handful of other households and close friends who were similarly protective of me. After the robbery on the border with José Felix, Rafael spelled out to me why my safety could never be completely assured: "There are people here who don't even know why they're poor, but who know if they see you, *catíre*, it means *gringo*. They know that when they see the white skin, the blue eyes, the yellow hair, they know to reject it because it means *gringo*. And if you're *gringo* then you *must have money*."

In many senses, my position in Rafael and Yulmi's household was not dissimilar to that of their children, who also faced serious restrictions on where they could go, when and with whom. There were often tensions surrounding these restrictions, leading to stress and anxiety for Rafael and Yulmi as they attempted to find a balance between allowing their children to experience life for themselves and keeping them as safe as possible. One such occasion was Eduardo's sixteenth birthday, when Rafael and Yulmi organised a party at their house and allowed him to invite a group of friends over. Eduardo had wanted to attend a party taking place not far from the *cancha*, where it was known that the local gang would be present. Rafael and Yulmi had forbidden him (and me) from going because they considered it dangerous, and instead organised the party at home where he would be allowed to drink in the company of close friends, family and his parents. Despite his parents

allowing him and his friends to drink, it was clear to me that Eduardo was frustrated by the tameness of the party and embarrassed to have to be "supervised" by his parents. Perhaps eager to impress his new girlfriend, he, Cristina and his group of friends eventually snuck out whilst Rafael and Yulmi were distracted talking politics in the back yard. Although tempted to join them, I chose not to go against Rafael and Yulmi's word and stayed behind, a little frustrated by how limited my life in El Camoruco was. When Yulmi realised what had happened, I feigned ignorance and watched as she reached for her mobile phone at the front gate. "I've told him before: *never* with the gangs," she said as she tried unsuccessfully to reach Eduardo on his mobile. "You *can't* get involved with them."

Terrifyingly, a few hours later several gunshots rang out and news filtered through that three young men had been killed at the party in question. Eduardo was still not answering his phone and Yulmi was clearly frantic with worry. Finally, he returned home shaken and sheepish and explained that a car had pulled up suddenly and those inside – reportedly a rival gang – had opened fire on a number of youths from El Camoruco. Eduardo, Cristina and his friends had run off as the shooting began and taken refuge at his girlfriend's house. Clearly furious and terrified, Rafael gave Eduardo a long lecture on the dangers of attending parties of that kind, before joining me for a beer after Eduardo had gone to bed. "Maybe it's a good thing they saw that. They've seen for themselves how dangerous it can be," he remarked. A short while later, primarily in his capacity as a community leader but perhaps also to remind me of these dangers, Rafael asked me to accompany him to the scene of the shooting. As we pulled up outside the house in which the party had taken place, he wound down his windows to speak to the local youths gathered outside and pointed to the blood-splattered sheets covering three corpses in the road. The scene attested to the realness of his and Yulmi's fears for their children.

If local people knew far more than what they told me about the local gang, their reluctance to speak in explicit terms could perhaps be explained by a scene such as this. I have no doubt that plenty of people knew exactly who lived in the *lugar de la banda* and exactly what was going on there, but those closest to me chose to distance me from it in the same way they did for their children – through avoidance, restriction and refusal to even risk implicating oneself in a *peo* or *culebra* through careless talk. Fear of violence and the gangs, then, was not simply fear for the physical safety of oneself and one's loved ones, but also a fear that one's son or

daughter could be pulled into that world of blood vengeance and *antivalores*. Practices of insecurity were thus not only practical modifications concerning everyday safety, but also moral markers that were set down in order to stake out the limits of where one could tread in both word and deed. In this way, the "othering" of individuals and communities was an attempt to construct symbolic boundaries between a world deemed violent and immoral and a world of family and community, sometimes by falling back on the very language that paints all *barrio* residents as backward, deviant and violent. Yet this distancing in the discursive realm belied the fact that such a separation was ultimately impossible: violence and its causes and effects had already been woven into the fabric of daily life at the family and community level. As I discuss in the next section, the attempt to build and maintain alternatives to gang life heightened the importance of family as a moral and economic ideal, and made masculinity a site of struggle in the battle to establish social order.

MALANDROS, MASCULINITY AND SOCIAL ORDER

The importance of the *malandro* as a pervasive figure in the local imaginary was made clear to me at a Hernandez family party a few weeks into fieldwork. Surrounded by a cluster of young boys, aged approximately between six and twelve, I was fielding a barrage of questions about my home country and what it was like. Having translated the body parts from Spanish into English and explained what I could about the cold, the Queen and Manchester United, I was caught off guard by the next question, put to me by a boy of no more than eight: "Do you have *malandros* in England? We have lots of *malandros* here." The conversation then continued in the same vein, as the other boys chipped in: "Do you know where the *malandros* are in El Camoruco?" said one. "My *papa* knows the *malandros*. He's even got a gun," interjected another. "I saw a *malandro* on the corner yesterday," commented a third. If the excitable chatter of children tell us something about issues that may be prominent in a community's collective imaginary, the stories of my newfound friends seemed significant. As a figure who appeared to be both alluring and terrifying, the *malandro* seemed to be an organising signifier for a whole host of issues that shaped *barrio* life: poverty, violence, drug abuse and family breakdown; but also sexual adventure, *machismo*, consumption and hedonism.

I found no way of translating the term *malandro* exactly, but perhaps its closest equivalents in English would be expressions such as thug, delinquent, gangster or, in the colloquialism of British inner-cities, "rudeboy". Part of the difficulty in finding an appropriate translation stems from the flexibility of the term's use. Describing men or boys who are mischievous, cunning, dangerous, roguish or criminal, a *malandro* can be anything from a young boy on the corner who smokes marijuana to a heavily armed narco-trafficker involved in serious organised crime. In my experience, the most common definition is of a young man involved in gang life who carries a gun and is likely to either consume or sell drugs (or both), particularly marijuana and crack cocaine. Presumed to carry out street robberies and hold-ups, *malandros* are likely to wear baseball caps, sports t-shirts or vests and expensive branded trainers. They speak in the languid and coarse *calé* street slang and have a fondness for cars, motorbikes, women and fast living. In the mainstream national imaginary the *malandro* is thus, as Ferrándiz puts it, a "social, psychological and cultural mugshot of a stereotypical thug of the shantytowns" (2003: 116) who seems to encapsulate the very worst of neoliberal *barrio* life: hyper-individualism, immorality, ruthless materialism and a destructive *machismo* that fuses toxically with guns, alcohol and narcotics.

In a number of accounts that attempt to move beyond this mugshot by drawing on life histories and testimonies from current and former *malandros*, scholars have drawn attention to the importance of earning *respeto* (respect) for young Venezuelan men, describing how the need to be respected in a socio-economic environment that provides few means to achieve self-worth has made gang life into a viable, if treacherous and usually unfulfilled, lifestyle choice (Duque & Muñoz 1995; Márquez 1999; Zubillaga & Briceño-Leon 2001; Ferrándiz 2003; Zubillaga 2007; Briceño-Leon 2008; Ferrándiz 2009; Moreno 2008, 2009). In the absence of reliable employment that conforms to traditional masculine roles, becoming a gang member in various parts of the world has been understood as a way of earning fast money by selling drugs or carrying out robberies, a way of being protected and embedded socially, and a way of accessing consumer capitalism in the neoliberal era (Bourgois 2003; Rodgers 2006a; Venkatesh 2008). Zubillaga and Briceño-Leon (2001) make the interesting point that gangs evidence the attempted cultivation of two kinds of fragmented and at times contradictory masculine identities in the neoliberal context. One registers with the traditional Latino model of the man as the self-sufficient

breadwinner of the household, whilst the other fits with a more recent identity aligned with conspicuous consumption, individualism and hedonism. This merging of "ultra-traditional" and "hypermodern" (2001: 46) models of masculinity has for them produced a perverted version of the Latino patriarch, replacing a man's ties to his family with ties to his gang. Disembedded from family responsibilities, desirous of quick thrills and easy wealth, the *malandro* thus embodies the very opposite of Chávez's community-minded model Bolivarian. He instead evokes the self-identification of Bourgois's crack dealers in Harlem, who style themselves as "the ultimate rugged individualists, braving an unpredictable frontier where fortune, fame, and destruction are all just around the corner, and where the enemy is ruthlessly hunted down and shot" (Bourgois 2003: 326).

In Guillermo's case, almost all of his closest friends from high school and his *barrio* were classed as *malandros*, and most – in fact, "all except for one" – were either dead or in prison. He described how close he had been to entering gang life, pointing out that his friends would share their money from robberies or drugs sales with him and others. "One friend of mine would go round robbing houses with a gun, and then he'd come back and share the money and we'd go to all the parties. He was a *malandro* but he was *pana* [a very close and trusted friend], and at the weekends we'd go round to his house and smoke and play Nintendo." This kind of story is common in many of the accounts cited above, which document the codes of loyalty and protection that have traditionally existed between *malandros* and non-gang members in their own communities. Such codes dictate that whilst a *malandro* may rob and kill outside of their *barrio*, they are branded as a *chigüire* – a coward and a traitor – if they commit such crimes in their own community (Duque & Muñoz 1995: 108).

As Guillermo explained, the *malandros* he knew maintained strong relationships with their friends and family in the *barrio*, often sharing money, alcohol and drugs with them and becoming indispensable to the weekend parties as a result. Moreno (2008) argues that this traditional relationship, in which territorial loyalty is paramount, has meant that the *malandro* has become one of the known "characters" of the *barrio*, occupying a fixed place in community life: "In this way the *malandro* has his community… and the community has its *malandros*, just as it has its tin collectors, its drunks, its crazies in the streets, its *portugués*, its evangelical and its

priest (2008: 277).[42] Yet he also stresses that in recent years more and more *chigüires* have been emerging, suggesting that the nature of gang life may be changing as individuals or gangs become less loyal, less morally regulated and more parasitic towards their local neighbourhood. The emergence of such patterns falls in line with the observations of Rodgers (2006a), who shows how the institutionalisation of the drugs trade in the *barrios* of Managua transformed street gangs that had previously "defended" their *barrios* into "exclusive and predatory institutions that brutally imposed order through the creation of arbitrary regimes of terror to protect their drug dealing interests" (2006a: 326). This emergent amoral "model" of *malandraje* (delinquency or gangsterism) was often described by *barrio* residents as illustrative of the influence of crack cocaine, whose pernicious effect on individuals was seen to have eroded their capacity to maintain loyalty to little besides their addiction or need for fast money (see Bourgois 2003; Rodgers 2006b).

As far as Guillermo and others knew, the gangs in José Felix and El Camoruco did not have *chigüires* among their ranks and still retained a sense of loyalty to their *barrios*, with the fierce rivalry between the two gangs reinforcing this territorialism even among non-gang members. Rises in robberies in a given *barrio* often coincided with a weak local gang: it was the *malandros*, not the police, who protected residents from outside assailants. Indeed, Guillermo admitted that these strong ties had made it hard to avoid the *culebras* and drug-taking when he was younger, describing how the parties, shootouts and scrapes with the police fostered a sense of *compañerismo* (companionship) and a moral compulsion to defend his *pana*.

> My friends were all involved in the *peo* with José Felix, and when we'd go to parties they'd be shooting at each other or throwing bottles. I never wanted to get involved, but sometimes because I was with them I had to throw bottles too. Sometimes we'd get arrested by the police and taken to the modules. Back then it was really bad with the police. If you had a cap or Nike trainers or whatever, they'd take you away without asking anything and stick you in a little cell that stank of piss with twenty or thirty other guys.

Guillermo's statement here underlines the multiple pressures that young *barrio* boys and men come under, as solidarity, loyalty and strength in adversity help to form what Ferrándiz calls a "forced gender identity" in which the *malandro* identity "becomes the pre-eminent form of masculinity available to male inhabitants of the *barrios*"

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[42] My translation. The term *portugués* usually means "Brazilians", who are often the owners of the *bodegas* (grocery stores) in *barrios*.

(2003: 116). In this way, being a man and being *pana* become almost inseparable from going to certain places, dressing in a certain way and attaining respect. Critically, in the very fact of appearing to conform to the *malandro* "habitus" (Mauss 1973; Bourdieu 1990), non-gang members such as Guillermo end up encountering police brutality and victimisation regardless of the moral lines they draw for themselves. When they are dragged into police cells due to the people they associate with or their style of clothing, their subjectivity becomes a site in which Bourgois's four categories of violence – structural, symbolic, direct political and everyday physical – are all present simultaneously, each category feeding off the next in a cycle that dramatically frames a young man's life chances and prospects.

The question of why the *malandro* had come to dominate masculine identity among young working-class men was one that concerned local people in El Camoruco, particularly mothers and grandmothers who worried about their sons and grandsons and complained about the indolence, promiscuity and selfishness they perceived in men. Yulmi traced the problem to the relationship between *machismo* and the rise in poverty in the 1980s, arguing that the increased pressures on families that after the crash of 1983 had combined with the existing tendency for men to have children with more than one woman and made it harder for households to maintain themselves economically. The greater pressure on women to work and the fragmentation of family life, coupled with a lack of employment options or positive role-models for young men, she reasoned, meant that too many young men were "growing up on the corner" and thus cultivating their identity out of *el hampa* (the underworld).

> The problem here with our *machismo* is that a lot of men have children with two, three or even more women, and that's still totally acceptable. So for a lot of the children growing up, they don't have a model of what a strong family looks like. The *muchachos* grow up thinking they can sleep with however many *muchachas*, have children that they don't see and take no responsibility, and the *muchachas* grow up thinking it's fine to have a baby aged 15 or 16 and that's what you do with your life. I'm not saying it's bad to be a mother, but the problem here is that we're creating weak families and that makes a society weak. All the delinquency we have now is because if there's no dad in the house and mum has to go out working, who's there to provide a base for the children? So instead they end up on the corner, they start smoking or robbing and that's that. They grow up on the street, not in the home, and that's why we've got so much delinquency.

Guillermo's assessment of the problem was similar, and when I asked him why he had ultimately managed to avoid being drawn into gang life he put it down to the influence of firstly his father, who had given him a moral education at home, and secondly Cristina, who gave him a reason to pursue a different life course to his friends. His father, a Colombian shoemaker, had always emphasised the importance of working, and Guillermo claimed that this had given him an alternative model to the one many of his friends chose. "From when I was very young I was taught to work. I was taught that you have to work so your kids can eat. It doesn't matter if you're not making much money, you still have to work. That's the difference between me and them I guess. I had a strong family and strong values." Guillermo's would bring this history up to the present day by constantly referring to how he worked six days a week in a cafeteria in order to save money for his and Cristina's future together.

As Rodgers (2006: 287-289) argues, gang life can be understood as an attempt to create social order out of situations of precarity and insecurity. Although in the long run gangs may ultimately contribute to further social disorder, the individuals involved in them undoubtedly find collectivised organisation, solidarity, employment and identity that they cannot readily find elsewhere. Moreover, the *malandro* life offers a package where all these elements can be found together, in however fleeting and unsustainable forms. Clearly then, for a proud and aspiring young man from a *barrio* to avoid such a life, they need to find alternative means to access these attributes and *ser hombre* (to be a man). Yulmi was acutely aware of this fact, describing their commitment to family as a moral and political project:

> That's why it's always been so important to us to keep this family together: it's to provide a model, not just for our children but for other children in the community. If people look at us and see that we've done well, that we've improved our lives and more or less got economic stability, that our children are studying and all that – well they can see that as a model. If you can have, say, twenty families in the community that have both parents that then it's a model for others to follow. Look at Rafael's family – they're a big family but all the brothers have followed the model of María and Manuel and have stayed with their wives. They're raising their kids in stable households and that means that most of their children will go on to do the same. That's how we need to build a new socialist society: from the families up.

Matthew Gutmann opposes what he terms the "fanciful and static" (1996: 16) portrayals of men and masculinity, suggesting that gender identity is better understood in line with Stuart Hall's (1990) definition. Hall proposed that identity

should be thought of as a production that is "never quite complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (1990: 222, cited in Gutmann 1996: 17). In Guillermo's case, his decision to style himself as the kind of man who works hard, looks after his family and struggles with what little he has showed that he had found a way to *ser hombre* by making the *ideal* of a strong family the centrepiece of his life and identity. It was thus, as Ferrándiz (2003: 126) and Smilde (2007: 76) have suggested regarding religious conversion, having access to an alternative model of masculinity and the means to construct it materially that enabled Guillermo to buy into a different view of himself and thereby construct social order. Though he was not himself a political person, his rejection of easy money, hedonistic thrills and conspicuous consumption in favour of hard work, self-sacrifice and restraint made him the perfect son-in-law for Rafael and Yulmi. These life choices provided exactly the kind of political and moral "model" that they sought to promote as a Bolivarian ideal.

CONCLUSION

After over a decade of significant government spending on health, education and welfare, the persistence of endemic violent crime in Venezuela presents a serious problem for supporters of the revolution who attribute the phenomenon principally to neoliberalism. Although significant strides away from neoliberal governance have been made in the Chávez era, a lessening of the violence has yet to emerge as a corollary. The question of why violence continues to worsen in numerical terms is hugely important one, but also one that resides beyond the scope of this chapter. Many of the macro-structural causes of violent crime are implicit in the discussion above, but to make further claims would require, I think, a far broader investigation using both quantitative and qualitative data. Instead, the question I have sought to answer refers more to the *effects* of insecurity. What are the practical and imaginative consequences of the daily proximity to violence for the residents of El Camoruco?

In their efforts to continuing living whilst members of their families, their friends or their neighbours both perpetrate and suffer everyday violence, *barrio* residents encounter the "end point" of structural marginalisation and symbolic discrimination as it filters down into their communities and is enacted, all too often,

by young men attempting to find social order, achieve social mobility and cultivate self-respect with scarce means to do. In facing this sharp end of systemic inequality, they have learnt to modify and structure their lives around violence in both practical and symbolic terms, guarding themselves and their loved ones as best they can and building social relationships that must endure the uneasy co-existence between mistrust and solidarity. *Barrio* residents reject and disprove the long-standing discriminatory discourses that depict them as a barbarous blemish on Venezuela's body politic, but at times they do so in ways which reproduce such hegemonic imaginings by shifting them along to perceived "hosts" of marginality in their own communities. If such efforts to distance themselves from "carriers" of *malandraje* are understandable, they nonetheless evidence the workings of Gramsci's "contradictory consciousness": even as they attempt to foster alternative imaginings of themselves, in everyday life they reproduce stigmas that have been "inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed" (Gramsci 1971: 333).

In broader political terms, the pervasiveness of insecurity in *barrios* like El Camoruco provides a constant reminder to residents of the need for far-reaching social change – of a disorder that must be righted somehow. The moral disquiet I described in Chapter 1 is reinforced with every robbery or murder that takes place, as residents repeatedly ask themselves why this violence persists and attempt to strategise against it. As the Hernández family show, the understanding of insecurity as a crisis of values leads to redoubled efforts to build and maintain families that can act as moral and political counterweights to social anomie. Drawing on the anti-neoliberal and anti-capitalist discourse of Bolivarianism as they maintain these counterweights, political morality imbues everyday social reproduction with a redemptive quality. For *chavistas* like Rafael and Yulmi, their political discourse offers a means to amplify concerns over safety and security into a larger struggle to create a model of moral conduct that others can follow. For them, the struggle against insecurity and the search for social order is an indelibly political one.

The challenge for the Bolivarian government, then, is to ensure that twenty-first century socialism remains a credible and believable solution to the kinds of problems that Rafael and Yulmi face. At the level of discourse, Chávez successfully changed the state's portrayal of *barrio* residents in a significant way; language such as "barbarous masses" (Coronil & Skurski 1991: 327) would now be unthinkable. Instead, residents of communities like El Camoruco are valorised by the government

as custodians of Venezuela's true heart, their struggles for lives of dignity and security repositioned as *the* struggle – *la lucha* – of the nation as a whole. Yet in order for this message to make sense, working-class families such as *Los Hernández* must also see tangible material changes in their lives. The next chapter focuses on the new opportunities for social betterment that have emerged in the Bolivarian era.

CHAPTER 3

POCO A POCO:
ASPIRATIONS, OPPORTUNITIES AND DISPARITIES IN THE BOLIVARIAN *BARRIO*

> When you come back in a few years and see me, hopefully you'll see a leader. But you'll be able to say that you lived in my house, that you sat in the street drinking with me, that you mixed with the *malandros*. But not really *malandros*, Mateo, not really. I say us *malandros* because to talk about a *malandro* is not necessarily to talk about someone who goes around stealing, or high on marijuana, or whatever. It's to talk about someone who wants to do things, for example someone who wants to do things with this revolution. This isn't anything to do with drugs, with deaths or with narco-traffickers. This is about people. It's about the hope of doing things, of finding work, of *jodiendo*… of doing a million different things.
>
> – Rafael

INTRODUCTION

It was one of my last nights in El Camoruco when Rafael made the comment above. Having endured 15 months of my questions, he had decided to take revenge by interviewing me and asking for my concluding thoughts before I left his *barrio*. After listening to my reflections, he responded with these words, which I have highlighted because they seemed to capture the defiant sense of hope, aspiration and working-class pride that characterised his attitude to life and politics. Turning the figure of the *malandro* on its head, he used it to symbolise the determination, creativity and resolve of *barrio* residents. By re-appropriating a term that ordinarily embodies the worst elements of *barrio* life, he challenged the hegemonic depiction of his community as a place of hopelessness and re-imagined the *malandro* as someone who strives, who invents and who achieves. This future-orientated attitude was also epitomised by the ubiquitous phrase *poco a poco* (little by little), which surfaced time and time again when the residents of El Camoruco described how they had gradually built their homes, and their lives, from the small plots of land that were first occupied 40 years before. I regard these discursive preoccupations with the future as indicators of a wider attitude in *barrio* life that can be summed up by what Arjun Appadurai (2004: 59) calls the "capacity to aspire". In his articulation of this concept, Appadurai seeks

to pinpoint the attributes and resources that enable people to aspire, arguing that the routes to social betterment can be understood as a capacity to imagine particular possibilities, test them out and thus garner insights into what opportunities might be available. As he writes,

> If the map of aspirations… is seen to consist of a dense combination of nodes and pathways, relative poverty means a smaller number of aspirational nodes and a thinner, weaker sense of the pathway from concrete wants to intermediate contexts to general norms and back again. Where these pathways do exist for the poor, they are likely to be more rigid, less supple, and less strategically valuable, not because of any cognitive deficit on the part of the poor but because the capacity to aspire, like any complex cultural capacity, thrives and survives on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture, and refutation. Where the opportunities for such conjecture and regard to the future are limited (and this may well be one way to define poverty), it follows that the capacity itself remains relatively less developed (2004: 69).

This chapter focuses on the relationship between *chavismo* and patterns of aspiration, opportunity and disparity in El Camoruco. I suggest that the revolution as a lived experience is not only a response to social and political inequality, but also a pragmatic means for *barrio* residents to acquire education, develop new skills and build careers, principally in the *chavista* state. It offers a whole array of options that did not exist before the arrival of Chávez, and material betterment and social mobility have indisputably accelerated in El Camoruco thanks to the government's investment in localised health, education and social welfare provisions for its residents. Yet the core argument I make is that those who have benefitted most from these initiatives – i.e. those who are building new professions, acquiring status and reinvesting their economic gains in their homes and families – are those whose strong kinship networks gave them a pre-existing capacity to make the best use of new opportunities. For some, Bolivarian social programmes may act as a safety net, preventing them from falling into the kind of poverty that many experienced in the neoliberal era; yet for others they are springboards that propel already upwardly mobile individuals into positions of political influence and relative economic prosperity. It is these individuals who have become the most ideologically committed *chavista* activists, suggesting that the broad-brush characterisation of "the poor" as Chávez's supporters obscures a more detailed analysis of who *chavismo*'s core social actors are and why their political commitment is so firm. In fact, it is not the very poor who lead the Bolivarian revolution at the local level, but the established families and individuals

whose greater "capacity to aspire" enables a fuller process of ideological interpellation.

The chapter emphasises, therefore, both the new opportunities and the new disparities that have emerged in the Bolivarian era, as well as paying attention to the continuing inequalities and tensions that persist in spite of various advances. It begins by looking at the Hernández family in the context of anthropological accounts of poverty, describing their self-reinforcing success as a social unit. I then turn to my respondents' use of the education missions, analysing how different individuals are able to benefit more or less depending on their wider social backgrounds, and showing how this is reflected in differing levels of commitment as activists. The following section analyses gender relations in Rafael and Yulmi's household, showing how disparities and tensions between men and women persist, and how the improved opportunities for women in the Chávez era are constrained by enduring gender inequities. I then provide case studies of those who utilise Bolivarian projects without becoming activists, and those who continue to struggle in spite of the wider set of opportunities. The overall aim of this chapter is to show how the benefits of *chavismo* are distributed unevenly, a fact reflected in varying levels of ideological and practical commitment to the revolution.

THE "CULTURE OF POVERTY", KINSHIP AND ASPIRATION

Anthropological accounts of life in urban ghettos, shantytowns and squatter settlements frequently begin with the work of Oscar Lewis. Though his attention to ethnographic detail has been commended, Lewis is more commonly remembered for the dubious legacy of his "culture of poverty" theory. Premised on the idea that the urban poor are largely disconnected from the political, economic and cultural life of the formal city (Lewis 1966: xlviii), Lewis defined this "subculture" as a set of learned adaptations to the conditions of poverty, with short-termism, a disinterest in the wider society, belief in male superiority and toleration of "psychological pathology" all deemed typical of the condition (1966: 47-59). Perhaps most controversially, he claimed that the culture of poverty was passed down through generations, possessing, "autonomous dynamism and self-perpetuating mechanisms"

(Moser 2009: 11).[43] A desire to disprove his model strongly characterised urban ethnographies in Latin America from the late 1960s onwards, with authors emphasising the cultural optimism of slum-dwellers (Peattie 1968; Lloyd 1979) and suggesting that it was not a simplistic notion of "marginality" that acted as a barrier to social mobility, but rather the unequal and exploitative ways in which the urban poor were connected to the rest of the city (Roberts 1973; Perlman 1976). Such authors highlighted the complex reciprocity networks that allow people to survive on sporadic and insufficient incomes (Lomnitz 1977; González de la Rocha 1994), while noting the heterogeneity of households and pointing out the stark gender inequalities within many of them.

In the neoliberal era, a number of authors revised their original arguments, suggesting, as in Perlman's (2006) case, that marginality appeared to have gone from "myth to reality", as feelings of disconnection, fear of violence and social exclusion replaced cultural optimism in slums increasingly wracked by gang violence and police brutality. In the place of optimism and reciprocity networks, the neoliberal era was described as having created an "advanced" marginality through declining wages and dwindling employment opportunities, wholesale exclusion from work, the retrenchment of the welfare state, and a spatial concentration of poverty that diminished the sense of community life (Wacquant 1999; see also Perlman 2004: 125). In place of the "slums of hope" of the 1960s and 70s, then, were the structurally disconnected "hypershantytowns" described by Auyero (1999, 2000), as chronic unemployment and state retrenchment left shantytowns controlled by gangs and corrupt state actors (1999: 64). In her follow up work, González de la Rocha (2001) concluded similarly, arguing that the "survival strategies" approach to urban poverty had become redundant because neoliberalism stunted the capacity of the urban poor to maintain their reciprocity networks. The "resources of poverty" had turned into "the poverty of resources", leading to highly segmented and non-cooperative households (Rodgers 2007).

At the level of individuals and families, Caroline Moser (2009) argues that a household's potential to achieve social mobility can be measured in terms its "asset accumulation" (2009: 18-22). By this, she means the capacity to accumulate resources

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[43] The "culture of poverty" model has been debated at some length and continues to arise in contemporary urban anthropology. See Hannerz 1969; Lloyd 1979; Stack 1975; Day et al 1999; Goode & Maskovsky 2001; Gutmann 2002; Bourgois 2003.

– human, material, social and political – that can take a family or household on an upwardly mobile trajectory, or indeed accelerate an existing trajectory.[44] In line with Maia Green's (2004) critique of developmentalist approaches to poverty, Moser's approach sees poverty as both relational (Moser 2009: 6) and multidimensional, and looks at how attempts to find a way out of poverty are shaped not only by low incomes, but by complex impediments to "capabilities, assets, entitlements and rights" (2009: 22).

In El Camoruco, the Hernández family possessed a relatively large spread of such "assets" prior to the arrival of Chávez, and these were multiplied and enhanced by the family's engagement with Bolivarian institutions and programmes. As I have already suggested, they were deeply proud of their togetherness and determined to maintain their social unit as a counterbalance to the perceived social anomie around them. Together with the moral identity this provided, another significant advantage to their strength as a group was the aspirational platform that the family provided. As a well-established household, María and Manuel's home was not only a domestic unit, but an economic one as well. In the evenings Antonio would open up a hatch at the front of the house and sell *perros calientes* to passers-by, and each *Semana Santa* (Holy Week), María and Manuel would make vast quantities of traditional *hallacas* to sell to local people. On top of this, Morocho, the third brother who remained in the family home, ran a small internet café round the corner from the house. The family pooled the incomes from these endeavours and thus successfully reproduced itself economically, corresponding to Moser's observation that housing is a "first priority asset" because it generates the potential to accumulate other assets (2009: 40). Though they remained a relatively poor family on low and at times sporadic incomes, in comparison with many other households in El Camoruco, *Los Hernández* lived good lives. All of the men had some kind of income, with Rafael, Jose, Antonio and Chico – the four brothers who had moved into their own houses – all holding down regular wages in their respective jobs. The bulk of domestic reproduction fell to the women, but Yulmi had a full-time job (see below), Andreina worked as a shop assistant in the city and Licha planned to return to work once her children were old enough to attend school.

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[44] Moser takes her definition of assets from the Ford Foundation, which describes an asset as "a stock of financial, human, natural or social resources that can be acquired, developed, improved and transformed across generations. It generates flows of consumption, as well as additional stocks" (Ford Foundation 2004: 2, cited in Moser 2009: 18).

The parents in the family also had high hopes for their children. There were two high schools in the *barrio*: a regular state school known as Rómulo Gallegos and a semi-private Catholic school called Santa María. All of the Hernández children attended Santa María, which was located in Sector 1 of the *barrio* – close to María and Manuel's house, but some distance from Rafael and Yulmi's in Sector 4. Rómulo Gallegos, on the edge of Sector 4, was notorious for trouble with gangs, so much so that Guillermo recalled prominent gang members agreeing to leave their guns with the school principal during the height of the war between El Camoruco and José Felix. In contrast, Santa María had a good reputation and was regarded by some local youths I spoke to as being "for *sifrinos*" – something akin to "snobs" in English. It was also a school that charged, though the fees for poor families were low and scholarships were available. *Los Hernández* were determined for their children to have the best chance possible, and though I never discovered whether or not they paid fees at Santa María, they had clearly found a way of ensuring that all of their children were educated there.[45] As Moser points out, households can accumulate "intergenerational assets" by investing in education in the hope that a son or daughter's success will be reinvested in the family (2009: 182-205). In El Camoruco, sending their children to Santa María was a way of ensuring that they mixed with other upwardly mobile and professional families and avoided the most difficult individuals. It underlined the family's aspirations for their children, as well their willingness to seek out options that distanced them from the more threatening elements of *barrio* life.

By becoming prominent actors in El Camoruco's neighbourhood association and then its Bolivarian Circles (see Chapter 4), the Hernández family established a wide network of contacts among Valencia's *chavista* milieu and in the local Alcaldía (municipality). As I described in Chapter 2, for most of the men in the family this had translated into various forms of paid political work with *chavista* institutions. In this way, the family had been able to build on an existing inclination towards community work and transform it, thanks to the Bolivarian era, into regular employment and careers. Or to put it in Moser's terms, their existing human and social capital had allowed them to take hold of new opportunities for political and economic capital, deepening a complex "portfolio of assets" (2009: xiv). The most prominent *chavistas*

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[45] My understanding was that Rafael and Yulmi did not earn enough to warrant paying fees at the school. I was unable to discover the status of the other children in the family.

in the community, then, were also among the most economically successful and socially visible individuals.

THE SOCIAL MISSIONS: NEW OPPORTUNITIES AND NEW LIMITATIONS

Following the failure of the 2002 coup and 2003 *paro,* the Bolivarian government launched a major anti-poverty programme aimed at addressing the immediate needs of Venezuela's poorest citizens and strengthening political support among them. At the heart of this drive were the *misiones sociales* (social missions), which have become flagships for the government's break with the neoliberal model, channelling hundreds of millions of dollars from the country's oil revenues into local-level projects in education, health, social welfare and subsidised food. The education missions, which provide free evening classes ranging from basic literacy and numeracy through to the university level, proved hugely popular when they were first launched. Millions enrolled in Mission Robinson, the first tier of the programme, and by 2005 Chávez announced that the country was "free of illiteracy" (Hawkins 2010: 201). According to Wilpert (2007: 127), by 2004 a further 700,000 participants passed through Mission Ribas, the high school tier, with 27,000 people finding work as teachers and facilitators. Mission Sucre, a decentralised university-level programme, completed the new educational system, with 300,000 graduating from its programmes in 2005 (Ellner 2008: 122). A further initiative followed in health, with Mission *Barrio Adentro* ("Inside the *Barrio*"), an oil-for-doctors exchange scheme with Cuba, providing over 13,000 Cuban doctors to 8,500 new *barrio* clinics by 2004, whilst hundreds of diagnostic and rehabilitation centres were built as part of *Barrio Adentro* II (Ellner 2008: 134). Finally, seeking to address the high prices of largely imported food, the government launched mission MERCAL, a discounted food initiative which by 2006 had 15,000 outlets across the country, again mainly in poor areas. Alongside MERCAL, free staple foods were provided by *casas de alimentación* (food houses) to 600,000 of Venezuela's poorest families (Ellner 2008: 166-167). Supporters of the government argue that the missions have hugely improved the quality of life for Venezuela's popular classes by expanding access to free healthcare (Castro 2008; Briggs & Mantini-Briggs 2009), providing new opportunities in education and

reducing the cost of food. In turn, government opponents criticise the standard of teaching in the education missions, accuse Cuban doctors of poor standards and dubious ideological motivations, and argue that MERCAL's cheap food amounts to a clientelistic "food for votes" scheme (Penfold 2006; Corrales & Penfold 2007).

The Hernández family had benefitted significantly from the arrival of the missions in El Camoruco. All of Rafael's brothers attended Mission Ribas and completed high school baccalaureates, something they had never achieved as teenagers. One of the major advantages of the family's large support network was that there were ample resources to enable individuals to spend their evenings in the classes. Children could be left with aunts, uncles and grandparents while their parents studied, and these favours could then be reciprocated on other occasions. One family member's successful use of the missions would therefore reinforce another's, and this would set an example for further relatives to follow. The missions were thus understood as an unquestionable social good by the family, simultaneously drawing on and bolstering their efficacy as a social unit.

Yulmi had made particularly good use of the education missions. Having successfully passed through Mission Ribas, she was now studying a degree in social management through Mission Sucre and attended night-classes there several times a week. Her course privileged Bolivarian values and was designed to train the future managers of the revolution, fusing standard educational requirements with the political and moral messages of the revolution (see Hawkins 2010: 205). This politicised pedagogy suited Yulmi, who was already a powerful orator and capable organiser as a result of her experience with *La Joc* and the neighbours' association. Thanks to her training with Mission Sucre and this longer history of community activism, in 2009 she found work as a regional coordinator for MERCAL. Monday to Friday, and often on Saturdays too, she would rise at 5.30am and prepare the family's breakfast before catching several buses to the north of Valencia, where MERCAL's regional centre was located. She acknowledged the good experience she was getting as a manager in a state-run company, but was also highly critical of various aspects of the job. Though it gave her a regular, secure income (1,500 Bs.F [USD $350] per month, the standard minimum wage during my time in Venezuela), she regarded it as poorly paid, bureaucratic and overly demanding on its staff, who were often under pressure to work long hours out of loyalty to *el proceso*.

Yulmi was explicit about both her frustrations with MERCAL and her long-term ambitions: "I have to do this as part of my career development, but once I graduate I'm going to look for something better," she told me. Her aims beyond Sucre and MERCAL were to carry out postgraduate study and eventually find work at PDVSA, the state oil company that funds the majority of government social programmes. For a committed *chavista* who would not dream of working for a private corporation, PDVSA potentially provided Yulmi with a way of channelling her aspirations in a manner that remained socialist. The world's fifth largest oil company, PDVSA is the main source of revenue for the government's social spending programmes.[46] It is therefore both a politically legitimate and economically appealing place for ambitious *chavistas* who seek to build careers without compromising their socialist credentials. Yulmi's articulation of this ambition showed how both an expansion and a circumscription of aspiration seemed to be occurring for *chavistas* who benefitted from the missions. On the one hand, for a *barrio* resident whose working background was entirely in the informal sector prior to the Chávez era, the very fact that she could envision working for such a company showed the extent to which Yulmi felt her horizons had been broadened. On the other hand, it was clear that her working ambitions would remain firmly entrenched within the *chavista* party-state nexus: the missions created a parallel education system for employment in Bolivarian state institutions. As such, the government was essentially guaranteeing the loyalty of individuals like Yulmi by making their ideological commitment and their career prospects co-dependent.

Yulmi's job with MERCAL was certainly due in part to her existing standing within the wider *chavista* milieu in Valencia. For other individuals who were less well-known, however, the options made available by the missions seemed to be more limited. Edwin was an enthusiastic individual I met on my first night in El Camoruco at one of several *puntas rojas* (red points) in the community.[47] 41 years old at the time of our meeting, he was a friendly and talkative character, popular in the community and always full of news. He lived in a one-floored, self-built house a few roads to the south of the *cancha* with his elderly mother. His father, a German immigrant, died a

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[46] "World's Largest Oil and Gas Companies," *Petrostrategies*, http://www.petrostrategies.org/Links/Worlds_Largest_Oil_and_Gas_Companies_Sites.htm (accessed 19 January 2011).
[47] The *puntas rojas* are *chavista* organising points usually located in houses or community centres. They are used as rallying points during elections and political campaigns.

few years before my arrival in the community, whilst his sister lived in a nearby *urbanización* with her husband and young son, who he often looked after in the afternoons. Politically, Edwin voted for Chávez and considered himself *chavista*, but was by no means a militant. He would rather watch television or visit friends than attend political meetings, and described himself half-jokingly as a "*chavista-lite*". He supported the government and its programmes, but showed little interest in activism and voiced concerns about the single-mindedness of some *chavistas*: "If you criticise the government, you get called an *esquálido*, and it shouldn't be like that," he remarked.

As I soon discovered, an enthusiasm for education had been central to Edwin's life for some time. A relative rarity for someone of his age from the south of the city, he graduated from the Universidad de Carabobo in 1991, in an era when the university was yet to run any direct buses from El Camoruco to the campus.[48] Having worked a variety of jobs in private companies after graduating, Edwin decided to train as a teacher. When I first met him he was teaching evening classes at El Camoruco's Mission Ribas and studying for a Masters in Education at UNEFA, the Universidad Nacional Experimental Politécnica de la Fuerza Armada (National Experimental Polytechnic University of the Armed Forces), during the day. UNEFA had originally been solely for the use of the military, but in a push to expand access to higher education Chávez opened the university up to the general public through a presidential decree in 1999. Since his job at the mission was part-time and poorly paid, Edwin hoped the Masters would enable him to find full-time, secure employment in a state school. During the two years he spent studying for his Masters he used the monthly 500 Bs.F (USD $116) from the mission to help his mother run the house. Following his graduation from UNEFA in the summer of 2009, he began looking for permanent work as a schoolteacher, but struggled to find the secure position he was looking for. Instead, he found two part-time jobs with no benefits: one at a local private school, the other as a supply teacher in a nearby state school.

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[48] The Universidad de Carabobo campus is located north of the city's boundaries, near to the predominantly wealthy areas of Naguanagua, Prebo, El Trigal and Mañongo. Students travelling from the south of Valencia, where the majority of the city's *barrios* are located, face a trip two or three times longer than those who live in the leafy *urbaniziónes* near to the campus. This improved with the arrival of direct university buses in the 1990s, but it remains a far longer and more inconvenient journey for those from the *barrios* in the south.

During the same period, he left Ribas and switched to teaching evening classes at Mission Sucre after a dispute with the director of Ribas.[49]

Edwin was undoubtedly a capable and shrewd individual who had made sensible use of new institutional openings in UNEFA and the missions. Proud of his achievements, he argued that *barrio* residents could no longer complain of a lack of educational opportunity:

> No-one can say that there aren't the opportunities now, the opportunities are there. He who wants to learn, learns. Right now people who aren't studying aren't because they don't want to, not because they can't. Not everyone is born to be a professional, but people have other talents that they could realise. If you don't want to go on to study at university, you could do a technical degree – the options are there.

These educational options did not necessarily translate into secure employment, however, and in the months following his Masters graduation Edwin was clearly frustrated to have to gone to such efforts only to find himself without a fixed teaching position. Before he found the job in the private school, he complained about visiting all the schools in the area without being able to find employment. Teaching in state schools is often poorly paid in Venezuela, and as a result many teachers have two or even three jobs, teaching all day and then doing evening classes as well. Consequently, openings in existing schools are difficult to find. Edwin was not in financial trouble during this period because his mother's pension of 900 Bs.F a month (USD $210) and his own 500 Bs.F from Mission Sucre were enough to cover their living costs (like most *barrio* residents who had built their own houses, they paid no rent or mortgage). Yet he admitted that things would have been much tougher if he had a wife and children. "It's a lot harder for the families that have five, six or seven children who are surviving on the same money," he pointed out.

One of Edwin's major concerns was that his principal teaching experience was in the missions, which were not always respected by non-Bolivarian educational bodies. "Some people think the diplomas from the missions are *chimbo* [fake, cheap or worthless], or that they won't be received in universities. This isn't true, they're totally valid, but that's what some people have started to think," he argued. Prejudice

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[49] I never found out exactly why Edwin had left Ribas, but according to him they had refused to renew his contract and had given him little by way of explanation. The director of Mission Ribas had something of a reputation locally, and seemed highly suspicious when I offered to teach English classes a few nights a week to help out Edwin. I suspected there was something Edwin was not telling me about his dismissal from Ribas – possibly something political – but never discovered more. He certainly felt that he had been treated unfairly.

about the missions could thus work to inhibit those who sought to use them – either through work or study – as a springboard for work outside of the Bolivarian system. As a result, Edwin found himself caught between continuing to work in the missions, where he would have to teach evening classes for relatively low pay, or balancing part-time and supply work in other schools, which would still provide him with no long-term security.

This predicament highlights some of the achievements and limitations of the missions and the expanded university system. Undeniably, both endeavours have provided new opportunities for individuals to receive free education and find employment as teachers and coordinators. Such shifts cannot be underestimated, as Edwin himself pointed out:

> Look, before there simply wasn't the free education available. We had one college near El Periférico [in the south of the city, not too far from El Camoruco], but it only went up to high school level. The only other place for evening education was Pedro Gual on Avenida Bolívar [in the north of the city]. Think about it, after 9pm in the evening you can't get a bus back here in the night, so you'd have to get a taxi – or walk back through the city in the night, which is really dangerous. Now look at the difference: I walk one block and I've got Ribas and Sucre on my doorstep.

Yet beside these unquestionable improvements in opportunity for *barrio* residents, it was also evident that the missions were struggling to challenge broader structural and social impediments that remained in place: in Edwin's case, this meant that his work experience in the missions and perhaps even his Masters degree were overlooked or undervalued by non-Bolivarian institutions. Consequently, there seemed to be a fairly low ceiling for those who accessed education or employment through the government's schemes. Indeed, in order to be better paid and find secure employment in state institutions, such as the kind Yulmi had found, it was apparent that being involved as a political activist was a major advantage. Bolivarian projects had hugely enhanced the educational and aspirational options available to *barrio* residents, but much of the better-paid work was acquired by the more explicitly politicised through social connections, meaning that careers would be built in tandem with a visible commitment to the Bolivarian cause.

Kirk Hawkins (2010: 195-230) argues that the missions can be thought of as "a populist mode of discretionary spending" (2010: 230), stressing that the beneficiaries of the projects are most likely to be those who already identify with the

Bolivarian cause. He bases this claim on largely quantitative data, which shows how the missions are overwhelmingly used and staffed by *chavistas*. He also rejects the view that the missions distribute aid in a traditional patron-client fashion, asserting that the system is certainly partisan in a diffuse sense, but not overtly exclusionary at the point of service. I knew of a number of opposition supporters who both taught in and used the missions, and though there were rumours about them, I came across no instances of services being refused due to political affiliation. A more comprehensive study, using both qualitative and quantitative data, would do well to look into not only those who use and work in the missions, but also their long-term career paths after leaving them. This would produce a clearer picture of the missions' overall impact on people's life prospects.

As I have suggested here, there are different "categories" of *chavista*, represented by Yulmi and Edwin respectively. For both a hard-line committed activist such as Yulmi and a "lighter", more passive government supporter like Edwin, the missions unquestionably offered opportunities to receive free education, expand employment opportunities and cultivate social capital, all of which must be understood in relation to the paucity of options that existed pre-Chávez. Yet the horizons of both individuals remained broadly circumscribed within Bolivarian state institutions. Since these state structures struggle to challenge patterns of social exclusion that exist outside of them, people's career prospects are channelled largely within this same structure. As a result, it would seem that a *chavista's* career prospects exist in direct relation to their political connections and commitment. The visible display of political morality in the form of loyalty to *el proceso* can thus be understood as a useful "asset" for aspiring *chavista* activists.

GENDER RELATIONS IN A *CHAVISTA* HOUSEHOLD

The Chávez government has been hailed as the one of most pro-women in history. Its 1999 constitution is one of the first to be "non-androcentric", meaning that all instances of job titles or positions are listed in their feminine form as well as their masculine. Anti-discrimination articles within the constitution state that all public policies should be re-examined for any discriminatory effects that may have arisen

unintentionally, such as the underrepresentation of women in higher education (Wilpert 2007: 31-33). In 2007, the national assembly passed a further law guaranteeing women's right to live free from violence, and firm efforts have been made to promote women's political participation at all levels of society. According to the pro-government newspaper, *Correo del Orinoco*, by 2011 Venezuela had the highest gender equality index in Latin America, with the Minister for Women's Affairs and Gender Equality, Nancy Perez, pointing out that three of the five executive branches in government are led by women (Tibisay Lucena leads the National Electoral Council, Luisa Estela Morales the Supreme Court of Justice and Luisa Ortega Díaz is the Attorney General).[50] Perhaps most significantly, the constitution also includes the right for women to receive social security payments for domestic work. Article 88 states the following: "The state recognises work at home as an economic activity that creates added value and produces social welfare and wealth. Homemakers are entitled to Social Security in accordance with law" (Wilpert 2007: 33). Wilpert points out that this article had yet to be effectively activated by 2007, but payments were being made to some 200,000 poor women through the *Misión Madres del Barrio* (Mothers of the Barrio).

In El Camoruco, a *Madres del Barrio* mission had been formed, but by the time I arrived it was no longer in operation. Some people claimed that money had gone missing, while there were others who said that the payments were unfair – that women were receiving money for "doing nothing". Since Yulmi was employed, she had not signed up to receive assistance from the project. Instead, she focused on her job at MERCAL and her studies at Mission Sucre. She valued these opportunities greatly, and compared them to her experiences as a young woman entering the job market:

> I was nineteen and I wanted to get out and work, but I had no qualifications and no training. If as a young woman you wanted to find work it was like, 'So what skills do you have? What qualifications do you have? Oh nothing, well then you'll have to [she makes a sexual intercourse gesture with her hands].' That's how it was, you basically had to prostitute yourself to get work. Now it isn't like that. We still have a big fight, but there are real opportunities now for women to educate themselves and get good jobs. There are still not enough women in important positions, but it's a lot better than it was, and in *el proceso* a lot of the people driving the movement are

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[50] "Venezuela celebrates women's advances, but more efforts needed," *Correo del Orinoco*, English edition, No. 55, Friday 11th March, 2011.

women. With the missions and the new universities no-one can say they don't have the opportunities.

Although they brought a number of clear benefits, Yulmi's commitments to her work and study were significantly time-consuming. For several periods during my stay, she also provided the family's main income, due to regular changes in Rafael's employment (his changing patterns of employment and activism will be described in Chapters 4-6). Historically, when the couple's children were young, he had been the principal breadwinner in the household and Yulmi had carried out the bulk of the domestic work. By the time I arrived in the community, however, their working arrangements had altered considerably. Although Rafael was earning money for much of this period, the unstable and shifting nature of his political activism meant that he would also go through periods with low income and, during heightened phases of political activity, could forego paid work altogether. With her regular income from MERCAL, it was therefore Yulmi who became the main breadwinner in the household, a role that she attempted to balance with several nights of study a week.

Despite this shift, Yulmu still did the majority of the family's cooking, washing and cleaning. In the mornings, she would prepare the staple cornflour baps, *arepas*, which would be filled with ham, cheese and eggs and supplemented by sugary *cafecitos* throughout the day. As well as preparing breakfast, when she was at home she would also cook a large lunch, usually of rice and chicken, which would be left in a pan on the stove and picked up by various members of the family as they returned from school or work in the afternoons. Rafael was not averse to cooking, but his efforts would generally be confined to deep-fried *arepas* in the evenings, which most family members would prepare for themselves if they came home late. Although both of the couple worked, it seemed to be assumed that the overarching domestic responsibilities still lay with Yulmi. Cristina and Eduardo could more or less take care of themselves, whilst Yuleidi would generally spend the afternoons at María and Manuel's house. But it was Yulmi who would be cooking and cleaning on the weekends, and Yulmi who stayed in with Yuleidi when Rafael attended political meetings in the evenings (if Yulmi was studying, Yuleidi would stay at María's until late).

One of the glaring examples of the inequality between the couple was the use of the family's 4x4, which was totally monopolised by Rafael. Yulmi knew how to

drive, but there never appeared to be even a question of her using the car: it was Rafael who owned and drove it, despite the fact that Yulmi worked far away in the north of the city. This disparity of mobility was a core theme more generally within households in El Camoruco. In all of the car-owning families I knew it was the men who owned and drove the cars. Indeed, I met few women from *barrios* who drove at all (this was not the case among middle-class women), and it was clear that vehicles played a central role in maintaining gender roles that tied women to the home and enabled men to move far more freely. In an oil-producing country where, as every taxi driver will attest, "petrol is cheaper than water," owning a car or a motorbike is regarded as an essential part of masculine identity. It demonstrates a man's ability to accumulate the capital required to buy the car and gives him the capacity to move beyond his immediate surroundings. In a city such as Valencia, which lacks the extensive metro links of Caracas, cars enable men to extend their lives geographically in a way that is much harder for women, reinforcing their freedom to have lives – and "adventures" – beyond the home.

The male domination of car usage highlights how perceived notions of what men and women "do" worked to entrench particular gender roles that disproportionately burdened and constrained women. The example of the 4x4 conformed to the commonly observed Latin American distinction between the feminine *casa* (house) and masculine *calle* (street) (see Safa 1995; Molyneux 1996; Koch 2006; Pertierra 2008). As Pertierra (2008: 748) points out, such arrangements are present in two forms of Latin American gender relations: the traditional "male breadwinner/female nurturer" archetype common to patriarchal households, as well as the female-headed, matrifocal pattern more typical in Caribbean households (see Chapter 2). Yulmi's case appeared to shift between these two archetypes: while earlier in their lives Rafael had been clearly defined as the breadwinner, in recent years she had taken on far more financial responsibility. But critically, this change had not been matched with a fairer distribution of responsibilities in the home. Rather, as a result of her determination to take advantage of new opportunities, Yulmi simply faced more work and more stress.

Moser argues that poor Latin American women often act as social "shock absorbers" (2009: 68) by combining maintenance of the household with wage labour and often community work too – a "triple burden" that has also been observed by ethnographers such as González de la Rocha (1994, 2001) and Roy (2002). Yulmi

was acutely aware of the struggles she faced in the home, and would often complain about these multiple burdens. It was not uncommon for her to return home from work or night classes exhausted and in a foul mood. On one occasion she snapped suddenly at Rafael: "I'm shouting because I can't stand up my feet hurt so much, do you know what that feels like?" As Jelin (1991: 35) observes, confrontation often emerges when women participate more in the labour market but retain the majority of domestic work. A host of studies have shown how women challenge gender inequalities in a variety of ways within households, pointing out that patterns of domestic responsibility cannot be regarded as static or fixed (e.g. Jelin 1991; Chant 1994; Gutmann 1996; Chant 2003).[51] Yet as things stood for Yulmi, the central issue was that the burden of work within her household had not evolved to match the increase in responsibilities she faced outside of it. Unless the couple were willing to change the nature of Rafael's role in the household, this looked set to be a consistent source of justifiable resentment.

Part of this problem related to Rafael's high standing in the community, the *parroquia* and the local *chavista* milieu. As a charismatic and popular leader *de las bases* (from the bases), he was genuinely regarded as a "special" person throughout Miguel Peña. In fact, he was essentially seen as a collectively-held resource – an asset – that belonged to the whole community. Consequently, those close to him were forced to accept that his attention would never be undivided, and that his *compromiso con la gente* (obligation to the people) would always overlap with his responsibilities to them. This meant that although both Yulmi's domestic work and his political activism were unpaid, domestic work was treated as *subordinate* to activism; at root, the sacrifices that Yulmi made were less valued than those made by Rafael. For Yulmi, everyday life was animated, as a result, by a set of overlapping sacrifices: those she willingly made for her home and family, and those she stoically tolerated for the revolution.

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[51] There is a vast literature on this subject, and these references are principally indicative. For a good overview see Chant 2003.

If strong commitments to both their family and the revolution constituted two important elements in Rafael and Yulmi's home life, a third was the striving for material betterment that was evident in the great attention they paid to the improvement of their house. As Yulmi put it, the couple regarded a major part of their socialist dream as "our struggle to improve the material quality of our lives." *Poco a poco*, in twenty years they had transformed their home from a basic *rancho* into an impressive two-floored house with sturdy security gates at the front, several TVs, washing machines, a modern gas cooker and air-conditioning units in each bedroom. Bolivarian social programmes had also significantly enhanced the family's ability to obtain good quality food. Once a month, the couple would drive to a large MERCAL outlet and buy the family's subsidised staples for the coming month: rice, pasta, maize, dried milk, black beans, salt, sugar and coffee. Then on Saturdays they would go to the local *Mercalito* (little MERCAL) in El Camoruco and supplement these essentials with fresh tomatoes, cheese, ham, margarine and eggs. Occasionally, and particularly for special occasions, Yulmi would buy a chicken or a large cut of beef for a barbeque at the weekend, although competition for *Mercalito*'s discounted meats was fierce and people would often start queuing from early in the morning. The cheaper prices at MERCAL had made a significant difference to the family and, recalling how the country had ground to a halt during the oil *paro* in 2003, Yulmi always made sure that the house had a surplus of dried staples in the kitchen. On trips to MERCAL, she would often comment on how greedy the relative abundance of affordable food seemed to make people: "We've forgotten how it was to be poor and we want more and more. People want to buy five chickens instead of two. Well, if you've got the money to go and buy more in a private supermarket, good luck to you. Even the poor have forgotten poverty here."

Like many *barrio* families, Rafael and Yulmi had no property deeds or land title for their home. They had paid a small sum to an informal property developer for the original *rancho*, but never possessed the legal means to generate capital by selling their home. Hernando de Soto (1989, 2000) argues that this exclusion from the formal property market holds back huge swathes of the world's population, because they are

unable to unlock what he terms the "dead capital" (2000: 32) of their property.[52] In February 2002, Chávez issued Presidential Decree 1,666, which stated that those living in squatted *barrios* had the right to claim legal land tenancies. In response, *barrios* across the country began forming *comités de tierras urbanas* (urban land committees, CTUs), in which residents would group together and collectively set about submitting proposals to legalise their titles and guard against any future risk of eviction. Although some 126,000 families are reported to have claimed land titles through this process (Wilpert 2007: 188), the CTUs in El Camoruco were still only notional entities by mid-2010, meaning that no significant progress had yet been made (see Chapter 4 for further discussion of the CTUs). Rafael and Yulmi did not seem overly concerned by this delay, and there was certainly no risk of eviction from what was now a well-established community. They also paid no rent or mortgage for their home, meaning that any surplus income they earned could immediately be used for material items of their choosing. Invariably, the small surpluses that stretched beyond the family's everyday needs were reinvested in the home: the floor was tiled, a new television was purchased, or new furniture arrived.

Despite the absence of the formal property deeds, the family were still able to use their home as a source of income in the informal market. On the second floor of the house Rafael had established three bedsit-size rooms and a shared bathroom. Two of these rooms were being rented out to lodgers during my stay – one to my partner and I, the other to a young couple named Pablo and Paula and their 3 year-old son, Yeison. The second floor was known as the *anexo* (annex) by the family, and had a separate gate at street level that gave the lodgers independent access. A second gate connected the stairs to the family house, so that Rafael or Yulmi could come upstairs when necessary. For our room, the smaller but better decorated of the two, we paid the market rate of 250 Bs.F (USD $58) per month, whilst Pablo and Paula paid 200 Bs.F for theirs, giving Rafael and Yulmi a monthly income of Bs.F 450 (USD $105) from the combined rents. Such arrangements typified the small-scale entrepreneurial endeavours celebrated by de Soto, who estimates that the untapped value of informal urban dwellings in Latin America is close to USD $1 trillion (2000: 36).

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[52] In *The Mystery of Capital*, de Soto argues that there are six elements in the formal "Western" property systems that give citizens the capacity to generate capital: the fixing of the economic potential of assets; the integration of dispersed information into one system; the accountability of individuals; the "fungiblity" (i.e. flexibility) of assets; the networking of people; and the protection of transactions (2000: 39-67).

Figure 11: The author's room in Rafael and Yulmi's annex (Matt Wilde)

Although I was able to come and go freely between my own room and the family house (I had stayed downstairs for the first 6 weeks), relations between the other lodgers and the homeowners were cordial without being overfriendly. Pablo and Paula chose not to socialise with Rafael and Yulmi's family and friends, preferring to spend their free time with their families outside of Valencia (see below). They addressed Rafael and Yulmi using the formal *señor* and *señora*, thereby maintaining a respectful distance that reflected the exchange-based nature of the relationship. On occasions, Yulmi would bring up leftover food for the couple, which would then be

reciprocated by Pablo and Paula another day – a practice common among family members or close neighbours and friends. Yet because these gestures were never followed up with further socialising, there was always a distance between the two couples, with the relationship never developing significantly beyond that of landlord and tenant. Perhaps conscious of the "capitalist" nature of this venture, Rafael argued that although they let the rooms in order to help themselves financially, they also wanted to provide affordable options for young families who needed homes. He was certainly true to his word in my case, charging me the local rate even though I was a foreigner with access to US dollars and the lucrative parallel exchange rate.

The family's aspirational qualities were also manifested in aesthetic touches such as the coloured balustrades that lined the stairs and faced the street, or the bright blue and white paint and elaborate decorations that Yulmi added to the front of the house in time for Christmas 2009. Tellingly, she chose not to paint the sides or the back of the house: it was what faced the street, what others saw, that she wanted to showcase. Writing of similar instances of self-built housing in Sao Paulo's peripheries, James Holston describes the importance of customised homes as follows: "Residents read this house architecture as indications not only of economic success but also of life cycles and personalities. In this sense, the neighbourhoods constitute a stage on which houses perform by giving evidence of the social drama of each resident" (2008: 168). Social dramas were certainly present in Yulmi's outlook, expressed through her observation of the apparent jealousy of other people in the community: "There are people here who envy us and what we've got – you know, the good house, the car, the better things. But we worked for all of this, we had nothing before and life was so hard. When other people have spent their money on partying, drinking every night, we've spent our money on things for the house so that, *poco a poco*, we've improved it. That was our decision."

Statements such as this underlined the couple's sense of their own agency and demonstrated their justifiable pride in their accomplishments since moving into the "really ugly" *rancho* some twenty years before. Yet the comparison with less successful households in the community seemed to indicate a certain tension in their attitudes towards their neighbours. Yulmi's insinuation that others had been less successful because of their partying and drinking – that is, because of their short-termism and failure to plan for the future – suggested a discomfort with the visible unevenness of social mobility that prevailed in the community, and hinted at

underlying resentments over wealth disparities. Although such resentments were rarely expressed openly in my presence, there were occasions when they sprang to the surface. One evening I arrived home to find a blazing row taking place between Eduardo, Rafael's son, and his good friend Fernando, who lived across the street. Eduardo had lent Fernando 100 Bs.F (USD $23), who failed to return the money within the agreed time. Furious as a result, Eduardo was effectively ending the friendship as I arrived: "You know what, people get to hear about these things and in the future when you need help, they aren't going to *darte la mano* [give you a hand] because they know you're a thief," he shouted. Fernando responded by drawing attention to the disparities between his family, who were relatively poor, and *Los Hernández*. "It isn't easy for me like it is for you," he shouted back. "I can't just find 100 *bolo* [bolívares fuertes] like that. Look at your house compared to mine. And you've got a *car*. My *papá* doesn't even have a car." Rafael attempted to mediate in the dispute, telling both boys they needed to take a step back and calm down. But neither was willing to do so, and the argument ended with Fernando storming off as Eduardo shouted insults after him.

The exchange between these erstwhile *pana* shed further light on Yulmi's comment, highlighting how hidden resentments over the inequalities between households were made explicit in moments of conflict. Seen within this context, her words can be understood as an attempt to discursively assuage such wealth gaps by insinuating that the less well-off were responsible for their own situations. In keeping with her attitudes on family values and delinquency (see Chapter 2), this position spoke to issues of moral decay and illustrated an attempt, perhaps, to lesson any feelings of guilt that the Hernández family might feel concerning their own relative wealth. Neighbours deemed to have squandered resources or opportunities were thought to epitomise an irresponsible attitude to life, prioritising immediate pleasures over the more important task of building for the future. In contrast, hard work, frugality and self-control were presented as desirable traits, and it was these that Yulmi highlighted in her insinuations. Far from sounding "socialist", such comments evoked the figure of Benjamin Franklin, whose Protestant valorisation of toil and thrift was taken as emblematic of the "capitalist spirit" in Weber's (1976) famous work. In the case of this aspirational *chavista* family, the presence of such attitudes showed that self-identifying as revolutionaries did not preclude the persistence of ideas that might generally be associated with more conservative political stances. A

complicated set of tensions was evident, as socially mobile *chavistas* attempted to reconcile the egalitarian principles of Bolivarianism with the palpable disparities in their immediate lives.

The growing body of anthropological literature on consumption has focused chiefly on its importance in relation to production (Miller 1995) and on the role it plays in constructing identities (Baudrillard 1998; McCracken 1988; Applbaum 2000). It has been shown as integral to nation-building (Foster 2002), to cross-cultural identities (Howes 1996) and to forms of class distinction and prejudice (Bourdieu 1984; O'Dougherty 2002). Anna Pertierra's (2007) study in late-socialist Cuba demonstrates how a set of expectations about the kind of consumption that should be possible in "modern" Cuba has led to a predominant sense of disillusionment with the state and the revolutionary government because these expectations cannot be met. In Rafael and Yulmi's case, what was observable in contrast was a discomfort with benefitting from a system in which some fared better than others. As a result, in an attempt to reconcile the apparent discrepancy between their activist identities and their social mobility, they sought to draw moral boundaries around practices like consumption. The couple would describe how consumerism was a disease that had "infected" Venezuelans, and made a strong distinction between the material improvements they had made and the "individualist" fantasies they observed in those around them. Regularly, they would castigate their children for displays of *egoismo* (egotism/selfishness) in the house, reminding them forcefully of their responsibilities to others. A constant theme in Rafael's political addresses was the importance of seeing socialism not only as a political and economic struggle, but as a spiritual and relational one as well. "Socialism isn't just something material," he would say. "Obviously socialism is about material need first, but it's also about the security and happiness of your neighbour, your community and everyone else."

On a personal level, Rafael would put such attitudes into practice with acts of generosity or restraint. Although Yulmi never used the 4x4, it was regularly lent to friends or political comrades, sometimes for days at a time. On one occasion, Miguel and another activist managed to have the car impounded by the police after being caught drunk driving. Rafael was forced to pay to recover the vehicle, but somehow managed to laugh the incident off after briefly admonishing Miguel. "How could I stay angry at him," he explained, "when he's got nothing, and when he does so much work for the revolution without being paid?" On another, he chose to turn down a free

Blackberry mobile phone that the Alcaldía (municipality) offered him when he started a new job (see Chapter 6). He recognised the usefulness of having a new phone, and was particularly attracted to the year's free credit that would come with it, but was quite clear about why he could not accept it:

> I'd be really embarrassed to walk around with a phone like that, *really* embarrassed. To walk around with a tremendous telephone like that with the people who are with me – with where I'm from – I couldn't do it. To do that would be to show off, to show off your power *pues.* If they want to give me a phone with full credit, fine. But it has to be a normal, little phone. I feel comfortable sharing things with my people. But to have something like that just for me, for me alone… I can't. Morally I can't.

This insistence on maintaining modesty brings to mind Sahlins's (1974) critical take on Mauss's (1954) analysis of The Gift. Stressing that the Maori *hau* can be translated as "excess" or "spoils" (1974: 162), Sahlins argues that the moral exposition at the heart of the *hau* is that any advantage or gain one accrues from another must be returned to its originator. Rafael's rejection of the mobile phone exhibited elements similar to this belief, although it was not the "gain" he might owe to the Alcaldía that was his main problem. Rather, the Blackberry represented a visible excess or advantage that was not shared by his fellow activists and *barrio* residents – a moral impossibility, as he saw it, for someone with his standing in the community. As a community leader whose political career and public reputation relied on being a *chamo del barrio* (a boy from the *barrio*), he could not be seen to be elevating himself above his comrades or friends. There was thus a fine line that needed treading, in which an entrepreneurial *chavista* family needed to carefully regulate their consumption in order to maintain the social capital that came with being community leaders. In terms of political morality, the key point here is that ethical decisions such as this one were "performances" of morality (Zigon 2009: 263) that demonstrated the attempt to return to an embodied level of moral stability. The normative ideals of Bolivarianism, as well as concrete social relationships, were reinforced through the practice of everyday ethics.

Although there were clearly benefits that could come with being prominent members of the local *chavista* milieu, there were plenty of people in El Camoruco who were doing well in life without taking a significant interest in politics. Many made use of the missions and voted for Chávez without involving themselves in activism, while there were numerous government supporters who felt no need to make use of the missions at all. One couple who epitomised the *poco a poco* ethic were Pablo and Paula, the lodgers who rented Rafael and Yulmi's second room upstairs. A determined pair, they were both originally from rural communities and had moved to Valencia on a temporary basis in the hope of saving money. Shortly after arriving in the city, they had found work in a small plant that made cardboard boxes and, after staying in a small room near El Camorcuo, moved into the *anexo* after the birth of their son, Yeison. They were not deeply political people, taking little interest in local politics, but they voted for Chávez and planned to do so again.

Pablo and Paula were distinct from many families in El Camoruco because they were determined to return to the country, seeing their time in the city as a temporary measure that would allow them to save money and acquire enough useful consumer items – a television, a fridge, a cooker and nice furniture – to establish themselves in the country. Around once a month, they would travel back to Miranda State to spend the weekend working on a house they were building close to Paula's parents. The plan was to have the house ready before Yeison was due to start school, since they were determined that he would be educated in the country. Pablo used the money they saved after rent and food to buy things for the house in the country. He often listed the things they were buying as he described their gradual progress, and traced their frugality back to the tough times they experienced when they first moved to Valencia.

> We were sharing this tiny mattress in an empty room and I was only earning 60 Bs.F [$14] a week. It was enough to live but we couldn't buy anything. We had to leave a bit aside every week so that slowly we could buy the things we needed. And well, *poco a poco* we got our bed and our table and a better TV. I started to earn a bit more, and then my brother told me there was a place going here [El Camoruco] so we moved.

The couple possessed an admirable determination to improve their lives materially and were steadfastly focused on their long-term goals. Like several families I met, they also utilised what de Soto might term a "common credit fund" (1989: 101) through a network of close friends and work colleagues who participated in a "game" called *un bolso* (*bolso* translates as "bag"). This involved a number of trusted friends or family members pooling money, gathering it in a bag and drawing lots. The first lot drawn received all the money from the first month, the second all the money from the second month, and so on. The idea was that it allowed people with low incomes to buy large items such as beds or fridges outright when they would otherwise have to save for them. (It was the element of chance that appeared to classify it as a "game"). The *bolso* game resembled many traits of the micro-credit schemes that neoliberal economic theorists have sought to promote in the Global South, but had the advantage of maintaining debts within a closely trusted circle rather than involving international NGOs or lending agencies.[53] As well as paying for their essentials, investing in their future home in the country and, *poco a poco*, accumulating the material things they wanted to make life comfortable, the couple also had be mindful of their payments to the *bolso* pool – once a "game" had started, participants must keep up their contribution. Since they did not have close family nearby, they lacked the natural kin-based resource networks that typified settled *barrio* families such as *Los Hernández*. Instead, they utilised the linkages they had made with work colleagues and a few close friends and exhibited a remarkable discipline with their limited resources. As this informal micro-credit system demonstrated, their outlook was very much "future orientated", with the dream of returning to the country sustaining them through the long hours at the plant, which they described as tedious, repetitive and exhausting.

This work ethic was matched by a pride in being from the country, and by a kind of rural exceptionalism that set up a binary between city and country. Hard work, moral fibre and adaptability were regarded as traits that stemmed from a country upbringing, whilst the urban was depicted as a source of indolence and moral decay that blunted people's capacity to problem-solve. As Pablo put it,

> Here in Venezuela, Mateo, the only reason someone goes hungry is because they don't want to work. I've never had problems finding work, and I know that if I had to

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[53] The pros and cons of micro-credit have debated at great length. For ethnographic contributions, among others, see Goetz & Gupta 1996; Kabeer 2001; Rankin 2001; Lazar 2004; Mosse 2004.

move somewhere else tomorrow I'd find work within a couple of weeks. The problem here [Valencia] is that these *chamos* [kids] out in the streets just want to be given money, it's just '*dame reales*' [give me money]. In the country it's not like that. The *chamos* go to school during the week but first thing on Saturday they're out there with their machetes chopping bushes or trimming hedges trying to earn a bit of money. My parents taught all of us, eight brothers and sisters, to work. They taught us to work, to be humble and to be honest, and if anyone had turned out badly it would've been because they wanted to be like that.

There was a striking similarity between Pablo's words and those of Yulmi's regarding her neighbours, again reflecting a common tendency for Venezuelans to pit their own work ethic against the apparent torpor of others. The intriguing variation in comparison with Yulmi, however, was that from his rural vantage point Pablo understood the city as the root of these problems. In his classic work, *The Country and The City* (1993), Raymond Williams dated the moral separation between the rural and the urban as far back as Greek and Latin literature, noting the well-versed dichotomy that portrays the country as a place of quiet harmony and the city as a "teeming life of flattery and bribery, or organised seduction, of noise and traffic, with the streets unsafe because of robbers…" (1993: 46). Yet as he also points out, as much as cities are commonly regarded as places of vice and corruption, they are also seen as places of learning and socio-economic and cultural advancement (1993: 1). In Venezuela, as in much of Latin America, the dream of social mobility has been an unmistakably urban one for the second half of the twentieth century. Since the 1940s, when radicalising peasants who had begun to win land reforms saw their gains brutally reversed with the arrival of Perez-Jiménez's military junta in 1948 (Powell 1971), the overwhelming demographic trend in the country has seen rural to urban migration on a massive scale. By 2005, as Fernandes (2010: 10) notes, figures showed that Venezuela's population was 93.6 percent urbanised. The desire of a young family like Pablo and Paula's to move in the opposite direction thus represents an intriguing exception to the general trend over the last half century.

Together with the fact that they both had strong family links in the country, two factors seem explain to this desire. The first relates to the themes I explored in Chapters 1 and 2. Fundamentally, many Venezuelans see their oil-funded modernist dream as one that has failed, largely due to the high levels of poverty, corruption and violence in the cities, which are understood as indicators of a general social anomie and moral decay. Pablo certainly subscribed to this view, as his quote above indicated. The second factor is that, due to the investments made in health, education

and social welfare, rural areas are no longer regarded as backward or limited in the way they once were. In the past, secure employment and formal education may have only seemed possible in urban areas. But in the Chávez era, with the missions providing clinics, schools and affordable staples, and with significant public investment in roads and transport, many rural areas are now able to access these services without having to travel into the cities. Pablo and Paula followed the development of their rural community closely, commenting on the construction of a new school and a new bus service that meant the *pueblo* would be within a few hours journey of all three major cities (Caracas, Maracay and Valencia) in the area. Indeed, it is arguable that these infrastructural contributions are more significant in relative terms for rural communities than urban ones, since the availability of a local school or clinic for a rural household that can more or less self-subsist dramatically reduces their reliance on the economies and services of the cities. Pablo certainly agreed with this view: "What these rich people in the cities don't understand, Mateo, is that these things make a big difference to people in the country. It doesn't matter to them because they go to private clinics and send their kids to private schools, but we can't do that. Now that these things are arriving, life's better for people in the country."

Pablo and Paula's case suggests that the social programmes initiated by the Chávez government have not only enhanced the "capacity to aspire" among the poor, but have also given them greater control over what these aspirations are. No longer do rural migrants to the cities need to regard their moves as permanent because of the perceived limitations of rural life. Public investment in key services allows rural Venezuelans to re-imagine *el campo* as a place of opportunity, and to envision lives there without feeling that they are cut off from the "learning, communication [and] light" (Williams 1993: 1) that once seemed the sole preserve of urban dwellers. In broader terms, Pablo and Paula's story provides a useful case study of socially mobile, ambitious *barrio* residents who, whilst enjoying the benefits of the Bolivarian government, do not involve themselves in local politics or activism. Their case underlines the point that whilst political activism can certainly improve life prospects by multiplying an individual's social networks and opening up employment opportunities, there remain a myriad of non-political strategies that *barrio* residents employ in the hope of establishing more secure and fulfilling lives.

Just as some have fared well without becoming politicised, others have continued to struggle in spite of the Chávez-era changes. One local who fell into this category was Nucho, who I first met when I was helping Rafael refurbish the ground floor of his house. Together with a young man named Juan Martín, Nucho had been brought in to help with the work, and I first knew him as the guy who was busy in the road outside making the cement (by hand) that the three of us were using to fix new tiles to the floor inside. I became good friends with Nucho as I came to know him better, particularly as I realised that our positions in relation to Rafael were not, in a certain sense, so dissimilar. Rafael was, in essence, a patron to both of us, and in our different ways we each had our uses as his "clients" – Nucho as a handyman and occasional "security advisor" and I as anthropologist, photographer and administrative assistant.

A lifelong resident of El Camoruco, Nucho came from a difficult background, and was reluctant to talk in great detail about his childhood. His father left when he was a teenager and all four of his brothers had also moved out and now lived elsewhere. By the time I met him, he and his elderly mother were the only people living in the family house. In his late teens, Nucho had started smoking marijuana and became friendly with several local youths who were involved in El Camoruco's gang. Out of work and lacking direction and guidance, he was persuaded to join in the hope of making some easy money. "You meet the wrong people, start using drugs, get given a gun and they say, 'Let's go robbing,' and that's it. Easy." Together with a friend who was in the same position, he soon started using crack cocaine, which intensified his need for fast money and deepened his involvement with the gang. By then permanently armed, he became embroiled in the war between El Camoruco and José Felix, who were competing for control of the burgeoning drugs trade in the zone. After several years of involvement with the gang he climbed to third in command, a role which entailed providing guns to junior members of the gang, coordinating drugs sales and acting as a driver for the gang's leader, a notorious local figure famed for his cruelty. Nucho recalled how he was a mess at the time, earning fast money through armed robberies and then spending days on crack binges, smoking and smoking until he would finally pass out. He also remembered it as a chronically insecure existence and described how the war with José Felix left him in a perpetual state of fear. "They couldn't come here and we couldn't go there. If you went in

someone else's territory you'd be killed, it was simple. I was always scared. Everyday, all the time, I was looking around me worrying about being killed. I had two guns, one in my back pocket and one at the house in case the police came looking for me."

At the height of the war between the two gangs, Nucho took a bullet through his arm, severing the nerve so that he could no longer move the small finger on his left hand. "There was one person killed and seven injured, there were shots going everywhere," he described. The following occasion was even worse: seven people were killed in a gunfight by the *cancha* in El Camoruco. At this point, realising that he could die at any minute, Nucho decided he wanted out. He was able to maneuver his way out of the gang, and managed to stop using crack as well. Critical to this process were Rafael and Yulmi, who having known him most of their lives had spent a year and a half encouraging him to come on trips with *La Joc* and leave the drugs and guns behind. Rafael approached Nucho gradually, offering to take him to the beach initially, and then began offering him small jobs so he had an alternative source of income. As he explained, "When we were helping Nucho we never mentioned his crack use, we just offered him work and *poco a poco* showed him another way." Nucho had eventually stopped using crack and began working in an ad hoc and informal capacity for Rafael. When jobs in the house needed doing, Rafael would pay him for his help. He would be brought in to help with community events, acting as a general assistant, barman and unofficial security guard. I developed a similar arrangement with him, so that when I needed to visit places outside of El Camoruco I could call and ask him to accompany me for safety. Usually I would give him 20 Bs.F [USD $4.60] and he would buy himself a beer and wait for me while I carried out interviews or sat in meetings.

Though he had come a long way, Nucho's well-being still seemed precarious. He had found a patron in Rafael, but he lacked the embedded reciprocity networks that larger families had and at times this absence seemed starkly apparent. He would go wandering off for days at a time without his mobile phone so that no-one could contact him, and seemed incapable of holding down regular employment. In the relatively short period that I spent in El Camoruco, he went through several jobs: digging graves at the local cemetery, a brief stint as a shop assistant in a Chinese-owned store in the city centre, sporadic work in construction and occasional spells doing his old job collecting fares on the *camionetas*. In the evenings, he would cook

for his elderly mother, and often came by looking for money when he was short. This became increasingly frequent over a period of several months, and I discovered that his visits to me "for a few *bolo*" were supplemented by similar visits to other friends nearby. Some people worried that he was smoking again, but there was no proof of this and he usually managed to arrive for whatever informal work he was doing. Rafael's long-term plan was to start a mission called *Yo Soy Útil* (I Am Useful) for youngsters involved in drugs and gangs. He hoped to involve Nucho in this project, suggesting that he could work as a recruiter and organiser. In an embryonic example of this, Nucho and two young gang members provided security for a cultural event organised by Rafael's political team, a day that passed off without problems despite the local police refusing to assist. Yet he was heavily reliant on Rafael for such opportunities to emerge, and in the meantime his movements often seemed aimless and haphazard.

Oscar Lewis would probably have regarded Nucho's situation as an exemplar of the "culture of poverty", whilst it could also be categorised as the "advanced marginality" described by Wacquant (1999), Auyero (1999, 2000) and Perlman (2004). Yet conversely, one could equally make the claim that his survival was ultimately down to the kind of reciprocity networks that characterised the more optimistic studies of the 1960s and 70s. Rafael and Yulmi's ability to economically help Nucho by giving him informal work was certainly a product of their material ascendance in the Chávez era, but their desire to help others dated back to their time with *La Joc*. Perhaps what his case underlines more than anything is that, at least as far as the contemporary Venezuelan *barrio* goes, neither the "slums of hope" nor the "hypershantytown" model can be said to adequately summarise the nature of social and economic life. Rather, El Camoruco seems to occupy a midway point between the two, in which material betterment and neighbourly cohesion co-exist with social anomie and impoverishment. What this suggests is that increases in public investment can make a significant difference to the lives of *barrio* residents, but only in proportion to their existing circumstances. The precariousness of Nucho's situation seemed to reflect a broader problem for *barrio* residents, which was that access to secure, well-paid employment was largely contingent either on educational qualifications or extensive social contacts (or both). The Chávez era has unquestionably made both of these pathways easier to access for working-class Venezuelans, but even within *barrios* some have "a more brittle horizon of

aspirations" (Appadurai 2004: 69) than others. Kinship networks remain the dominant institutions in *barrio* life, and these dramatically frame an individual's ability to capitalise on wider macro-structural changes.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have shown how different households and individuals in El Camoruco engaged with Bolivarian institutions and used them to develop aspirations and opportunities as both political activists and pragmatic individuals. I have also shown that such engagement was by no means universal, arguing that *chavismo* has added to rather than replaced existing economic strategies. The case studies discussed illustrate that opportunity, like poverty, remains unevenly distributed for *barrio* residents in spite of *chavismo*'s social programmes. Firstly, households and kinship networks that were already strong and self-reinforcing have been able to draw on their existing "portfolios of assets" (Moser 2009: xiv) and take advantage of new openings for education and employment. Through their involvement in political activism, figures such as Rafael and Yulmi have been able to convert the social and human capital they already possessed into further assets – into employment, material advancement, status and what Appadurai calls the "capacity to aspire" (2004: 59). This aspiration is multifaceted, reflecting the broad political content of Bolivarianism as well as more "prosaic" concerns such as the health and prosperity of their children and the moral conduct of their neighbours.

Secondly, the social missions and expanded university system have unquestionably had a significant impact on people's capacity to both consider themselves as educated, professional people and their real-world ability to find work as a result. Once again, though my own conclusions are tentative given the small number of cases I have considered, it would appear that the same individuals from strong social networks are able to put their qualifications to further use than others. In particular, prominent activists like Yulmi can find secure employment in the state sector once they graduate thanks to their prominent standing in the local *chavista* milieu. Others, like Edwin, still benefit from Chávez's education programmes, but their ability to break out of sporadic and insecure forms of employment remains

limited. Undoubtedly, such issues reflect broader structural forms of exclusion that continue in spite of the revolution.

Thirdly, though women have been major beneficiaries of the new opportunities thrown up by the Bolivarian government, gender inequality remains an issue in *chavista* households, taking different forms as new pressures on both men and women emerge. Although Yulmi has seen her opportunities expand hugely thanks to education and political empowerment, she remains bound by what are deemed traditionally female duties and tolerates significant disparities in terms of mobility and domestic responsibility. At times her ambitions clash with those of Rafael, confirming the observation that, as Jelin (1991: 33) and Moser (2009: 158) argue, households are multifaceted and contradictory domains.

Fourthly, the successes of *chavista* families thanks to their involvement in the Bolivarian party-state nexus produce uncomfortable tensions that challenge socialist ethics and values. Although collectivised class struggle is regarded as a central component of socialist theory and practice, more atomised and individualised social mobility is a clear by-product of a system in which access to resources and services remains unevenly distributed. Socially mobile *chavistas* struggle with this contradiction, on occasions appearing to blame the less fortunate for their predicaments and at other times engaging in discursive and practical efforts to ameliorate obvious disparities in wealth.

Finally, despite the predominance of *chavismo* as a political and social project in the *barrios*, many people pursue life goals that either do not relate to politics at all, or make use of government programmes without engaging as activists. Aspirations are diverse and unpredictable, and in Pablo and Paula's case what the Bolivarian revolution may mean, above all, is that they are able to achieve their homesteading dream with greater security and opportunity, orbiting the "vice-ridden" city for a little longer so that they can propel themselves away from it. Roads, clinics and schools provide the relatively small number of rural Venezuelans with a more solid base from which to build, *poco a poco*, the rest themselves. For others, aspiration may remain something muted and faint, buried beneath the multiplicity of hurdles and snags that make the immediate and everyday challenge enough. Nucho was close to being one of the ultimate casualties of poverty, but found fortune in Rafael and Yulmi, who helped him to drag himself out of a nihilist spiral. Households on an upwards trajectory may not be able to take everyone with them, but they can generate enough motion to give a

few others the ability to get themselves somewhere. Nucho may not share Rafael's vision of socialism or Yulmi's dream of a professional career, but he has his assets: his friends and few family members, and the wily, dogged attributes of a survivor.

What, then, can these conclusions tell us about the success of *chavismo* as a political movement and its adoption by particular groups of people? Perhaps the most important point to underline is that the broad-brush classification of *chavismo* as a "movement of the poor" fails to interrogate who these poor are, what the differences among them might be and how these differences affect political agency, leadership and ideological loyalty at the local level. These distinctions are crucial to understand because they provide the real shape of the Bolivarian revolution as a lived reality in everyday life. My contention is that kinship is of critical importance in shaping who become community leaders because it determines who the most capable and resourceful individuals are likely to be. Those who come from strong family backgrounds with significant social and economic resources behind them are able to both make better practical use of government initiatives and to offer themselves more freely as activists. As a result, their loyalty to the revolution is produced through the co-dependence of material betterment and ideological commitment. Put simply, for families like *Los Hernández*, the more committed to the revolution they are, the better life becomes.

The importance of this observation is that it shows how *chavismo* is not driven by the poorest of the poor who are "spellbound" by Chávez's charisma, but rather by the some of most successful and socially embedded working-class families who use the revolution as tool for both developing class consciousness and achieving social mobility. These kinship groups constitute what might be termed an emergent "*barrio* aristocracy" who increasingly find secure employment in the Bolivarian state. They form social, economic and ideological blocs – "resource hubs", we might call them – at the local level that their own family members and others are able to utilise for support and guidance. In doing so, *chavismo* and its ideology is carried through kin- and friendship-based problem-solving networks, with couples like Pablo and Paula and individuals like Nucho benefitting on a "secondary" level; although they are not activists, their partial dependence on a strong *chavista* family produces a mediated connection to Chávez and the revolution.

If we accept the claim that the "capacity to aspire" is a navigational attribute, the Chávez era can be understood as offering an increased potential for working-class

Venezuelans to acquire navigational skills and seek out opportunities for themselves. Although the revolution speaks the language of class struggle, because labour is not the principal mode of political organisation in the Bolivarian movement, it cannot be said to be a collectivised project in the manner of "traditional" socialist movements. Instead, the varied case studies detailed here demonstrate how this capacity is developed most keenly in those from strong kinship networks, meaning that ideological commitment is conjoined with aspiration and social mobility in particular households. It is individuals from these households who have become the revolution's key leaders at the local level.

PART II

CHAPTER 4

> One time we were in a community helping with the formation of a communal council. They were trying to do a census of all the houses so they could find out who lived there and what the needs of the community were. When we were at the meeting this woman said to me, 'But how are we supposed to do a census when we don't have official documents that can be signed and stamped?' And I said to her in front of everyone, 'How is this popular power if you need to wait for the government to do everything? This is your community so you should do the census; you know better than anyone what the needs of the community are. *That* is popular power.'
>
> – Oneidys

INTRODUCTION

This thesis has thus far examined the appeal of Bolivarianism as a moral project and a means to find solutions to material problems for working-class Venezuelans. Beginning with this chapter, it now analyses the attempt to achieve a more far-reaching and normative aim: the establishment of participatory democracy as a foundation for twenty-first century socialism. At the heart of this aim was the ideal of popular power, a notion that provided a predominant and abiding aspiration for the activists whose struggles animate these pages. Archetypical of the moral fables that would be repeated over and over again by *chavista* organisers, Oneidys's statement above captures the desire to empower *barrio* residents and convince them of their own ability to control their lives in practical and ideological terms. Rejecting the hegemony of officialdom represented by government documents, in this instance she had urged local people to look to themselves before seeking out the state to address their needs. Such sentiments were recurrent in the meetings and social events of local-level *chavista* leaders, expressions in vernacularised form of central tenets of the Bolivarian dream: participatory democracy and self-government. Yet as the extract also shows, these principles were often in competition with political beliefs and practices that appeared to contradict, or at least significantly complicate, the plausibility of their realisation. While activists like Oneidys sought to promote revolutionary visions of a revolutionary and participatory state, they regularly encountered the stubborn persistence of attitudes that continued to imagine the liberal

state in more paternalistic and benevolent terms. These competing ideals were not only expressed through the viewpoints of different individuals, but could also be identified as conflicts that took place *within* individuals: many *chavistas* were themselves hybrid and contradictory political subjects who reflected, through their own internal dilemmas, the divergent currents of Bolivarianism as a whole.

An enquiry into this disjunctive political subjectivity, this chapter provides an overview of the historical, political and ideological conditions that framed everyday political practice in and around El Camoruco. Its principle aim is to analyse the diverse and often conflicting currents that shaped neighbourhood activism in my fieldsite, focusing on what I regard as the central challenge that confronted grassroots *chavista* leaders: how to build "bottom-up" participatory democracy out of a political movement that derives a tremendous amount of its material and symbolic resources from the central petro-state and its charismatic president. Here I explore four key themes that structure this confluence. First, I outline the notion of "political work" and explain its uses to an analysis of grassroots activism and leadership; second, I detail the history of Venezuelan neighbourhood organisations and their changing relationships with the state; third, I analyse the trajectory of El Camoruco's neighbourhood organisations within this shifting national context; and fourth, I explore the ideal of popular power through ASOPRODENCO, a radical grassroots organisation in the locality. In the final part of the chapter I consider the relationship between grassroots organisations and the state by drawing on Negri's (1992) distinction between constituent and constituted power, a framework Chávez explicitly drew on in his formulation of participatory democracy.

POLITICAL WORK

The importance of "political work" as a focus of ethnographic enquiry has been emphasised in recent studies by Mukulika Banerjee (2010) and Julieta Gaztañaga (2010). Both derive their approaches from Weber's seminal essay, "Politics as Vocation" (1946), which sought to define the qualities that characterise successful political leaders. Weber observed that the political life could be understood in two ways: "Either one lives 'for' politics," he wrote, "or one lives 'off' politics. By no means is this contrast an exclusive one" (1946: 83). He detailed how successful

political leaders would be those who were motivated by a sense of responsibility and belief in a cause, but also those who were able to cultivate careers out of such causes by accepting that they might never be realised (1946: 128). Banerjee extends Weber's definition by emphasising how successful local leaders – in her case, the Comrades of West Bengal's Left Front – are those who are able to turn their connections to centres of power into personal social capital. She observes that political work often seems to have an elusive quality to it (2010: 23); local political leaders are known to do *something*, but it is not always clear exactly what that something is. As in the classic studies of brokerage and clientelism (see Bailey 1969; Blok 1974; Gellner & Waterbury 1977; Schmidt et al 1977), this elusiveness often stems from unseen connections to more powerful actors outside of the immediate community, meaning that such leaders cultivate popularity by delivering resources to their locales through hidden means. Banerjee's key point is that these well-known forms of brokerage or patronage are most effective as political work when the leader extends their influence into realms that are not normally considered political – into family, traditional institutions and civic life more generally. As they simultaneously expand their social networks and promote their chosen cause, leaders enact a form of "political entrepreneurship" (2010: 30) in which they are able, pace Weber's formulation, to both live *for* and *off* a political cause at the same time. Gaztañaga (2010: 299-301) also highlights the importance of spheres beyond those ordinarily considered "political", arguing that political "works" – that is, infrastructural projects undertaken by local political actors – are often realised through the mobilisation of interpersonal relationships and institutional connections that exist outside of the political domain. Anthropological enquiries into political work, she argues, should pay greater attention to the processes that enable such works to take place, since the utilisation of "informal" relationships play a significant role in shaping how "formal" politics is imagined and practiced.

Much of the material that characterises Part II of this thesis centres on the relationship between political and non-political domains, and on actors like Rafael and Rosa who gradually cultivated political careers out of both the commitment to a cause (Bolivarianism/socialism) and social networks that enabled them to promote that cause in their localities. A critical point I wish to emphasise from the outset is that political work is best understood as an amalgam of ideological motivations, structural constraints and interpersonal relationships, its everyday practice a constant

process of navigation between these different domains. Two frameworks are useful tools for understanding this process. Joan Vincent's classic article (1978) proposes that *action theory*, an approach that focuses on the strategies of individual actors in political arenas, remains a useful analytical tool because it highlights how individuals are both enabled and constrained by the social relationships they inhabit. A key insight of Vincent's argument is that although actors may indeed be motivated by ideological causes, they also manipulate and adapt prevailing discursive trends to suit their own strategic aims (1978: 178).[54] This observation is of particular importance in Chapters 5 and 6, where conflicts between political rivals over the control of particular Bolivarian projects are mediated through debates over the meaning of terms like participatory democracy and socialism.

A second framework I adopt, and one compatible with action theory, is Bourdieu's (1984, 1990) notion of the *social field*, which explains how practice is shaped through the interplay between a subjective system of predispositions (*doxa*), embodied behaviours (*habitus*) and the objective ensemble of power relations in a given social setting (*social fields*). Actors take part in something akin to a "game" governed by hidden rules, in which they struggle to accumulate social capital according to the interchange between these subjective and objective categories (1990: 66-68). I consider *chavismo* – a bundle of institutions, ideological imperatives, social relationships and actors in a variety of party, state, quasi-state and non-state roles – to be a social field in these terms, and approach political work as the complex navigation of these different categories by individuals. In keeping with Bolivarian ideology, much of the time my respondents were seeking to act collectively and further the interests of both their geographic and political communities. But it was also true that even as they sought to achieve collectivised means and ends, different actors jostled with one another over the control of resources, or strove to impose their understanding of particular ideological positions on others. Often, these individuals were unable to clearly see all the forces that acted upon them, and their political work was coloured by continual reflections on whether or not their everyday practice was "truly" socialist, democratic or Bolivarian. An enduring theme that features

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[54] Vincent notes that observations of this kind date back as far as the work of Herbert Spencer and Robert Marrett. She cites the following quote from Marrett, for example: "Even where the regime of custom is most absolute, the individual constantly adapts himself [*sic*] to its injunctions, or rather adapts these to his own purposes with more or less conscious and intelligent discrimination. The immobility of custom is, I believe, largely the effect of distance. Look more closely and you will see perpetual modification in process…" (Kuper 1973: 31, cited in Vincent 1978: 178).

throughout Chapters 4-6 is the tendency for activists to blame perceived failings or difficulties in one sphere of action (e.g. limited sources of economic support) on phenomena they observe in another (e.g. the poor moral conduct or failing political consciousness of their comrades). Such trends, as I will discuss, show how political work is also an ongoing exercise in managing imagination, hope and disappointment.

The political work I traced among activists in and around El Camoruco featured a myriad of tasks, roles and responsibilities, with key actors like Rafael and Rosa becoming political "specialists" to the extent that they eventually became paid employees of the *chavista* state (see Chapter 6). Yet all *barrio* activists carried out multiple duties, the revolution demanding their energies in a number of different guises: educating the local population about the principles of popular power and socialism; assisting in the construction of neighbourhood organisations; acting as brokers with state funding bodies and political patrons; electoral campaigning on behalf of Chávez and PSUV; assisting with the establishment of social missions at the community level. Although many of these tasks were carried out simultaneously, for the sake of clarity I have divided them largely into different chapters. The sections below focus principally on the history of neighbourhood organising until the passing of the Communal Councils Law in 2006, looking at the evolution of both political consciousness and community leadership. Chapter 5 centres on political practice in the communal councils, whilst Chapter 6 looks at grassroots charismatic leadership and the launch of the communes.

NEIGHBOURHOOD ORGANISING AND POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN VENEZUELA

Neighbourhood organising in Venezuela has a long history in which a diverse set of political positions in relation to the state have been observable. Community organisations have ranged from close clientelist ties with political parties to strong autonomous and antagonistic positions in regards to the state and political establishment. In the *barrios*, neighbourhood Juntas Pro-Mejoras (improvement committees) were generally formed during or shortly after the land invasions that made up the process of rural to urban migration from the 1950s onwards. As Ray (1969) points out, many of these invasions were carried out within embedded

clientelist networks operated by the dominant political parties, Acción Democrática (AD) and the Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente (COPEI). Intermediaries with close links to party and/or municipal officials would target vacant land owned by the state or individuals with close links to the ruling party in a given municipality. The land invasions were then granted tacit approval, on the proviso that the party would receive electoral support from the settlers. Such support was assured by issuing the first land plots to specific individuals in the *barrio* who, in return for the guarantee of land, became *caciques* – local strongmen who would organise political support and reinforce the power of whichever party had assisted with the settlement (Ray 1969: 37-63; see also Peattie 1968; Karst et al 1973: 28-29). These same intermediaries were invariably elected as the leaders of the Juntas, becoming responsible for finding the state support necessary to establish basic amenities and services. According to Ray, after an initial flurry of activity during the settlement process, the achievements of the Juntas were often slow and ad hoc, with infrastructural improvements often corresponding to electoral cycles. As a result, they often failed to maintain widespread local participation and slipped into inactivity (1969: 43-56).

A second organising trend at the neighbourhood level took place in predominantly middle-class communities, who according to Lander (1995) and Ellner (1999) often organised around concerns over rapid urbanisation and delinquency. In 1971 an umbrella group of organisations from wealthy neighbourhoods known as FACUR (Federation of Associations and Urban Communities) was formed. Unlike the Juntas Pro-Mejoras, FACUR strove to maintain independence from political parties and began to articulate a neighbourhood-focused form of citizenship that was closely linked to property ownership (Fernandes 2010: 57). Responding to these trends, the passing of the Organic Law of Municipal Regimes (LORM) in 1978 gave *asociaciones de vecinos* (neighbourhood associations, AVs) the right to exclusively represent their communities and encouraged municipalities to consult neighbourhood groups about public works in their localities (Ellner 1999: 78). This emboldened an already growing neighbourhood movement and signalled its potential to be a significant political force. Further moves to decentralise political power came during Carlos Andrés Peréz's neoliberal reforms of 1989, which opened up elections for governors, mayors and *juntas parroquiales* (lower-level district councils). Taken together, the 1978 and 1989 reforms represented an effort to alter the mechanisms of

political decision-making and increase public participation. Yet a failure to accompany these political reforms with decentralisation of the fiscal and taxation system resulted in political inertia, as many state authorities at the municipal level sought to protect entrenched clientelist interests and prevented effective democratisation (Buxton 2001: 111-114). This also led to financial inequalities between different municipalities, which increased socio-economic polarisation and decreased the likelihood of a multi-class alliance being organised through organisations like FACUR (Ellner 1999: 90). Ellner argues that this emergent neighbourhood movement failed to capitalise on its strengths because of its reticence concerning "centralisation". In his view this left the organisation unable to build the political structures that could have exerted more pressure on the state (1999: 96-97).

This interplay between long-term political visions that sought autonomy and more immediate concerns that required engagement with political power had been observable in *barrio* organisations since the fall of Peréz-Jiménez in 1958. Fernandes (2010) and Velasco (2011) show how *barrios* such as 23 de Enero, La Vega and San Augustín in Caracas were bastions of the radical guerrilla movement of the 1960s, establishing a tradition of autonomous neighbourhood organising and hostility towards the state during the years of the dictatorship. Velasco argues that these movements tended to oscillate between long-term political struggles – those seeking to advance revolution – and short-term social demands, which became more prominent in the 1970s as residents organised around water, public services and amenities (2011: 168-174). These political and social currents finally converged in the 1980s, when direct action was used to force municipal authorities into action over waste collection. Neighbourhood groups thus began to combine autonomous actions with strategic negotiations with the state. Velasco argues that this ideological and tactical fusion between social and political struggles "contained radical elements of direct action that nevertheless did not preclude loyalty to liberal government, in its forms of accountability, institutionalism, and representation" (2011: 179). It expressed, he writes, a "hybrid political consciousness" (*ibid*) in which participatory politics were built around a "contingent autonomy, neither fully independent nor fully beholden to the state" (2011: 181).

In the Chávez era, such hybrid tendencies are again present. As I described in Chapter 3, the formation of *comités de tierras urbanas* (urban land committees, CTUs) occurred in response to Chávez's move to grant land titles to those living in

squatted *barrios* in 2002. Although they were framed around an effort to obtain legal ratification from the state for self-built communities, the CTUs began as autonomous organisations, with committees choosing their own leadership and undertaking community censuses independent of state bodies. According to María García-Guadilla (2008, 2011), in areas where the CTUs were formed they not only served an instrumentalist purpose in relation to land titles, but also acted as bodies that attended to the wider needs of their communities (2011: 88-94). She raises concerns, however, about the dangers of these bodies being co-opted by more explicitly party-political groups, and notes that during periods of political strife such as the 2002 coup, oil *paro* and recall referendum, the CTUs often became appendages of *chavista* groups such as the Bolivarian Circles (CBs) and Electoral Battle Units (UBEs) (2008: 8). Both the CBs and UBEs functioned as pro-Chávez, neighbourhood-level organising bodies in periods of elections and had close links to the Movimiento Quinta República (MVR) before it was superseded by PSUV in 2007. At the community level, the lines between autonomous social movement organisations and political arms of *chavista* parties are often blurred, particularly as the same actors tend to perform dual roles, shifting from community-specific campaigns to support for the MVR and later PSUV during elections and political crises (2011: 97).

The most recent set of changes for neighbourhood organisations was the passing of the Communal Councils Law in 2006. As a core component of Chávez's move towards twenty-first century socialism, the law provides a legal framework for new community bodies, grants them the power to directly manage state resources and provides a new set of institutional channels that enable resource streams from government ministries to circumvent state and municipal levels of government and pass directly to neighbourhoods. I deal with the communal councils (CCs) in greater detail in Chapter 5, but for the benefit of this chapter it is worth noting that they have been regarded as a mixed blessing thus far. Although they signal a concerted effort by the state to stimulate and support popular participation, they also represent an increasingly institutionalised and prescribed form of participation, deepening state-managed frameworks at ever-lower levels of community organisation. The law seeks to make CCs the predominant model of organisation at the local level and dictates that pre-existing community organisations like the CTUs should become part of the CC structure. Arguing in favour of autonomy, García-Guadilla cautions that such

subsumption may work to "disarticulate and demobilise the CTUs from their original identities" (2011: 96).

Interestingly, unlike in the Caracas cases cited above, in El Camoruco CTUs were never established following the 2002 decree. Residents were aware that the option to claim land titles existed, but the practical organisation of committees and censuses did not emerge until the CCs were formed after 2006. Efforts to establish CTUs were subsequently made, but not until I was carrying out fieldwork in 2009 and 2010.[55] These local-specific dynamics highlight how Caracas-based accounts cannot be assumed to apply across the country. Individual community histories are thus vital to deepening our understanding of how state projects intersect with local organising trajectories, helping us identify the diverse forms of political consciousness that may emerge as a result.

THE EVOLUTION OF NEIGHBOURHOOD ORGANISING IN EL CAMORUCO

In El Camoruco there was no collective memory of significant neighbourhood mobilisations during the 1970s and 1980s. Whilst the *poco a poco* ethic was quietly being practiced as people built houses, found work and slowly connected their *barrio* to the rest of Valencia, for many years they lacked community organisations that could operate autonomously or offer an alternative to *puntofijista* systems of clientelism. Local people remembered how community improvements such as the *cancha* (sports court) and street lights had been achieved by the neighbourhood junta in the 1970s, but none of the elderly residents recalled any significant community mobilisations, and there was certainly no guerrilla activity. An *asociación de vecinos* (AV) was formed following the 1978 reform but, again, it was only sporadically active and reportedly relied on close links with COPEI, who usually made investments in the community around the time of elections. Other than the AV, the principle community organisation people remembered was *La Joc*, which, as I described in Chapter 1, had been influential in radicalising young people such as Rafael and Yulmi in the 1980s. The community would have to wait for *La Joc*'s

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[55] In fact, because my local CC had struggled to elect specific spokespeople to a CTU, it was the simply the core actors from the CC who were busying themselves with community censuses in early 2010 (see Chapter 5). At the time of writing, no land titles have yet been issued in El Camoruco.

efforts to bear fruit in the political domain, however, and until the late 1990s El Camoruco's residents were denied access to a host of basic services by the limited terms in which they could participate politically. Forced to rely on party brokers, *partidocracia* trapped them in a position of what Holston calls "inclusively inegalitarian citizenship" (2008: 3).

Although the historical absence of significant neighbourhood mobilisations in El Camoruco is striking in comparison with the Caracas *barrios* that the studies above focus on, it can perhaps be explained by the community's relative youthfulness in comparison with the capital's communities. After all, whilst many *barrio* residents in Caracas had struggled against Peréz-Jiménez in the 1950s, El Camoruco was not founded until a full decade later. During the 1970s and early 1980s the community would have been archetypical of the future-orientated "slums of hope" described by Lloyd (1979), with the oil-based redistribution of *puntofijismo* tempering the need for radical, autonomous community organisations. As a community establishing itself *poco a poco*, residents in those years could believe that improved living standards and full recognition as citizens and would come with time. But the economic contraction that occurred after the 1983 crash and the establishment's complete loss of legitimacy after *el caracazo* radically altered this faith in the future.

A combative community organisation did finally emerge in 1999 when, shortly after the election of Chávez nationally, Rafael was elected as President of the AV. Together with Yulmi, Rosa and two of his brothers, Alejandro and Manuelito, he assembled a committed group of activists and set about changing the way the AV worked, asking each street in the community to appoint a *delegado de la calle* (street delegate) who could represent their street at regular community meetings. The aim was to bring the philosophy of *La Joc* to the AV and find a way of stimulating more widespread community participation. Large public assemblies were organised so that pressing local issues could be discussed, and under the leadership of a group of young and motivated activists the community began to make demands directly on the state without involving political parties. As *puntofijismo* died a death at the national level, between 1999 and 2003 El Camoruco's AV saw a huge rise in local participation and was able to win a number of community improvements from the city's Alcaldía (municipality), which until 2008 was in the hands of an anti-Chávez mayor, Francisco "Paco" Cabrera. New water pipes, telephone lines, freshly asphalted roads and a pilot

public health scheme all came as a result of the AV's public mobilisations in this period.

Rafael recalled how the high level of participation in public meetings had made a significant impression on visiting municipal officials:

> I remember one time we had a meeting with someone from the Alcaldía about the water or the roads or something. He said, 'I'll get you the money if you can prove to me that this community is behind you and in need. I want to see two hundred people at the meeting on Thursday.' This was on the Tuesday, but I knew it would be easy. Back then we were so well organised I didn't even need to go round the community myself, I just contacted the street delegates and they rounded up their streets. At the meeting we had like 400, 500 people and I remember seeing this guy's face!

According to Partha Chatterjee, mobilisations of this kind are opportunities for neighbourhood organisations to demonstrate the *"moral attributes of a community"* (2004: 57, emphasis in original). Following Foucault (1991), he argues that successful claims can be made on the state by investing collective identities with a "moral content" and demanding that the state performs its duty of care (2004: 47).[56] In the AV's case, large public mobilisations showcased the community's need and placed a responsibility on the Alcaldía to respond to their demands. By organising outside of the traditional party patrons, the community was able to articulate a more powerful moral claim.

As well as receiving recognition and assistance from the Alcaldía, one of the real achievements of the AV was that they were able to foster a community-minded ethic by resolving community disputes internally. Though a focus on meeting the community's material deficiencies was hugely important, Rafael argued that it went hand in hand with engaging individuals and households directly. For example, when a number of residents complained about people throwing sewage into the street, it became clear that the AV needed to campaign for an upgrading of the water pipes. But they also approached the households involved and persuaded them not to throw dirty water and rubbish into the street in the meantime. They then drafted a set of community rules through a series of public meetings, establishing norms through conversations that took place on a street-by-street basis. As Rafael explained, "We had really high levels of participation because of the way we worked – we'd go out

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[56] Chatterjee (2004) argues that although governmentality (Foucault 1991) is commonly regarded as an expression of state power, it opens political spaces for citizens precisely because it confers a moral responsibility on the state to assure the well-being of its populace.

and talk to people and encourage them to engage." Rosa believed the positive response to the public meetings had a feedback effect on the community's ethos more generally: "We really changed the *conciencia* [social conscience] of people. People put boxes of flowers in their front windows, and one December we had a competition for the best decorated street in El Camoruco. All the streets were so pretty with the lights and the decorations. It was beautiful, Mateo, and that's what the association achieved for El Camoruco." The accomplishments of the AV were such that in the 2001 census the community was upgraded from *barrio* to *urbanización popular*, indicating a marked improvement in infrastructure and services.[57]

In summation, the success of El Camoruco's AV stemmed from the convergence of several key factors. Firstly, the pressing needs of the community were a powerful galvanising force after years of chronic underinvestment and rising poverty. Secondly, the shift in political hegemony nationally with the arrival of Chávez meant that relying on political patrons from *puntofijista* parties was no longer either credible or desirable. Thirdly, the active promotion of protagonist and participatory democracy from the Bolivarian government encouraged collectivised and combative community actions and championed them as legitimate expressions of citizenship. Finally, the emergence of highly energetic and effective local leaders enabled the community to make demands on the state without the need for external brokers. Instead, figures such as Rafael and Rosa began cultivating the profiles and connections that would see them become "home-grown" brokers with an increasing ability to access state actors and institutions.

As the Bolivarian era progressed, the AV became just one of many local-level organisations that were active in El Camoruco. Political participation increased hugely in this period, and a number of different currents were observable as various organisations came and went, often with the same activists being involved. Thanks to their accomplishments with the AV, Rafael and Rosa began extending their influence beyond their own *barrio* as links with other community leaders and state actors were forged. By then self-defining as *chavistas*, they had developed a great enthusiasm for "popular power" through the AV, and decided that there was huge political potential

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[57] Classifications of urban communities in Venezuela go from *invasiones* (squatter settlements) to *barrios* (post-squatter communities that have established basic amenities and services), and then through to *urbanizaciónes* (private developments predominantly for the middle-class and elites). Defining El Camoruco as an *urbanización popular* therefore indicates a significant improvement in services and amenities since Rafael and Rosa's core period with the AV.

if other communities could achieve similar levels of mobilisation. In 2003 they began building a network of community leaders in Miguel Peña that eventually became known as the Association for the Promotion of Endogenous Community Development (ASOPRODENCO). ASOPRODENCO called themselves an *Escuela de Formación* (School of Formation) and sought to establish combative and participatory AVs like El Camoruco's in other communities, gradually becoming a central organising unit for grassroots activists throughout the south of Valencia. On top of this, having impressed with his capacity for community leadership and networking, Rafael was offered employment with the Alcaldía's public services department, where he was asked to develop similar community-state links in other *barrios*. Both of these developments were significant, and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6.

As a result of their expanding commitments, Rafael and Rosa chose to stand down from El Camoruco's AV in 2003, handing over to Alejendro, Manuelito and several other prominent actors who had acted as street delegates. Between 2003 and 2006, the AV went through a less active period, partly due to the successful infrastructural improvements that decreased the need for largescale mobilisations, and partly to the intensely political period nationally. The coup attempt of 2002 had a seismic impact on many community activists sympathetic to the government, and local concerns were put on hold as organisers sought to defend the president. As Yulmi recalled, "In that period we were fighting for our lives. We *had* to keep Chávez in power. If Chávez had gone, we would've had ten years of the ultra-right, of a dictatorship, and then there would've been a civil war." Between the *paro* (2003), the arrival of the social missions (2003), the recall referendum against Chávez (2004) and finally the build-up to the 2006 presidential elections, many AV activists were pulled into more explicitly political groups such as the CBs and UBEs. These groups later dissolved and were subsumed by PSUV when it was formed in 2007, and many activists returned to a more local focus with the passing of the Communal Councils Law in 2006.

In a relatively short period (1999 to the present day), El Camoruco thus saw a host of neighbourhood bodies emerge and evolve, with many of the looser arrangements of the early Chávez period eventually being superseded by more clearly defined organisations with firmer institutional ties to the central state. By the time of my arrival in late 2008, the MVR coalition had been replaced at the national level by PSUV, with smaller parties either being subsumed by PSUV or opting to remain

independent.[58] Over 5 million people had become members of the new party by 2007 (Ellner 2008: 127), with a visible recruitment drive taking place at public events during my research period. In El Camoruco the CBs and UBEs were replaced by PSUV's electoral *patrullas* (patrols), which like their predecessors were key organising units during election periods such as the *enmienda* referendum of February 2009 and the PSUV primaries in mid-2010.[59] The community's AV was broken into four separate communal councils, which emerged with a clear set of laws passed by the National Assembly (see Chapter 5). ASOPRODENCO continued to grow and remained structurally independent from both PSUV and state institutions, but their efforts to cultivate autonomous principles whilst working with more official strands of *chavismo* became increasingly complicated, as I discuss below and in Chapter 6.

Two critical shifts had therefore occurred in El Camoruco since the demise of the Punto Fijo era. Firstly, local-level party-based clientelism was no longer the predominant means through which the community accessed state resources. In the period from 1999 to 2006, the AV had been able to place demands directly on the Alcaldía without needing to reciprocate the acquisition of resources with electoral support for the then controlling party, Proyecto Venezuela. As Miguel Peña's voting figures for the period show, electoral support for the pro-Chávez coalition was constant from 1999 onwards, yet the broadly anti-Chávez Alcaldía still made significant investments in the community.[60] Thanks to the realignment of political power at the national level, community-orientated public policies were becoming the norm regardless of the configuration of municipal politics. Because of the decline of the *puntofijista* parties, forms of party brokerage had also changed. Many brokers from PSUV were not distant individuals with little connection to the community, but rather people like Rafael who were drawn from the *barrio* itself. Clientelism, then,

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[58] Significant leftist parties such as Podemos, Patria Para Todos (PPT) and the Partido Comunista de Venezuela (PCV) refused to become part of PSUV (Ellner 2008: 127).

[59] The *enmienda* (amendment) was a straight yes or no referendum on whether Chávez could remove the two-term constitutional limit on presidencies. The pro-Chávez *sí* campaign won with 54.36 percent of the vote.

[60] In 2004's recall referendum Chávez received 65.64 percent support in Miguel Peña and 69.82 percent in El Camoruco: http://www.cne.gov.ve/referendum_presidencial2004/. In 2006's presidential election, he received 68.9 percent of the vote in Miguel Peña and 72.05 percent in El Camoruco: http://www.cne.gob.ve/divulgacionPresidencial/resultado_nacional.php?color=2&e=07&m=09&p=04. In 2008's mayoral election Edgardo Parra, the PSUV candidate in Valencia, received 50.15 percent in Miguel Peña with an abstention rate of 30.46 percent, while in El Camoruco he received 53.24 percent with an abstention rate of 38 percent: http://www.cne.gob.ve/divulgacion_regionales_2008/index.php?e=07&m=09&p=04&c=00&t=00&ca=03&v=02. These latter statistics suggest a general mistrust of both Parra and opposition politicians by residents of Miguel Peña (all accessed 11/12/12).

had not disappeared, but rather existed as one option among many that *barrio* residents could use to obtain resources.

Secondly, a state-led agenda promoting popular participation, with an accompanying institutional structure, now framed everyday political practice in a far more direct way than it ever had pre-Chávez. This agenda culminated in the launch of the CCs in 2006, which meant that organised communities were now linked structurally to national ministries and national funding bodies and no longer reliant on the local municipality or state governor for resources. As a result, when the *chavista* Edgardo Parra was elected as mayor of Valencia in 2008 (the city's first ever leftist mayor), the resources the community could potentially receive from the Alcaldía were *supplementary* to the resources they were constitutionally entitled to through the CCs. Seen in the most stark material terms, this meant that *barrio* residents had a wider set of prospective patrons whom they could approach for financial assistance. There was thus the potential for competition between different branches of the state, as various levels of governmental power sought to maintain or establish political hegemony.

As such, Velasco's articulation of a hybrid political consciousness is a useful framework for understanding the diverse political fields in which *chavista* activists operated in El Camoruco. For my respondents, antagonism towards the state co-existed with a belief in the same state's ability to meet their material needs; likewise, strategic negotiation with party officials or state actors sat alongside radical desires to build self-governing community structures. Very often, activists' practice would involve all these forms of political thought and action in the same day: attempting to stimulate autonomous popular participation in one context, cultivating links with state branches or PSUV in another and attacking higher level corruption and cronyism in a third. As the remainder of this chapter and the following two will explore in greater depth, a dynamic tension between seemingly opposed currents therefore animated activists' perception of themselves, their political movement and their government. In an open-ended conclusion to her work on the CTUs and CCs, García-Guadilla asks the following question concerning *barrio* organisations: "Can they generate an alternative project for society, independent and diverging from the state, one that transcends more immediate material demands and permits the construction of hegemony for social transformation?" (2011: 80). Although this question is a compelling one, it nonetheless seems to assume that the desire for such an alternative project already exists. My view, at least as far as my own fieldsite is concerned, is that

most participants in community organisations did not have such a clear picture of where they wished to position themselves politically, and nor were they necessarily able to transcend "more immediate material demands"; these were real necessities that their communities were entitled to claim. Most *chavista* activists in El Camoruco certainly strove in principle for some kind of non-capitalist society, but there was a great deal of uncertainty about the extent to which their own organisations could or should diverge from state-led agendas. This position was typified by ASOPRODENCO, who form the basis of the discussion below.

ASOPRODENCO, POPULAR POWER AND THE STATE

Rafael and Rosa's decision to form ASOPRODENCO was born out of the successes they enjoyed with El Camoruco's AV. At the heart of these successes was the realisation that well-organised and combative neighbourhood bodies could be a hugely effective means of placing demands on the state, as well as a source of self-empowerment and community-centred values for local people. The mobilisations and structures they had established with the AV not only required a motivated and well-organised community, but also a particular kind of leader who could engender a culture of self-organisation and self-confidence among *barrio* residents. Central to their politics was the belief that neighbours should look to one another before seeking out more powerful actors or institutions from outside the community. When they established ASOPRODENCO in 2003, the task for Rafael and Rosa was therefore to find other individuals like themselves, cultivate links between communities and train new leaders who would adhere to and promote the same principles. The guiding idiom they used to define their approach was "popular power", which had become an organising principle, almost a mantra, that featured as a constant in their everyday conversation and practice. It was a term that had been heavily employed by Chávez and was used to rename all government ministries in the 1999 constitution, but it also spoke to the experiences of activists who had seen the benefits of grassroots organising and consciousness-building as a quotidian reality.

Best described as a diffuse network of community leaders, ASOPRODENCO was entirely voluntary and independent of state funding. By the time I arrived in early 2009, it was comprised of some 30 or 40 community leaders from across Miguel Peña

and the south of Valencia. The whole group would meet together around once a month, but much of the organisation's work was carried out in small groups, with each leader acting as an organiser in their respective locality. The organisation's informal leadership structure – Rafael, Rosa and Oneidys – were all based in El Camoruco, the three of them acting as a hub around which the other members orbited. Rosa's house, located just two blocks from Rafael's, operated as an informal office and meeting point where the organisation's letters and documents would be drawn up before being photocopied at a small internet café run by Rafael's younger brother, Morocho. Their working relationship seemed almost symbiotic: while Rafael had a natural oratory charisma and skill with people, Rosa was the consummate organiser who undertook the bulk of the administrative work. Oneidys, a much younger activist, had become central to the organisation in recent years after attending a training workshop given by Rafael and Yulmi. She had a similar aptitude for administration, and it was between her and Rosa that most of ASOPRODENCO's logistical work was divided.

At the heart of the organisation's work was the facilitation of new AVs and, after 2006, CCs through training workshops. According to Rosa, training sessions in communities were carried out at least three or four times a week on average. Most of these were arranged by word of mouth – those who had already received training might recommend Rafael or Rosa to friends and acquaintances, or other community leaders from the network would facilitate meetings. Often, these were in the squatter settlements of wooden and tin *ranchos* known as *invasiones* (invasions) that had begun reappearing throughout the south of Valencia in the Chávez era. A typical day early on in my fieldwork would involve driving out in Rafael's battered 4x4 to a newly settled *invasión* on the fringes of Valencia's industrial sprawl. There he, Rosa and Oneidys would engage the community in a question and answer session concerning the importance of community organising and the meaning of popular power. Part of this routine would involve discussions of practicalities, in which Rafael would outline how to organise a promotional team, how to elect street wardens and how to arrange a public assembly. But there would also, constantly, be ideological and moral guidance that, for ASOPRODENCO's leadership, had to prefigure any attempt to access state resources. "What makes a community?" Rosa would ask those assembled, before delivering a well-rehearsed speech:

> This is about building a new relationship with the state, and about you becoming the government in your locality. But before we talk about structures and funding, the most important thing is your formation as a community, your spiritual values. What you have here is the beginnings of a community, a chance to be unified and together, in a union. You can be the founders of the history of your community.

When Rosa finished speaking, the participants would be asked to list the attributes that make a community. People would often mention education or public services, and in response they would be encouraged to think about values, principles and relationships. On one occasion, in a settlement of recently-erected *ranchos* that bordered a middle-class *urbanización*, Rafael gestured to the private apartments a few hundred yards away:

> Look at those apartments over there. Now they're good apartments with good services and everything you could need materially, *bien de pinga* [top notch]. But do you think they've got a community? [Everyone says 'No']. No, they're living behind walls, they're separate from one another.

The stress would then return to how a community could be constructed through non-monetary means: through communication, participation and organisation. Often, Rosa would provide examples of how other communities had organised themselves without state resources:

> There was a young boy from a community who was ill and needed an operation. Instead of waiting for some institution, a lady from that community organised an event on the weekend. They made soup and other food and organised games and that kind of thing. Well, thanks to the collective contributions of the community, they found the money and the boy had his operation. That's the sort of thing we're talking about, that's the type of self-organisation and self-determination that we trying to promote and strengthen.

To conclude these examples, Rafael would often sum up with his favourite line: "The most important thing is the participation of the people."

In emphasising these points, ASOPRODENCO sought to engender the kind of political morality and personal transformation that were characteristic of the "prefigurative politics" described by Wini Breines (1980) in her analysis of the New Left. Breines explained how such politics were founded on the belief that revolutionary change could only be realised by creating non-capitalist and communitarian institutions that would act as embryos for the future society (1980: 421). This view of political change proposed that social transformation is not the end

point of struggle, but rather achieved through the process itself. "Prefigurative politics," wrote Breines, "attempted to develop the seeds of liberation and the new society (prior to and in the process of revolution) through notions of participatory democracy grounded in counter-institutions; this meant building community" (1980: 421). In a similar vein, ASOPRODENCO believed that instilling a sense of personal and relational evolution was the key to creating socialism as a lived subjective reality. Although they were firm supporters of Chávez, they perceived a great danger in having an oil-rich, redistributive and pro-poor government because it could potentially threaten their desires for a radical shift in consciousness. Drawing allusions to Gramscian notions of hegemony, Oneidys called this problem a "disc" that people had playing in their minds: "People just think the government will do everything for them," she would regularly complain.

Yet ASOPRODENCO's position was not an anarchist one, and nor were they advocates of the autonomous, anti-state socialism envisioned by John Holloway (2002). The organisation had grown out of neighbourhood bodies whose success was built on the acquisition of state resources, and its activists all lived in communities that needed major infrastructural investment. Although significant criticisms of state corruption, bureaucracy and conservatism were central to ASOPRODENCO's discourse, the possibility of transcending the state was not generally part of their calculations.[61] Their belief was rather that no process of radical social change could truly occur without the right kind of political subjects lying at its core. Oneidys outlined her understanding of their work:

> The government is planning lots of infrastructural changes, and we all know that there's a huge need for services here. Now you could have new projects in every *barrio* but if the people aren't prepared for them, are they going to function well? You could have a beautiful park in the middle of El Camoruco but if people haven't been educated with the right consciousness they're not going to care for it properly. That's why, for me, the *formación* is the most important thing and it's got to go hand in hand with infrastructural developments.

In truth, it was unclear how far ASOPRODENCO thought popular power could go or how they might democratise or popularise governmental institutions. For the time

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[61] In my own discussions with Rafael, I often pushed him on popular power and how far he hoped to go. He said that one day he hoped people would be able to self-govern without the state, but that for the time being they were not ready. Using his young daughter as an example, he explained: "Imagine if I gave her all my money and let her do what she wanted. The house would be a mess within a week! It's the same with self-government. We have to prepare people."

being, their emphasis was principally on establishing leaders and building structures that could effectively represent their communities. With the commitment that Chávez had made to popular power and a constitutional right to participate in public administration, their great hope was that if they could provide the tools to those around them in Miguel Peña, the right channels would open up in the state infrastructure without the loss of local autonomy. Indeed, their emphasis on *formación* was designed to prevent such a loss by building a pre-emptive suspicion of power and reticence about immediate material gratification into the consciousness of their neighbours and allies.

By the time the Communal Councils Law was passed in 2006, the groupings of local activists in El Camoruco had altered significantly from the early Chávez era. By forming ASOPRODENCO, Rafael and Rosa had effectively graduated to a higher level of political influence, and now viewed their role as educators for less experienced activists in communities throughout Miguel Peña. As a result, they were no longer available to act directly as leaders in El Camourco, and although excited by the prospect of the CCs, they also worried that the top-down nature of the reforms would endanger the ethos of self-government and autonomy that had been central to their success with the AV. They feared that less experienced activists in the CCs would miss the point of popular power and focus only on obtaining money. As they saw it, this ran the risk of reproducing older patterns of clientelism that would weaken the community's capacity to organise itself independently and create a new set of mini-elites at the local level. The paradox of this position was that in seeking to build grassroots participation beyond El Camoruco, Rafael and Rosa were not on hand to ensure that their philosophy would be upheld in their own community. Their conception of popular power thus represented both a pragmatic negotiation with the present state and an idealistic dream of its future; somehow, they hoped the state under Chávez could both meet the material needs of their communities and engender popular participation in governance without co-opting the bases. Clearly, however, local activists had far less control over the other end of this proposed fusion: the democratisation of state structures.

The position adopted by ASOPRODENCO bears strong similarities to what Naomi Schiller (2012) has termed the "processual state". Schiller's work with Catia TV, a grassroots television station based in a *barrio* of Caracas, argues that the state is not only experienced in its magical or oppressive forms. In everyday life it is also encountered "as a *diffuse* and *unfolding* ensemble of ideas, practices, individuals, institutions, and representations that has the potential to improve the lives of the poor and expand their access to meaningful participation in media production and broader politics" (2012: 3, emphasis in original). Her informants regarded the state as a "work-in-progress" that, in spite of ongoing problems with top-down bureaucratic control, nonetheless offered opportunities for inclusion and progressive politics. Accordingly, Schiller suggests that the *chavista* state should be understood as a *dialogue* as much as a monologue, contending that concerns about state control of grassroots organisations are premised on a particular projection of the state as an adversary of freedom (2012: 6).

This argument ties into a much broader debate about the extent to which grassroots organisations can carve out spaces for their own political visions and agendas while still making use of the resources and opportunities provided by the state. Indeed, it raises critical questions about the viability of a political project that claims to stimulate "popular power" using state legislation and institutions. Chávez's desire to establish participatory democracy in Venezuela is said to have stemmed from Negri's (1999) work on insurgent democracy, which Chávez has often cited in speeches and television appearences. Negri argues that the fundamental conflict that underpins all modern revolutions and uprisings is that between "constituent power" and "constituted power". While constituent power is understood as the democratic force of revolutionary innovation that exists outside of formal structures of governance, constituted power is the fixed power of constitutions and centralised authority that claims a monopoly on violence. Chávez's agenda, as he repeatedly stated when *chavismo* entered its more radical phase, was to gradually "transfer" power from the constituted to the constituent (Harnecker 2008; Álvarez 2010). The 1999 constitution was the first step in this process, with the promotion of cooperatives, communal councils and communes through various laws since 1999 representing an effort to "create" the necessary constituent bodies that could

subsequently "receive" this transferred power. Yet the very presumption that power could be transferred in this way seems to suggest that either Chávez did not read Negri very carefully, or that he willfully adopted his terminology whilst casting aside the main theoretical argument.

Although Negri is interested in the relationship between the two forms of power, at no point does he suggest that constituent power can be somehow enabled by a paternalistic state. Instead, he starts by highlighting the paradox that constituted power, particularly in the form of law, is premised on constituent power. Constituent power, he writes, "is the source of constitutional norms – that is, the power to make a constitution and therefore to dictate the fundamental norms that organise the powers of the State… This is an extremely paradoxical definition: a power rising from nowhere organises law" (1992: 2). When democratic claims are made on established structures of power, constituent power becomes the motor of democratic change, but its force is then turned into another form of constituted power the moment it is institutionalised. "Constitutent power is reabsorbed into constituted law through a multistaged mechanism that, by making constituent power immanent to the system, deprives it of its creative originality" (1992: 6). Negri traces the relation between the constituent and constituted through the republican, democratic and socialist revolutions and polities of Western Europe and North America and concludes that in each historical case a process of enclosure occured: "The State, constituted power, and the traditional conception of sovereignty, reappear each time to bring the constitutive process to an end" (1992: 312). For Negri constituent power as a notion is thus a collective subject that only exists as the antithesis of constituted power. It cannot have power transferred or ascribed to it, since it is necessarily produced through a conflictual dialectic; it always exists outside the constituted. His notion of absolute democracy is clear in its rejection of constituted power:

> This democracy is the opposite of constitutionalism. Or better, it is the negation itself of constitutionalism as constituted power – a power made impermeable to singular modalities of space and time, and a machine predisposed not so much to exercising strength but, rather, to controlling its dynamics, its unchangeable dispositions of force (1992: 321).

The key point to this discussion is to fully comprehend what Negri means when he discusses constituent power. It is not simply something that is popular or "progressive", but rather the specific form of an oppositional relationship with

constituted power. It is impossible for constituent power to continue "being" constituent if it becomes part of constituted power.

Although Negri's argument is made in particularly abstract theoretical terms, it nonetheless speaks to the specific issues that were unfolding on the ground in my fieldsite. ASOPRODENCO, in the sense that they were a grassroots network formed to empower local residents and make claims on the constituted power of the Venezuelan state, were an expression of constituent power. Yet they were also comprised of *chavista* activists who supported the Bolivarian government and had benefitted from various state policies. Moreover, their formation was born from material needs as much as it was from political desires, meaning that the state had to be contended with given that it was the predominant provider of resources. What position did they occupy, then, in the dialectic proposed by Negri? There is perhaps an important distinction to be made between grassroots bodies that engage with the state and even source some of their funding from it, and those that are constituted by and through it entirely. This distinction rests fundamentally on who has control of decision-making and political direction in organisational terms. In Schiller's case, the producers of Catia TV were able to discuss their terms of their engagement with the state because they remained independent in organisational terms (2012: 4). Similarly, while ASOPRODENCO were formed out of a direct relationship with particular constitutional laws and frameworks, their actual structures and decision-making norms remained autonomous – they remained, that is, part of the constituent power of Negri's "multitude". The great challenge, then, was whether this subtle but critical distinction could be maintained as the *chavista* state sought to circumscribe grassroots political practice in line with its own political project.

The fact that Chávez seemed to have either wholly misinterpreted or willfully misused Negri can perhaps tell us something about the relationship between populism, state-led revolutions and radical grassroots democracy. Martin Holbraad (in press) argues that revolutionary ontology sets itself against liberal distinctions between sovereigns and subjects by imagining the people and the state, instead, as mutually dependent. This ideal seeks to collapse people and state into one entity and achieve, as Che Guevara wrote, "a complete identification between the government and the community in its entirety" (Guevara 1965: 14). In 1960s Cuba, as Holbraad shows, the cultivation of a relationship between Castro and the people was central to this desire for unification. Guevara famously described the connection that Castro

maintained with the people through his regular addresses to the nation: "His special way of fusing himself with the people can be appreciated only by seeing him in action. At the great public mass meetings one can observe something like the dialogue of two tuning forks whose vibrations interact, producing new sounds" (1965: 13). As I have already explained elsewhere in this thesis, a similar effort was made by Chávez, whose claim to represent the popular heart of Venezuela was central to Bolivarian populism. Chávez's projection that he *was* the point of unity between constituted and the constituent enabled the ontological assertion that he could "transfer" his own powers to *el pueblo*; because the two were understood as one entity embodied by the "master-signifier" (Žižek 1989: 93), there was no symbolic contradiction. Yet Negri, one assumes, would argue that the insurgent force of the multitude cannot be held in check by populist symbolism, however powerful, for long. This theme forms the underlying basis for the following two chapters.

CONCLUSION

As an opener to Part II of the thesis, this chapter has introduced key concepts that will underpin the case studies in Chapters 5 and 6. I have outlined the notion of "political work" and proposed that it should be understood as the ability to accumulate social capital out of a political cause, and to make use of this social capital in diverse fields of practice. Successful political workers achieve this by utilising "non-political" spheres of social life to buttress their projects, but in doing so they must often juggle multiple obligations, constraints and conflicts. Chapters 5 and 6 will develop this argument more thoroughly.

I have also detailed the evolving trajectories of community-state relationships and political consciousness at both national and local levels. For *barrio* residents, the Chávez era has unquestionably opened up new spaces for political practice and new channels through which to access state resources, with a significant set of legal and political changes in favour of poor communities occurring since 1999. Venezuelan community organisations now have constitutional rights to claim funding from national ministries, meaning that the traditional system of localised party-based clientelism that prevailed under *puntofijismo* has been fundamentally undermined. These shifts cannot be taken as final ruptures, however; working-class Venezuelans

continue to pursue diverse political strategies that reflect a "hybrid political consciousness" exhibiting seemingly conflicting political ideals. Whilst many neighbourhood organisations have traditionally maintained an antagonistic relationship with the state, they have also called on liberal notions of rights and responsibilities in order to press for improved representation and economic support. In the Bolivarian era, these hybrid currents are particularly compelling, since an interventionist and "pro-poor" *chavista* state now places political demands on local communities in equal measure to those that neighbourhood organisations place on the state.

ASOPRODENCO, whose key actors feature prominently in Chapters 5 and 6, provide a good example of this *chavista* hybridity. Built out of a belief in autonomous popular power and committed to cultivating revolutionary political consciousness, their attitude towards the state evinces an unresolved tension between pragmatic, instrumental engagement and antagonistic, revolutionary aspirations. Critical to their apparent belief that both of these approaches can co-exist was the charisma of Chávez, which works to bind Coronil's "two bodies" (2011b) through symbols that inspire and interpellate emergent political subjects. Activists hold on to this ideal of unification in order to animate the immediate and everyday, but in doing so they confront a profound contradiction between a state apparatus they seek to claim and one that remains irrevocably in the hands of their president. Although I acknowledge Schiller's justified focus grassroots actors' capacity to place demands not only on the state but *within* it too, I also suggest that it is important to pay attention to the limits of their agency, and to its confusions and dead-ends. As Holston remarks, "The agency of citizens… is not only one of resistance. I have also learned, especially from feminist theory, to see that human agency also produces entrenchment, persistence, and inertia" (2008: 13). In Chapters 5 and 6, I explore two projects that reach towards participatory democracy, and analyse them as sites in which these processual and charismatic articulations of the state converge in complex and unpredictable ways.

Figure 12: New *ranchos* being erected on the fringes of Valencia (Matt Wilde)

CONTESTED SPACES:
PARTICIPATION, SUBJECTIVITY AND CONFLICT IN THE COMMUNAL COUNCILS

> If he thinks he's going to put forward an idea for a project and see it appear the next month, he's crazy. You know most people who try and start projects don't end up seeing them realised. Maybe if they put themselves forward [for election] the next time they might be lucky enough to see their project after a long, long struggle. All the people here who do this work do it because they want to help the community. They don't earn anything for it, and all they get from the community are slaps in the face. So if you want to put yourself forward you've got to prepare yourself mentally for that reality.

> – Yulmi

INTRODUCTION

The passing of the Communal Councils Law in 2006 was a significant moment in the Bolivarian government's drive to refashion the relationship between state institutions and civil society in Venezuela. Placing participatory democracy and endogenous development at the core of the move to stimulate citizen empowerment, the launch of the neighbourhood-level *consejos comunales* (communal councils, CCs) was heralded by Chávez as a major step towards an "explosion of revolutionary communal power" (Dorta 2007: 146). As the "fifth motor" of the push towards twenty-first century socialism, the CCs are designed to facilitate a clear break with political and economic practices associated with both the Punto Fijo and neoliberal eras. Their guiding philosophy is that popular, localised participation in the planning, implementation and maintenance of community development projects provides the key to moving away from both representative politics and clientelist resource distribution, both of which were discredited by the inequality and exclusion that came to define *puntofijismo* (Ellner and Hellinger 2003; Ellner 2008; Smilde and Hellinger 2011). Drawing on a variety of theories of democracy and governance, Chávez claims that the CCs mark the beginnings of a transference of political, social, economic and administrative power from the "constituted power" of the state to the "constituent power" of civil

society (MINCI 2007, cited in Araujo 2010: 284).

In this chapter I assess how political practice has developed in El Camoruco since the Communal Councils Law was passed. The government's championing of participatory democracy signals an effort to break with the past and inculcate the values and languages of social movement organisations within a state-managed framework (Gill 2012). I suggest that everyday practice in the CCs highlights how problematic this proposal is for several predominant reasons. Firstly, the radical rhetoric that surrounds the CCs is often at odds with the structural frameworks they inhabit, meaning that participants experience an ongoing disparity between the lofty ideals they are encouraged to achieve and a series of daily frustrations with state bureaucracies they have little real control over. Secondly, many participants themselves are unclear over what "participation" should actually entail, resulting in a multiplicity of tensions and contradictions that shape how local-level actors make use of and perceive these new bodies. Whilst some actors pursue pragmatic and individualised goals as they seek to better themselves socially and financially, others seek to advance far-reaching visions of autonomous self-government and radical democracy. As a result, *chavista* aspirations for the CCs to be revolutionary bodies that strengthen Bolivarian hegemony compete with adherence to more liberal values such as deference to elected representatives and the paternal state. Although the CCs have undoubtedly increased opportunities for localised citizen participation and provided direct access to state resources, the top-down exhortation to participate puts new pressures on barrio residents that result in accusations of corruption and self-interest, power struggles and the transference of accountability from the state to voluntary local actors. In sum, I argue that the CCs are *contested spaces* in which diverse and often conflicting practices, motivations and understandings jostle for position between different members of the community.

This chapter begins by assessing recent trends in participatory democracy and viewing the CCs comparatively, placing them within the broader historical context of political decentralisation in Venezuela and Latin America. The sections after this turn to everyday political practice in the CCs, detailing the new social actors that have emerged, the problems they encounter and the conflicts both among different community leaders and between leaders and non-participants. I conclude by suggesting that the contested practice that shapes the CCs reveals broader structural and ideological tensions within the Bolivarian community-state nexus.

According to Article 2 of the Communal Councils Law, the CCs are "instances of participation, articulation and integration among diverse community organisations, social groups and citizens that permit the organised citizenry to directly exercise control over public policies and projects aimed at answering the needs and aspirations of the community in the construction of social equality and social justice" (López Maya and Lander 2011: 76). The formation of CCs is often a lengthy process that requires a series of public assemblies, elections and bureaucratic procedures before each new body can become a legally sanctioned entity. According to the 2006 law, in urban areas CCs must be drawn from communities of between 200 and 400 households and are formed by promotion committees of people from the locality, who must call a citizen's assembly. At the assembly, where 20 percent of the community must be present, elections take place for *voceros* or *voceras* (spokespeople) who stand for voluntary, unpaid positions in a variety of committees.[62] A 2009 reform to the law dictated that the three core committees must be constituted from a specific number of *voceros*: five members must be elected to the financial management committee, three to the executive committee and five more to the social controllership, which monitors and ratifies any transactions made by the financial committee.[63] Further *voceros* are then elected to specified work committees in areas such as health, water, food, land, citizen security, education and culture. When these positions have been chosen, the CC must put forward three projects that will contribute to *desarollo endógeno* (endogenous development) in the community by, for example, providing employment for local people (for example in the construction of a new school). In line with Article 15 of the law, the final registration of each CC is made via the Presidential Commission for Popular Power, an organ created by Chávez when he launched the initiative. As Uzcátegui argues (2010: 205), this close structural relationship between the CCs and Chávez is significant, and I will return to it in the conclusion of the chapter.

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[62] For the sake of convenience, I follow the Spanish and use the masculine *voceros* when referring to a mixed-gender group. The feminine plural, *voceras*, will indicate that the group is all women.

[63] This structure is according to the Communal Councils Reform Law, which was passed in November 2009. Prior to this, and for the bulk of my fieldwork, the CCs operated with a three-person communal bank rather than a financial management committee, whilst the social control position was generally only one person. These changes were made in an effort to counter corruption by involving more people in financial management and accountability.

Once a CC is registered, each committee is responsible for overseeing the community's affairs in their specified area, which often involves the integration of existing community organisations and actors (for example, education committees would seek to involve teachers from local education missions in their project proposals). The committees have the capacity to put forward community development projects but must do so in consultation with the citizens' assembly, which legally is the ultimate authority for the council. If they receive approval, funding for these projects usually comes from the National Fund for the Communal Councils (FUNDACOMUNAL), which receives its money from central government bodies such as the Presidential Commission for Popular Power and the Fund for Intergovernmental Decentralisation (FIDES). In addition to these long-term projects, the CCs administer funds for micro-finance initiatives called *empresas sociales* (social enterprises). These are small-scale initiatives, generally comprising of between three and five people often in family groups, who can apply for funding from the government's Microfinance Development Fund (FONDEMI). If the community is in agreement and the application is successful, the funds are issued via the CC's communal bank/finance committee. According to Ellner (2010: 66), over 20,000 CCs have now been formed in Venezuela, with an estimated $1 billion being transferred directly to them in the first year of their launch (López Maya and Lander 2011: 74).

The CCs draw on many current trends in theories of participatory democracy and governance. Popular participation in political decision-making has been a subject of substantial academic interest in recent years as the gains of social movements have drawn attention to the limitations of representative democracy in an era of financial crashes, corruption scandals and pernicious structural adjustment programmes (Alvarez 2003; Petras 2005; Cornwall and Coelho 2007; Lazar 2008; Rodgers 2010). Cornwall (2004) notes that participation has increasingly been seen as a means of addressing a "democratic deficit" between citizens and governments (2004: 1), with interpretations of its potential ranging from a timely set of reforms for existing representative democracies to revolutionary aspirations for self-government and autonomy (Holloway 2002). Participatory decision-making has been central to the resurgence of a post-authoritarian left in Latin America, with a "reinvention of democracy" (Chavez and Goldfrank 2004: 4) strongly characterising both radical rural/indigenous movements such as those of the Zapatistas and more reformist urban experiments in participatory governance (Petras 1999; Coronil 2010).

Responding to popular calls for greater democratisation, many governments have sought to encourage popular participation by opening new institutional channels. Cornwall (2004) proposes the concept of the "invited space" to describe how intermediary bodies or institutions are created or opened by states in order to encourage citizen participation and foster political action beyond voting. In some cases these are temporary moments that deal with specific cases or issues; in others they are designed to be permanent linkages or processes that make participation a core element of governance. She distinguishes these invited spaces from autonomous "popular spaces", which are formations such as associations or protest groups that are entirely responsible for their own instigation. Enthusiasm for the potential of such endeavours is typified by Fung and Wright's (2001) model of "Empowered Deliberative Democracy" (EDD). Attempting to move away from top-down planning procedures, the model asserts that political devolution to "local action units" such as neighbourhood councils should be central to democratising reforms (2001: 21). These local units are not autonomous, but instead are connected to centralised bodies that coordinate and distribute resources and solve problems that local units cannot solve by themselves. The authors argue that this "coordinated decentralisation" (2001: 22) is distinct from other patterns of popular mobilisation, where civil society groups may seek to pressure the state into action on a single issue without becoming involved in carrying out the changes themselves. EDD instead implies a move towards the permanent institutionalisation of citizen participation in governance through concrete changes in the political-legal arrangements of the state at both the local and national level.

Criticisms of Fung and Wright's model, some of which they pre-empt in their outline (2001: 33), emphasise how power relations within "deliberative arenas" significantly complexify the potential for all actors and groups to participate in EDD-style models (Harriss and Törnquist 2004: 11-12). Clientelism, institutional reluctance and the demand for unrealistically high levels of popular participation pose further problems, meaning that the wider political settings that frame participatory agendas are critical to how transformative they may be. Indeed, as Harriss and Törnquist (2004) point out, the opening of new democratic arenas at the local level – what they call the "localisation of politics" – has often gone in tandem with neoliberal globalisation and its accompanying ideological rubric. They observe that participation has become central to the drive for "good governance" promoted by supranational

development institutions such as the World Bank. Though this language is often remarkably similar to leftist visions of participatory democracy, they argue that the World Bank's characterisation offers a "depoliticised view of social change" (2004: 6-7) that fails to take into account political competition between social groups and classes. It focuses instead on participation in technical, managerialist terms and elides the contextual and relational forces that determine how successful democratisation can be in a given locality (see also Hickey and Mohan 2004).

Case studies of participatory programmes in Latin America bear out these points. Baoicchi's (2001, 2005) study of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, shows how large-scale popular engagement with the municipal budget engendered significant changes to public spending, with huge improvements to water and sewage systems, housing assistance schemes and public education emerging between 1988 and 1998 (2001: 48). Yet he stresses that the strength of the initiative owed much to the political will of the local politicians driving it, whose "radical democratic vision of popular control of city government" (2001: 65) was critical to the movement gaining traction in mainstream politics. State-level political backing, then, may often play an important role, but as Mahmud (2004) cautions, domineering interference from the state can lead to a culture of dependency and a lack of confidence among local participants. According to Chavez (2004), a genuine governmental will to institute participatory budgeting in Montevideo led to a significant improvement in public services ("good governance"), but failed to successfully transfer decision-making powers to community bodies in the manner of Porto Alegre. In other cases, surprising success stories have emerged from periods of social and political upheaval, less by design than by a set of contingencies that emerged in political flux (Rodgers 2010).

An attempt to foster something similar to participatory budgeting in Venezuela was made by Chávez in 2002 with the launch of Local Public Planning Councils (CLPPs). Though modelled on the Porto Alegre example, according to Wilpert (2007: 56-60) and García-Guadilla (2008: 6), the CLPPs struggled due to a poor formulation of the law, political resistance at the municipal level and a period of political upheaval and crisis nationally, as Venezuelans endured the coup attempt of 2002 and the oil industry *paro* (shutdown) of 2003. As well as being inhibited by problems with funding, the CLPPs faced significant opposition from city mayors and municipalities, meaning that many either failed to engage citizens or simply became

co-opted arms of existing political officeholders. The launch of the CCs represents a response to the failure of the CLPPs, signalling an effort to circumvent politically conservative elements within local municipalities and stimulate popular participation outside of them. It is for this reason, it would appear, that the funding bodies for the CCs are linked to central ministries rather than local municipalities.[64]

A further important factor to highlight regarding the CCs is that they adopt much of the language and style of social movement organisations – what Cornwall calls "popular spaces" – whilst actually being designed to subsume existing grassroots organisations within their own institutional frameworks. David Smilde (2009: 2) suggests that state participation policy in the Chávez era has gone from harnessing existing forms of participation (1999-2002), to sponsoring it financially (2003-2006), and now finally attempting to centralise it (2007 onwards). He argues that the "best" outcome for the CCs is that they become something like the participatory budgeting schemes found in Porto Alegre, but warns that they may echo the authoritarian tendencies of the Cuban *Comités de la Defensa de la Revolución* (Revolutionary Defence Committees), who "co-opt rather than channel local initiative" (2009: 4). The ethnography I present here suggests that such an either/or approach underplays the complexity of multifarious understandings, motivations and practices contained within the CCs. The state-led nature of the project means that top-down imperatives are clearly of key importance, but equally so are the often very individualised and localised manoeuvrings of individual actors. Although CC participants remain reliant on state institutions for funding, a hugely important shift since the Punto Fijo era is that they do not rely on party brokers to access these institutions – indeed, PSUV actors from outside El Camoruco were conspicuous by their absence during my research period. Instead, resources are accessed by learning a set of bureaucratic skills and by framing projects in the appropriate Bolivarian language.

As Chapter 4 showed, neighbourhood organisations in Venezuela are uncompromisingly complex. Given this history, the launch of the CCs can be read as an effort by the state to "simplify" many of these organisational and ideological divergences by creating an umbrella body for each community – the CTUs, for example, are now supposed to be committees located within the CCs. Yet one of the

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[64] This is not to say that municipalities cannot provide funding for CCs, but merely that they are not essential parts of the structural and financial framework. Indeed, as I describe below, the CCs in El Camoruco would often discuss asking the Alcadía for funding when they ran into difficulties with national-level funders.

major criticisms of state-led participation schemes is that they work to co-opt genuine popular struggles, absorbing or neutralising radical movements for social and political change and converting them into appendages of the status quo (Cornwall 2004: 1). In its most pernicious guise, as Paley (2001) observes in post-dictatorship Chile, participation can be used to outsource state services to voluntary community actors under the cloak of "democratisation". The question, therefore, of how spaces are opened, who occupies them and on what terms is critical to the shape that participation takes in a given setting. In all localities, participatory institutions are embedded in complex socio-political terrains in which they "jostle for policy space with political parties, social movements, religious organisations, [and] kinship and patronage networks" (Cornwall 2004: 9).

The remainder of this chapter will explore where the CCs in Venezuela fit in to these debates. Building on the previous chapter, I will show how the meeting of Bolivarian goals with the socio-political history of El Camoruco produces an intriguing set of variances. Although they bear many hallmarks of an EDD-style model, the wider context in which the CCs are situated is markedly different to the participatory budgeting programmes cited above. They are undoubtedly "invited spaces" created by the state, but a crucial difference is that they have been launched by the national government rather than by local municipalities. They are also probably unique in that the president himself has stated that they mark the beginning of a revolutionary transition from constituted to constituent power. As bodies created, sanctioned and funded by the very state they are theoretically supposed to transcend, the CCs are caught in a peculiar existential state that produces a whole host of mixed signals. On an everyday basis, as I will show, these contradictory and hybrid imperatives manifest themselves in the form of disputes between participants who adhere to different understandings of the CCs' overall mission.

GENDERED AND GENERATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF PARTICIPATION

The formation of the CCs in El Camoruco marked a significant shift from the era described in Chapter 4. Because the Communal Councils Law states that CCs must represent between 200 and 400 households, the original AV, which covered over

4000 residents, was forced to divide into four separate CCs, each with their own communal bank and separate set of *voceros*.[65] The new CCs were established in the existing four sectors of the barrio (Sectors 1–4), with assemblies and elections taking place in each sector rather than as a whole community. Some local activists were unhappy with this division, suggesting instead that the sizing rule should be a "guide" rather than a stringent law, and voicing concerns that it would lead to factionalism and conflict. On the other hand, sectorisation did mean that there were now more opportunities for a larger number of people to achieve recognised positions as community *voceros*. The vast majority of participants in El Camoruco were *chavista*, but there were ongoing rumours about the presence of opposition "*esquálidos*" – a point to which I return below.

Once all four CCs had been established by the end of 2007, the community was able to mount some projects collectively. The most significant of these arrived thanks to a microfinance grant from FONDEMI , which was used to buy eight brand new buses and establish a community-run bus service known as La Ruta Comunal (The Communal Route). La Ruta offered cheaper fares to the city centre than the private *camioneta* operators and provided work for drivers and collectors from El Camoruco. Since there was no way of dividing each day's takings between the four CCs, the service's profits were paid into Sector 1's communal bank and administered by its transport committee. A strict agreement was made between the four CCs to ensure that these profits would be used for the whole community, with the committee being required to keep records of the takings so the four CCs could then decide on how the money would be used. As I discuss below, rumours and suspicions about the extent to which Sector 1's CC kept to this agreement were common.

Meetings between all four sectors did occur when community-wide events or projects were underway, and I was in contact with *voceros* from all of the barrio's CCs. Generally speaking, however, I worked most closely with my local CC in Sector 4. It was formed in August 2007 after an initial promotion phase, a public assembly and then elections for the *vocero* committee positions. In order to receive ratification from FUNDACOMUNAL, each CC must carry out a census and propose three projects voted for by the popular assembly. In Sector 4's case, these projects comprised the establishment of a *Casa de Los Abuelos* (Grandparents' House, a day

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[65] The 2009 reform to the CCs saw communal banks replaced with finance committees, but during my research period El Camoruco's CCs were still operating with communal banks.

centre that would provide food, medical support and entertainment for the community's elderly residents), repairs to the houses of some of the poorest families in the community, and a plan to fill in the dirty and polluted canal that marked the border between El Camoruco and its neighbouring barrio, José Felix Ribas. Sector 4 had also established ten social enterprises with microfinance loans from FONDEMI, which were run by local individuals and families. These included a carpentry workshop, a confectioner, a small ceramic block producer (breezeblocks are the main building materials in the barrios) and a piñata workshop, which was run by Esme, one of the CC's most active *voceras*. Social enterprises must pay back microfinance loans within 33 months and must also give six percent of their profits to the CC's communal bank/finance committee, which can then be used for projects in the community. Not all of the enterprises in Sector 4 had been successful. Of the ten, in one case the applicants stole all the money, in another the main applicant had been murdered, and in a third the people involved had simply disappeared before I arrived in El Camoruco. Still, Juliana, first *vocera* for the communal bank, reported that seven were working well and on schedule with their payments.

One of the most notable features of Sector 4's CC was that it was essentially run by a small group of elderly women. Around the time of its launch in 2007, well-attended public assemblies and committee elections had taken place as the community chose its *voceros*. Since then, the number of public meetings had decreased significantly as the projects themselves became the CC's main focus. In place of public mobilisations a network of dedicated women had assumed responsibility for the majority of the unpaid labour required to run the CC. Although 28 *voceros* held positions elected, it was Esme, Juliana, Carla and Natalia – known locally *las señoras* – who carried out what seemed to be the myriad of daily duties associated with maintaining these projects.[66]

When they began their new roles, *las señoras* received official identity cards from FUNDACOMUNAL, before attending a series of training workshops at institutions such as INCES, the government's National Institute for Socialist Capacitation and Education. The workshops detailed how to facilitate meetings, draft funding proposals, manage budgets and organise community events. There were also optional courses for personal development goals such as self-esteem and leadership.

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[66] *Señora* is a term of respect, akin to "madam" in English.

Juliana, who had never been involved in community work before the CCs were launched, had been inspired by the workshops and was now studying social management in Mission Sucre.

> I've learnt so much so quickly, but it's a lot of work. My family are always complaining because I'm always here in the house working on things for the communal council! I've attended all the workshops, which are tiring because they often start at eight in the morning and end at three in the afternoon. I'm so busy with work for the CC and my course at the Mission, there's no time for anything else.

Together with the training schemes, regular contact with a myriad of state institutions was also evident in the reams of political propaganda, government information and official documentation that cluttered the houses of *las señoras*. These included copies of the 1999 constitution, booklets of recently passed laws and manuals on everything from microfinance to socialist family values. Ongoing engagement with Bolivarian state agendas was central to the daily experience of community leadership for the *voceras*.

Engaging with bureaucracy was also a key component of their everyday practice, and was particularly critical to the maintenance of the CC's three long-term projects. Frequent contact with the state funding providers and work contractors required constant letter-writing, form-filling, photocopying and telephone calls. Budgets, account statements and work contracts also needed constant monitoring, and everything had to be signed and then counter-signed by Esme, the social control *vocera*. Yet bureaucratic efficiency on the part of the *voceras* was no guarantee of the project going ahead smoothly. In the case of the canal project, for example, 7,000 Bs.F ($1,628) had been transferred to the CC and used to clean the canal in preparation for its concrete filling, but a second sum of money promised by FUNDACOMUNAL had never arrived. Juliana wrote several letters to the organisation but was yet to receive a satisfactory response. She then tried directly contacting the engineer contracted to carry out the work, but was told that he was waiting for the second payment from FUNDACOMUNAL. On one occasion we waited several hours for a meeting with him, only to receive a call saying he would be unable to come. These cancelled meetings and unanswered letters clearly tested Juliana's patience. "I don't know whether it's a problem with FUNDACOMUNAL – whether they're not doing their job – or if they've got so many projects [they lack the funding for ours]," she commented.

Frustration with funding providers and work contractors was a problem that regularly arose, and it was evident that very often the CC's participants had little idea why money failed to materialise. Although permitted to directly manage public funds, they had little real control over when funding would arrive or over those contracted to do the work. As a consequence, the search for alternative funding providers was often a subject of discussion. Because of the problem with the canal project, for example, Juliana was proposing to approach the Alcaldía and the mayor about funding for the *Casa de Los Abuelos*. As Nuijten (2003) argues, the search for the right broker or patron reinforces fantasies about the efficacy of state power. Although individuals may be frustrated in their efforts with one intermediary, the belief that the state *can* meet their needs is proven by their continued efforts with another (2003: 16). The apparent inefficiency and opacity of institutions like FUNDACOMUNAL meant that one of the stated aims of the CCs – a move away from clientelism – was being undermined. Local actors would search out traditional political patrons like the mayor if they were deemed to be the best way of obtaining resources.

Beyond the main projects, there were plenty of other duties to keep the *voceras* in Sector 4 busy. Each morning Natalia worked in the local PDVAL store, which sold PDVSA-subsidised food at cheaper prices than the privately-owned *bodegas*. For her efforts she received one percent of the store's profits, but claimed that she gave these back to the CC to use for community events. Shortly before I left the community, she was forced to stop this work due to ill-health. Carla and Esme, meanwhile, spent almost a year trying to organise a CTU in the sector so that land titles could be issued to the community (see Chapter 4 for a discussion of CTUs). Unfortunately for them, no-one else from Sector 4 was willing to take on the role, so they were forced to carry out a census of the sector themselves. With over 1000 residents in their part of the barrio, this was a hugely time-consuming process that required going door-to-door to each house. When I accompanied Carla on these trips it was obvious that she found it difficult to balance her role as a *vocera* with her family commitments. Both of her daughters worked during the days, and I would often find her simultaneously preparing the family's food, fielding phone calls relating to the CC and separating her bickering grandchildren.

As I described in Chapter 3, this merging of community work and domestic reproduction was in keeping with the observations of Friedman (2000: 266-269) and Fernandes (2007: 98-107), who point out that though women have traditionally been

excluded from formal political spheres in Venezuela, there is a long history of their involvement in neighbourhood organising. According to Fernandes (2007: 111-112), community-based organising has traditionally been regarded as an extension of the home and thus a female domain. The *señoras* were well aware that they were taking on a heavy burden, but reasoned that those of a younger age were unable to do so because of their work commitments. They also described how the introduction of a regular and secure state pension under the Chávez government had given them the financial security to dedicate themselves to such work.[67] As Natalia put it,

> I have to get up early in order to prepare everything for the day. In the morning I work at PDVAL, then I have to prepare lunch and often there are meetings to attend in the afternoon. The younger men are always working – they have to work – so they don't have time for it. But for people like us who are retired, we have the time so we get involved.

Esme, meanwhile, argued that their efforts were part of their gratitude to Chávez and the revolution, which had prioritised elderly people with its welfare programmes.

> I have a lot of love for *el pueblo*, for this work. I feel really appreciative towards the Chávez government… Right now you won't be able to find elderly people in their houses because they're out at the missions or the *casa de los abuelos*. The quality of life has changed a lot for us.

For the *señoras* in Sector 4, becoming a *vocera* was an articulation of citizenship that was closely tied to Bolivarian ideals of protagonism, self-sacrifice and altruism. As Lazar notes, community-based projects that promise some kind of financial or social benefit to their participants are most successful when they meet with "people's individual and collective economic strategies from below" (2004: 302). It was undoubtedly a commitment that meant spending hours doing the unpaid labour required to link community and state, often without clear results or gratitude from the community at large. Yet it was also an opportunity to develop new skills and cultivate self-worth and moral standing in the community. As Juliana explained, "I now have a lot more contact with the community – I know a lot more people." By being at the centre of community life and expanding their social contacts in the barrio,

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[67] As Ellner (2010a: 92) notes, one of the first decisions taken by the Chávez administration was to halt the proposed privatisation of social security provision and increase and secure state pensions for all Venezuelans of retirement age. By 2007, the number of pension recipients had reached 2.2 million, a three-fold increase since 1998.

the *voceras* were able to turn this social capital into modest financial gains. Esme had established a piñata workshop with a microfinance loan from FONDEMI, and could often be found at work with paint and papier-mâché in the front room of her house. An ever-lasting supply of children's birthdays meant that piñatas were always in demand, and the family-run business seemed unlikely to suffer from her standing in the community. With the state's assistance, community leadership and social enterprise became mutually beneficial components for self-advancing individuals.

The experiences of Sector 4's *señoras* highlight how the launch of the CC had created a series of opportunities for those who had the time and inclination to make use of them. Becoming elected *voceras* enabled individuals to tap into state resources, acquire specialist knowledge and skills, cultivate social and moral capital and, in many ways, become semi-professionalised community activists, even quasi-state functionaries. Such were the demands that came with the role, however, that few people seemed willing or able to take it on. The shift from the largescale infrastructural improvements of the AV era to the smaller, project-based endeavours of the CCs meant that a different set of skills was now desirable for would-be community leaders. Since there was now a clear set of institutional channels and ascribed funding providers, the need to "catch the attention" of the state through collective mobilisations appeared less pronounced. Instead, *voceros* had to learn how to successfully plan, implement and maintain projects – that is, to access the state through the invited channels it had created. This was above all a commitment of time and motivation. Calling such trends "projectism", Postero argues that project-focused organisations privilege particular actors who demonstrate the strongest capacity to "*montar proyectos*" [launch projects] (2007: 77). I have demonstrated here that, at least in Sector 4 of El Camoruco, this capacity was both gendered and generational, an outcome of existing traditions of neighbourhood organising, recent improvements to social welfare and the particular dynamic that existed between *las señoras*.

Yet a significant by-product of these trends was that a separation between a set of perceived specialists and the rest of the sector was emerging. As I describe in the next section, despite being heralded as part of a move from representative to participatory democracy, practices more common to representative politics showed a remarkable obduracy in the CCs. The exhortation to extend democratic practice beyond voting was not necessarily viewed as either desirable or viable for everyone,

and the CCs reflected an entrenched tendency to defer decision-making to elected officials.

NON-PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

If there was one theme that dominated the conversations of those involved in El Camoruco's CCs, it was the issue of low participation. Many *voceros* reported that a wave of enthusiasm had accompanied the formation of the bodies in 2007, with local people attending the public assemblies, turning out in large numbers to elect *voceros* and warmly greeting the arrival of the first projects. By the time I arrived, however, all four of the community's CCs admitted that they were struggling to attract people to public meetings. Worse still, many *voceros* themselves were deemed to be shirking their responsibilities by failing to attend meetings or put forward projects. This situation contrasted starkly with the images that circulated on pro-revolution state TV channels like Televisión Venezolana (VTV) and Vive, where montages depicting community-led construction sites, smiling activists and shiny new schools and clinics created the sense of a nation being at work together, propelled by the unstoppable force of popular power. Most weeks on *Aló Presidente*, Chávez would award cheques to community leaders who had galvanised their communities, reminding those watching that the money was there if people mobilised themselves.

For *chavistas* in El Camoruco, the daily struggle to stimulate enthusiasm for the CCs was set against the lofty expectations created by these images, as well as against the recent memory of the AV's notable successes. *Chavistas* considered low participation problematic because it increased the likelihood of corruption inside the CCs, made it harder to draft and maintain projects and, in legal terms, inhibited the democratic credibility of the CCs' decisions. Ernesto, a *vocero* from Sector 3, stressed this point: "We can't have an assembly that's only thirty people. We need at least 30 percent of the population to be there, otherwise [the decision] isn't valid." In broader terms, they also worried that low participation would endanger the revolutionary project, a fear that was exacerbated by the alleged presence of "*esquálidos*" in the CCs. Dwindling numbers seemed to signal that people might be fatigued with the revolution, and served to remind those who did participate that selfishness and individualism presented major hurdles to the establishment of twenty-first century

socialism. My own estimates regarding the number of regular participants, gleaned principally from attending meetings and talking to *voceros*, were that the four CCs usually had around 5-10 core active *voceros*, with another 20-40 people, depending on the sector, who would attend meetings and contribute to decision-making. These numbers were by no means paltry, but they fell short of both the ten percent required to reach a legal-binding quorum (Dorta 2007: 155) and the 30 percent that Ernesto felt was desirable. Occasionally, when the CCs organised large public celebrations such as Children's Day, a large proportion of the community would turn out and participate. But the reality was that for many people who worked, maintained families and simply preferred to spend their free time doing other things, the demands of running a CC were too great to justify the kind of commitments made by Sector 4's *señoras*.

Ozleidy, who ran a small *peluquería* (hairdresser) from her house a few doors from Esme's, was among those who was unable to participate in the CCs as much as she wanted to. "I would like to be more involved but I've got my business, the children, my husband – all of that to think about. There just isn't time," she explained. Others, particularly young men, were clearly not attracted to the idea of spending their evenings sitting through long meetings or drafting project proposals. Guillermo suggested that it might be something he would do in the future, but was aware of how much work it could be. "I would like to be involved one day – you know helping out in the community and that sort of thing – but I wouldn't want a role like Rafael's, that'd be too much responsibility." Santiago, a young man who lived two doors down from Rafael and Yulmi, described how the succession of different community bodies in the Chávez era had left him and others cynical about the arrival of the CCs.

> The first thing we had here was the Bolivarian Circles. When they arrived everyone was like, 'Whoo, great, let's get involved!' but in truth they didn't really do anything. Then it was the cooperatives, but nothing seems to be happening with them now. Then more recently we had the communal councils, but there are a lot of problems with them too.

Like many, he had attended Sector 4's initial assemblies but became frustrated by the seeming intransigence of projects that failed to materialise. An ambitious young man who supported Chávez, he also resented the continual demand for self-sacrifice: "What have I personally got out of [participation]? Why haven't I had any benefits? You know, I want something like a car or even a book or a t-shirt! I haven't even had

a t-shirt!" Others, like Señora Graciela, an elderly resident from across the road, concurred with his criticisms of the local *voceros*. She spoke of inconsistencies in Sector 4's CC. "You speak to one person and they say that another's going to get something done, and you speak to a different one and they say *that* person was going to do it!"

Comments such as these suggested that Chávez's call for an explosion of communal power was not necessarily regarded as either desirable or workable, even among his supporters. It was also evident that many people felt that some kind of hierarchy was inevitable. In Sector 4, since the *voceras* had become relative experts in their roles, they were essentially left to run the CC independently. When I asked non-participants about the body, they would often refer to it as an autonomous or separate entity, as if *los proyectos* were the individual endeavours of *esa gente* (those people) rather than the collective endeavours of the sector. These were not necessarily hostile statements (though sometimes they were), but certainly seemed to indicate that the CC was perceived by many to be a representative body rather than one that relied on their participation. A common belief was that *voceros* would be elected, find funding for projects and then manage them on their own. With their ID cards, official documents and daily involvement in the state's workings, the *voceras* in Sector 4 had certainly accumulated trappings of the "mystique of sovereignty" (Taussig 1997: 18). But with these trappings came the more problematic perception that they were, either by their own design or the workings of the CC framework, quasi-state officials or politicians.

This view was strongly observable in the public meetings of the CCs, in which adherence to rituals of officialdom suggested a reverence for formalised, state-sanctioned democracy. These meetings were opportunities for *voceros* to discuss the CC's current issues with the wider community and for decisions to be taken collectively. In Sector 4, they would usually take place in the road outside Esme's house. Plastic chairs would be arranged in a circle and, for well-attended meetings, there would normally be around 30 people present. Participants might come and go during the course of the discussions, and there were be frequent interruptions from the barrio's evening life: crying children, friends or family members passing by with messages, and the noisy din of young men doing circuits on their motorcycles. Generally speaking, one of the principal *voceras* would chair the meeting, with another taking the *acta* (minutes). As each meeting started, an *asistencia* (attendance

list) would be passed round, on which residents would write their names, *cédula* (national identity) numbers and signatures. The *voceras* had usually formulated an agenda, but the attendees would be offered the opportunity to add further issues. If clear decisions were taken at the end of the meeting, the participants would sign their agreement on the *acta*. All of these documents were retained as legal records of the meeting, and participants would often remind one another that these requirements were enshrined in constitutional law. According to Article 6 of the LCC, the citizen's assembly is "maximum expression of the communal decision" (Dorta 2007: 152).

Speaking was a highly valued act that reinforced an ethic of equality in the meetings. Great efforts were made to ensure that participants were given sufficient opportunity to speak, and I observed no signs of inequality between genders in terms of who could speak. Indeed, although men took part in the CCs and some in El Camoruco were *voceros*, as a general rule there were more women involved, both as elected *voceras* and as participants in the public meetings. Particular emphasis was also placed on listening to those who were ordinarily less vocal. When meetings became argumentative or noisy, someone might call for calm by shouting loudly and reminding the group that they were all neighbours and comrades. These interventions would often mention the nation and the revolution, invoking the greater struggle in an effort to put such exchanges in context. After a fraught exchange on one occasion, a young man stepped in to defend a lady who was struggling to make her point heard. He asked the participants to remember what their struggle was for: "This revolution is being constructed by us. If it's not constructed by us, it's not a revolution. Now, let the lady speak."

Decisions were generally taken by majority vote. At times the discussions were such that a consensus was clear without the need for a show of hands. On other occasions, voting was used to establish a clear outcome. Although the CCs seek to differentiate themselves from representative democracy, self-conscious mechanisms designed to ensure horizontalism were conspicuous by their absence. In David Graeber's (2009) ethnography of direct action in New York, for example, checks and balances were built in to decision-making to guard against both surreptitious hierarchies and the tyranny of the majority. Discussion facilitators, "blocks", "anti-pressure" and a de-emphasis on charismatic authority were all designed to promote diversity, synthesise opinions and avoid decisions being made where individuals or groups feel excluded or pressured (2009: 300-368). In contrast, although those

attending CC meetings constantly reiterated the importance of participatory democracy, the comparative looseness of their practical organisation meant that hierarchies could easily emerge.

Technically, for example, *voceros* were not elected to make decisions on behalf of the community. They were envisioned as conduits for the assembly's democratic decisions and subject to its will. In practice, however, because of their greater exposure to the workings of state institutions and work contractors, they would often influence the community's decisions through the weight of their superior knowledge and access to centres of power. In matters relating to particular projects, the meetings often worked to democratically sanction decisions that *voceros* were already planning to take. A good example of this occurred in Sector 4 when the community met to discuss the issue of new water pipes. Due to an ongoing water shortage in El Camoruco, the four water committees from the CCs had reached an agreement with the Alcaldía to have new pipes installed, but this would not happen for several months. In the meantime several local residents had proposed using money that was sitting in the CC's communal bank to buy a water "giraffe" – a large hand-pump that could be drilled down into underground pools to extract water. The Alcaldía advised against this at the meeting with the water committees, suggesting the community would be better off saving the money and waiting for the new pipes. When Sector 4's *voceras* reported this exchange they used the Alcaldía's advice to weight the debate in their favour. "The Alcaldía say it would be a waste of money to buy the giraffe," said Esme to those present, "so we have to decide if we use this money now or wait for the pipes to arrive in September." The implication in this sentence was that it was probably sensible to the take Alcaldía's advice and keep hold of the money. But since the decision had to be the community's, Esme qualified it by reasserting the need for democracy: "But it has to be *your* decision, it can't be ours." Although the decision itself may have been a prudent one to make, it was clear that Esme held a significant amount of persuasive power due to her access to specialist advice and "inside knowledge" of the Alcaldía's intentions. A show of hands in support of her suggestion concluded the meeting.

As Lazar (2008: 236) observes, even where discourses of bottom-up democracy predominate, leaders employ means of manipulating the bases. Similarly, Nuijten reminds us that public meetings often illustrate how affairs that may have been resolved informally "are formally presented, challenged and negotiated" (2003:

21). The fact that the meeting had taken place at the Alcaldía rather than in the community (as was more common in the AV days) meant that there was a degree of secrecy and mystification in the process – no one in the community could really know what had been said between the *voceras* and the state officials. In this way the *voceras* were effectively acting as spokespeople for the state rather than for the community. Even in Esme's efforts to invoke democracy, there was a slippage in her words: the distinction between "your decision" (the community) and "ours" (the *voceras*) belied an implicit separation between the two. The point was not that there was anything Machiavellian taking place, but rather that the nature of the *voceras'* privileged access to the state was blurring the distinction between who they were representing. They were essentially becoming brokers who carried as much information to the community *from* the state as from the community *to* the state.

Although participation is vaunted by the state as the key to the CCs' success, the material presented in this section has shown how El Camoruco's CCs retained a tendency to defer decision-making to designated representatives. The establishment of the *vocero* role offers a far more accessible route to the state than had ever existed before, but it does not necessarily mean that participation in everyday decision-making at the community level has increased. For many, taking democratic practice beyond voting is logistically difficult, meaning that they tacitly agree to others making decisions on their behalf. Moreover, the demand for ongoing, widespread participation for its own sake may signal a kind of fetishisation of community action. As Holston (2008: 247) points out, community organisations may pass through periods of demobilisation and remobilisation depending on their immediate needs. The sign of strong community bodies may be less in the number of regular participants who attend meetings, and more in a particular embedded ethic that enables a community to mobilise large numbers when they are required.

Chavista discourse envisions *voceros* as voices of the assembly, but because of the specialised nature of their work they often act as voices of the state in equal measure. By adopting state discourses, they create a separation between themselves and the assembly and become critical of locals who fail to meet with *chavista* aspirations of popular participation. Yet the durability of representative ideals and practices should not be taken as a sign of passivity on the part of El Camoruco's residents. As I describe in the following section, accountability was a key concern,

and local people subjected their *voceros* to demands and criticisms that sought to hold them in check.

ANTAGONISM AND DISCOURSES OF CORRUPTION

The continual exhortation to participate provoked serious tensions between *voceros* and those who chose not to involve themselves in the CCs. Because of their close interaction with state bodies, *voceros* were exposed to current debates about the health of the revolution that circulated in the *chavista* party-state nexus. As I described in Chapters 1 and 4, a common opinion among party and state officials was that the persistence of capitalist and individualistic attitudes in the general population was inhibiting the government's vision of twenty-first century socialism. During a workshop I attended with *voceros* from El Camoruco at the Alcaldía, this was the main theme of discussion. The workshop focused on the government's goal of introducing Social Production Enterprises (EPSs) to local communities via the CCs.[68] Our trainer, an official from the Alcaldía, described how cooperatives (the forerunners to EPSs) had struggled in Venezuela because of the lack of a "socialist mentality". Socialism, he said, is about sacrificing yourself on behalf of the community. "People still believe they can stop working when they go home at 3pm in the afternoon," he told us, mentioning Cuba as an example to be followed. "But you have to sacrifice yourself." Many of the *voceros* nodded their agreement, and the bus journey home was spent discussing why participation seemed to be dwindling in the community.

A few days later at a CC meeting, Esme began berating a number of Sector 4 *voceros* who, in her eyes, were not pulling their weight in the CC.

> There are really only four or five of us working in this communal council, and we need all the *voceros* to be involved, we need you all to assume your duties. We've all been at meetings with CORPOCENTRO, the Alcaldía and communal councils from the whole city for the last few days, involved in really important discussions... But you know what they always ask us? 'What projects have you got? What are you

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[68] Shortly after Chávez's election, SUNACOOP, the state's promotion arm for cooperatives, began issuing credits to help new cooperatives form as part of a drive to build an alternative economy. According to Wilpert, the number of cooperatives in Venezuela rose from 762 in 1998 to over 100,000 by 2005. Yet many of these projects never actually became fully functional, and there were widespread accusations that they were simply being used to obtain government funds (Wilpert 2007: 77-78). By placing the EPSs within the CC framework and making them democratically accountable to local communities, they are an effort to counter these trends.

doing?' They won't start sending us funds until we've got projects ready. We need projects from all the committees, which means that you've all got to start working. I've heard some people saying, 'Oh I don't want to work, oh I'm busy with my work and my kids,' but I'll tell you all this: you have responsibilities as *voceros*.

This outburst revealed how an ideal of bottom-up participatory democracy could be turned on its head. Rather than institutions of governance being opened up to the population at large, demands from above could be placed on local communities by using participation as a disciplining idiom. Esme's words essentially amounted to a transference of accountability from the state to local communities, in which a discourse of revolutionary sacrifice was used to rebuke those who were perceived to be indolent or individualistic. I stress here that it was not necessarily the case that "the state" as a discrete entity was actively seeking to threaten or discipline barrio residents. Rather, the adoption of critical party-state discourses by the *voceras* worked to delineate the separation between them and the rest of the community. By taking on the rhetoric of the paternal state, they were cultivating what Bourdieu terms the "delegated authority" (1991: 111) of institutions of power. As they became specialists in Bolivarian bureaucracy and discourse, *las señoras* subjectively remade themselves as local-level guardians of the revolution.

Local people, however, sought to hold *voceros* to account in equal measure. Increasingly, rumours about corruption within the CCs began circulating in the community. Local people suggested that funding for micro-finance initiatives was being misused, and speculated that *voceros* were spending communal bank money without the community's consent. A typical conversation of this nature took place at Edwin's house when I visited for a *parilla* (barbeque) one Sunday afternoon.

> Raúl: In Sector 2 they gave a family all this money to start a *hierrería* (smithy). I don't know what happened to the *hierrería* but that family's got a lovely new front to their house, and a new car.
>
> Yuleidi: I know, and there's that *muchacha* who got money to open a *cachapería* – I don't know what she's doing but she's not making *cachapas* there, she was selling some other type of food.[69]
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> Edwin: [sarcastically] Oh no, it's just a different *type* of *cachapa* that you've never seen before!

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[69] *Cachapas* are sweet pancake-like wraps made from cornflour that are usually filled with pork and cheese.

> Raúl: I don't get involved in all these *consejos comunales*, I don't think they're a good idea. To me it just seems like another way for people to steal money. They're not *consejos* 'comu*nales*', they're *consejos* '*robonales*'.[70]

A subtext running through such conversations was the belief that corruption was an inevitable companion to the handling of money, with many people arguing that the CCs were merely a new setting for *la misma vaina* (the same thing) – corruption – to take place. Because politics and politicians, Chávez excepted, were regarded as inherently contaminated, the CCs and their *voceros* were increasingly associated with the same "dirty river" (Harriss 2004).

Sector 4's *voceras* did not receive such rumours kindly. By mid-2010, Juliana was eager to call elections so that she could relinquish her role. She was tired of the constant criticism and argued that people were merely making excuses for their own lack of involvement.

> I've left my studies, my husband and my family for this job. And for what? To be accused of corruption and all the rest of it when I've spent every day of the last two years working for this community. This is the problem here, there's only a small group of us who actually commit to working, but then everyone else says that we're not doing things properly or that we're just working for ourselves. You can't win.

Repeatedly, *voceros* in all four of El Camoruco's CCs would respond to such criticisms by arguing that people should participate if they wanted to stamp out corruption. Angel, a *vocero* from Sector 3, summarised the situation bleakly: "When there's no money people aren't interested, and when there is we fight over it."

Accusations also circulated both within and between different CCs. This was certainly due in part to the division of the old AV into four separate bodies, which meant that handling and dividing money between the four CCs was always complicated when projects were organised by the whole community. When the four sectors decided to organise a trip to a national park for the barrio's elderly residents, for example, it took four meetings to reach agreement over which pot of money would be used and who would account for it. Because the Casa de la Cultura was located in Sector 3, their CC held a sum of money for El Camoruco's cultural events. Although their *voceros* agreed in principle that this money could finance the trip, a series of accusations had been made against the other three sectors regarding how money had

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[70] *Robo* is the Spanish word for stealing.

been spent for previous cultural events during Semana Santa and Carnival. The *voceros* from Sector 3 refused to release the money for the trip unless the other CCs produced receipts for all their expenditures during these previous events. After one meeting had to be abandoned because of the ferocity of the arguments, another saw Sector 3's social control *vocera* attacking the social control *voceros* of Sectors 1, 2 and 4: "Where did that money go? We all signed an agreement saying we'd provide receipts for all the funds we use. We have to see exactly what was bought because the social controls have not been working properly. You have to provide this to prove what was bought. That is what you need to do before we provide the money." In this instance the issue was eventually resolved and the trip went ahead, but an ongoing culture of mistrust pervaded the CCs and their *voceros*.

Although the emergence of these accusations just two years after the CCs had launched might suggest they were being viewed in negative terms, it can also be understood as an attempt to establish a culture of accountability for new political institutions. As Gupta (1995) points out, discourses of corruption can be central to the way that citizens imaginatively construct relationships between themselves and the state. By leveling accusations at politicians or state officials, citizens hold more powerful actors to account by judging them against an ideal of how they should conduct themselves. Although this ideal may be a long way from the real life encounters the poor have with the state, it nonetheless works to articulate the kinds of rights and responsibilities that *should* exist between state actors and citizens. As he writes, "The discourse of corruption, by marking those actions that constitute an infringement of such rights, thus acts to represent those rights to citizens themselves" (1995: 389). Similarly, Lazar (2008) argues that in local democratic arenas, rumour and accusation work to form pre-emptive accountability, so that both existing and future leaders know what is expected of them. Even though suspicions and tensions may appear potentially destructive, "contestation is much of what actually makes the community" (2008: 90).

Seen in this light, the discourse of corruption that pervaded everyday discussions of El Camoruco's CCs can be understood as an attempt to hold *voceros* to account and create a set of values they should adhere to. Since, as the *voceros* themselves pointed out, there were limits to what non-participants could do about alleged corruption, rumour and accusation helped to set normative standards and provide inferred warnings to community leaders. They constructed an ideal of what

community leadership should be and judged their elected spokespeople by those standards. This was, in a sense, a counterbalance to the representative and paternal line taken by *voceros*: if leaders chose to become "state-like" or "politician-like" by admonishing local people or taking decisions on their behalf, they would be treated in kind by those same people.

As a case in point, Juliana complained about the fact that more and more people were asking if they could borrow money. Local people had discovered that communal banks are given small sums by national funding bodies, which are supposed to be retained for exceptional circumstances. Several had asked for money to buy medicines for family members, claiming that they were experiencing "medical emergencies". Juliana resented the fact that she was being put in this position, and particularly that people were drawing on their friendship with her to seek favours from the CC. Yet such trends suggested that because the *voceros* were seen to perform so many functions of the state, including managing public funds, local people had come to regard them as brokers or patrons on whom they could make demands. Recent work on clientelism (Burgwal 1995; Gay 1998; Auyero 2001; Lazar 2004) has challenged the view that patron-client relations are merely exploitative exchanges in which "votes for favours" or processes of top-down co-option overwhelmingly favour patrons. Instead, clients have been proven to be agents capable of tactical maneuverings just as much as patrons, and clientelist relations are better understood as "a set of strategies through which clients attempt to make politics, and politicians, more representative and responsive" (Lazar 2004: 229). Though Juliana was perhaps not fully aware of it, by assuming a position of relative power in the locality, she had set herself up as public figure on whom already-existing attitudes about the state, politics and politicians would be brought to bear. The state's promotion of participatory democracy through the CCs had thus produced a significant unintended consequence: by bringing more people into the realm of officialised, state-managed democracy, and by giving them access to public funds, it had formalised community organising so that local-level actors were now subject to the same demands that would traditionally be made on state or party officials.

These were not the only challenges to El Camoruco's *voceros*, however. As well as facing criticisms from each other and the locals in their sectors, *voceros* had to contend with more overtly political challenges from long-standing *chavista* activists who had come to prominence during the AV years (see Chapter 4). As I describe in

the next section, activists such as Rafael and Rosa sought to contest the power of *voceros* and the overall definition of what the CCs stood for. In doing so, they revealed a set of contradictions that seemed built in to the structural framework of the project.

PRAGMATISM, PARTICIPATION AND REVOLUTION

As I hope to have made clear by now, a variety of actors chose to take part in the CCs for a host of reasons. For most, a loyalty to Chávez seemed to complement a desire to achieve something for themselves and contribute to community life. Yet opacity over the overall aim of the CCs meant that conflicting motivations seemed to be unavoidable. As García-Guadilla (2008: 13-15) notes, though the CCs come as part of Chávez's Bolivarian package, there is nothing in the 2006 Communal Councils Law that states they must be "socialist" institutions, and nor is there anything to prevent non-*chavistas* from standing for election or attending meetings. The vast majority of participants in El Camoruco were *chavista*, but not all *chavistas* necessarily adhered to the same understandings of what participation should entail. For some, using the CCs in a pragmatic manner for self-gain was regarded as perfectly legitimate.

In March 2010 Sector 4 held their first elections since the formation of the CC. Many of the same *voceras* stood again, together with several new candidates. The most surprising of these was Edwin, a so-called "*chavista-lite*" who had never shown an interest in the CCs before (see Chapter 3). Apparently, Esme had convinced him to stand as education and culture *vocero* on account of his experience as a teacher with the missions. There were also a number of known opposition supporters seeking election, indicating a new strategy on their part: rather than rejecting the CCs because they were considered *chavista*, they were now open to working within them. Local *chavistas* were concerned about their presence, but remained confident that they would retain a majority. This proved to be correct when the results were released, showing that the majority of *voceros* were still *chavistas*. Edwin, a popular figure locally, also won his position by a landslide.

After the elections, Yulmi and I spoke to Edwin about his victory. She commented on the presence of opposition supporters in the local CC for the first time. "To be honest," replied Edwin, "I'd prefer to work with *esquálidos* because with

chavistas things always get personal." I noticed Yulmi bite her tongue as he said this, and then listened as he described his main motivation for standing. His plan was to obtain funding for the construction of a primary school in the vacant plot of land next to the *cancha* and the preschool. The idea was to link the project to the missions based at the high school and provide a primary school for local children. As part of the proposal, Edwin planned to put himself forward as the school's permanent, fully paid teacher. As I described in Chapter 3, he had struggled to find permanent work for some time, and seemed to regard the CC as an opportunity to resolve this problem. He was frank about his motivations: "Let's be clear about this: no-one does things just out of their heart these days." Yulmi did not look impressed, but again decided against saying anything. Back at the house, however, she was damning in her criticism.

> But Mateo that guy is dumb huh! I didn't realise he was like that, but he only put himself forward because he's got this personal project he wants to do. He doesn't realise that if you're a *vocero* you've got to work for the good of the community, from your heart. I can't see him lasting because he only wants to do it to get himself a bit of money… Why did he put himself forward? You know there are only two types here Mateo, the *chavistas* and the *bolivarianos* [she rubs imaginary money between her fingers], and he's a *bolivariano* – only interested in the *platica* [little bit of money] he can get for himself.[71]

Yulmi did not usually involve herself in accusations of corruption. Indeed, she had purposefully stepped aside from the CCs in El Camoruco because she was tired of the constant backbiting. Her concern was a far more political one. Always uneasy about the threat of the opposition and the possibility of the revolution losing its gains, she worried that having self-interested individuals like Edwin as *voceros* would weaken the political strength of CCs. For her, *voceros* needed to be dedicated and resolute community leaders, and short-termist pragmatism posed a threat to the health of the revolution itself. She was not accusing Edwin of being corrupt, but rather expressing a worry that he lacked sufficient political dedication and ideological *formación* to be an effective community leader.

It was concerns such as these that led to efforts to publically challenge the

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[71] Yulmi's use of the term *bolivariano* was a play on words. The term *bolivariano* is often used interchangeably with *chavista*, particularly by Chávez, who links the contemporary movement to the ideals of Simón Bolívar. The *Bolívar* is also the name of Venezuela's currency, so by rubbing imaginary money between her fingers as she says it, Yulmi was insinuating that those who claim to be *bolivariano* are in fact only interested in money.

voceros. Long-standing activists from the AV such as Rafael, Yulmi and Rosa viewed the development of the CCs with growing concern and regularly discussed what they perceived to be a slide into self-interested projects run by community leaders caught in a "Fourth Republic" (meaning representative and clientelist) mindset. For them, the clamour to receive funding and the disputes it generated served to misdirect the energies of activists and residents away from a more important long-term goal: the establishment of self-governing institutions that could form the building blocks of a socialist Venezuela. As Rafael commented,

> It sounds like a contradiction, but all the money the government sends to the communal councils can work against the revolution. You know when we won the neighbourhood association in 1999 we were already functioning like a communal council before the idea even existed. We achieved really high levels of participation because of the way we allowed people to incorporate themselves. Now, the vision is distinct, in the sense that what [the CCs] have achieved is only possible due to the funds. A lot of people [in the CCs] are really dedicated to organising whatever scheme in order to get the funds, but they're not worrying about the general participation of the people.

The "general participation of the people" was essentially an emphasis on *process*. For the ex-AV activists, it was through the process of collective mobilisation and deliberation that the community had created itself as a political entity in the AV years, and they feared this was being lost with the CCs. Their challenges to the CCs were twofold: first, they sought to contest the power of the *voceros* by proposing the idea that anyone could organise projects (participation over representation); second, they argued that *voceros* should prioritise community mobilisation over the search for funding (participation over pragmatism).

Rafael and Rosa's public challenge to the *voceros* came when the Alcaldía announced that it was cancelling the contracts of the notoriously inefficient (and allegedly corrupt) private waste collectors. Although they were not elected *voceros*, both remained influential figures locally thanks to their work with ASOPRODENCO and their connections at the Alcaldía. The two of them had been looking for a way to launch a project that could provide employment to local people and spotted an opportunity when the Alcaldía made the announcement. The plan was to establish a community-run waste collection cooperative through the local CCs. Local workers would be sourced from El Camoruco and its surrounding barrios by the CCs, and would be offered jobs as waste collectors in Miguel Peña. The Alcaldía would pay

them initially, but funding applications would be made for trucks and equipment so they could eventually become a cooperative, whose profits would be administered by the CCs. The proposal was very much in keeping with government models for EPSs, and after positive discussions with IMA, the Alcaldía's Municipal Environmental Institute, Rosa convened a meeting in El Camoruco and invited interested workers and *voceros* from the local CCs to attend.

As people began to arrive on the day of the meeting, she noted down the names of the barrios and sectors that were present. "We have Barrio Macuto here, José Felix here, El Camoruco Sector 1? Yes. Sector 2 and Sector 4 too? Yes, good. And Sector 3? Well I'm from Sector 3, so that's all four sectors from El Camoruco covered…" At that moment, Angel, a *vocero* from Sector 3's CC who had been observing the meeting from across the street, shouted at her: "You're not communal council!"

"How can I not be communal council? I live in Sector 3, I'm part of this community," she replied.

"But you're not a *member* of the communal council, you weren't *elected*," Angel spat back angrily. The argument was put on hold to conclude the meeting, but later on Rosa recounted how the two of them had continued when it finished. Angel had refused to concede that, as a non-*vocera*, Rosa had any right to organise meetings or speak for Sector 3, whilst she regarded him as typical of many new *voceros* who felt they were above the rest of the community. In her eyes they had become intoxicated by what she called their "little space of power" and were unable to understand the difference between representative and participatory democracy. Rosa argued that *voceros* were supposed to be community delegates rather than elected decision-makers, and stressed that anyone from the community should be able to put forward proposals and participate in their CC's running. "People think that only *voceros*, only people from the committees, are the communal councils. But the communal council *is* the community, it's the assembly of citizens. That's the most important part," she explained.

Disappointingly for Rafael and Rosa, the project failed to go ahead. Although a group of potential workers had been assembled, in the end El Camoruco's CCs had failed to meet their end of the bargain by allowing one of their communal banks to be used. With no means of depositing or transferring funds, the workers could not be paid and the project had to be abandoned. Rafael and Rosa regarded the non-

compliance of the *voceros* as an act of sabotage. The only reason for *voceros* like Angel to act in that way, as they saw it, was to assert their control over the CC. "There are only two roads here," said Rosa, "representative democracy and socialism. These people are still thinking like, 'This is my communal council, I *am* the communal council.' They don't understand how a CC is supposed to work." The episode demonstrated that one understanding of participation – the belief that anyone could and should take an active role in running a CC – was incompatible with another – the assertion that only elected "members" could arrange meetings and launch projects. If personal disputes and egos both played their part in this dispute, the disagreement centred fundamentally on a struggle to determine how participation and decision-making should function in a CC. The issue was not that Rafael and Rosa had attempted to organise the project without the CCs, since they intended it to be run by them. It was rather that they had done so without going through the *voceros* – a sign, as Angel seemed to view it, of usurpation and disrespect. In turn, by contrasting representative democracy with socialism, Rosa made her position clear: people like Angel remained beholden to representative democracy, and therefore to *puntofijismo*, self-interest and capitalism.

These final vignettes show that the motivations for involvement and overall *raison d'être* of the CCs remained contested and unresolved. Participation in the CCs clearly meant different things to different people. For some it was a means of accessing state resources and taking advantage of new openings in order to improve life and, hopefully, benefit the wider community. Many *voceros* appeared to enjoy the small trappings of power that came with their role, and went to substantial efforts to protect the status that came with it. This suggests that for all the discursive promotion of participatory democracy, its representative antecedent is still what many Venezuelans understand by the term "democracy". For others, participation was interpreted through social imaginaries in which community bodies sat at the centre of a political struggle. An actor's motivations and loyalties were not only important in terms of how resources were controlled and distributed locally, but also in terms of the ongoing aims of the Bolivarian revolution. They were, moreover, part of a broader imagined struggle between socialist and capitalist moralities, in which perceived individualism was seen as a threat to the moral legitimacy and functional efficacy of emergent collectivities.

In this chapter I have analysed the development of political practice in El Camoruco since the Communal Councils Law was passed in 2006. I have made four key points concerning the Bolivarian government's attempt to stimulate "state managed participatory democracy" (Gill 2012) through the CCs. Firstly, I have argued that the shift in emphasis to small-scale, community-managed projects has changed the nature of neighbourhood participation since the AV era. Because funding is made available through specific institutional channels, there is less need to organise large community mobilisations in order to place demands on the state. Instead, the work associated with running a CC lends itself more to small groups who have the time and inclination to commit to these projects. For those are willing and able to do so, the *vocero* position offers the opportunity to achieve self-worth, develop new skills, benefit materially and practice a citizenship that is closely aligned to Bolivarian ideals of altruism and self-sacrifice.

Secondly, there is a notable gap between the state's drive for participation and the real-world ability and willingness of barrio residents to dedicate their time to CCs. For many, the pressures of work and family mean that regular participation in the CCs is logistically difficult, and as a result a separation has emerged between *voceros* and non- (or infrequent) participants. Despite the drive to promote participatory democracy, both *voceros* and non-*voceros* adhere to a number of principles and practices more commonly associated with representative democracy, meaning that communities defer decision-making to *voceros* and receive them as representatives of state discourse. The more problematic aspect of this trend is that barrio residents can be admonished, often by their own neighbours, for failing to live up to *chavista* aspirations of participation.

Thirdly, with these practices come efforts to contest new "politician-like" or "state-like" *voceros* and hold them to account. Accusations of corruption and requests for favours indicate efforts by non-participants to make demands on their *voceros*, whilst disputes between different CCs suggest that the arbitrary limits on size create unnecessary tensions over money. An unintended consequence of the CCs' launch is that voluntary local-level actors risk becoming tarnished by their association with politics and money. One might speculate that the CCs thus decentralise not only

power and resources, but also "the corroding force of accumulated toxins, waste, and excrement" (Coronil 1997: 353) that is seen to accompany politics and governance in Venezuela.

Fourthly, many of these trends sit at odds with more radical visions of autonomy and self-government, which remain significant currents in the Bolivarian movement. Activists who envision more overtly political and independent neighbourhood bodies seek to challenge the power of new *voceros* and are highly critical of what they perceive to be self-interested pragmatism, individualism and seduction by a "*pedacito*" (little piece) of power. Yet these same activists are constrained in their ability to forge alternatives by the politico-legal frameworks of the CCs and their own loyalty to Chávez and the revolution. The prospect of forming alternatives to the CCs is politically and logistically problematic, and for the time being diverse currents must co-exist uneasily.

These conclusions show that a set of unresolved tensions and contradictions shape political practice in the CCs. They are contested spaces in which a complex interplay between individual self-interests, state agendas and broader ideological imaginings intersect on an everyday basis. It is certainly clear that a struggle to define precisely what the CCs should be is a central problem for those who participate in them. The state's discursive promotion of participatory democracy seems to be at odds with key structural components of the CCs, most notably their significant reliance on national funding bodies for resources. Moreover, as Hellinger (2011: 28-29) argues, although *puntofijismo* has been discredited as a political system, one of its enduring legacies is that many Venezuelans retain a belief in the importance of pluralist or representative democracy. This is strongly evident in everyday practice in the CCs, and it significantly complicates the drive to make them embryos of new forms of politics.

Both of these issues arguably reflect contradictory tendencies that run throughout the Bolivarian project. Hellinger argues that a tension between liberal and socialist principles is built in to the 1999 constitution (2011: 36), and as far as El Camoruco can be taken as indicative, this seems to manifest itself in myriad confusions among grassroots activists. Tellingly perhaps, the 2009 reform to the Communal Councils Law suggests a governmental concern about the presence of non-*chavista* individuals and currents in the CCs. In the revised definition of the bodies, an extra line was added to the final sentence, which now reads, "…targeted to

meet the needs and aspirations of the communities in the construction of the new model *of the socialist society* of equality, equity and social justice" (cited in Araujo 2010: 306, my emphasis). Chávez was clearly seeking to ensure that the CCs conformed to his political vision, and it is easy to see why Uzcátegui calls the CCs a "subordinated social movement" in which "all roads lead to Rome" (2010: 205). Certainly, it is true that the CCs have not achieved significant popular participation in institutions of governance. Unlike the instances of participatory budgeting cited above, they do not give local residents the opportunity to shape the public policies of their municipalities. Instead, they function more as participatory appendages to the existing state system, running in parallel to it and on occasions intersecting with it. Aside from the odd exception (Harnecker 2008), there seems little evidence that constituted powers such as mayors and governors are willing to transfer governing responsibilities to the constituent power of organised citizens.

The broader question that faces the participants of El Camoruco's CCs, then, is what kind of organisations they want the CCs to be, and to what extent they are prepared to challenge the state in order to realise self-determined aims. As they stand, the CCs are "invited spaces" that give individuals the capacity to remake themselves subjectively, cultivate public profiles and manage small sums of state resources. There are clearly significant individual and collective benefits that come with these endeavours, and it would be wholly unfair to dismiss the value of community-run bus services, improved water systems or cultural events organised by the CCs. Moreover, as Castells argues, community organisations may always be limited politically because they cannot by themselves transform structures of economic production and consumption (1983: 328). Such accomplishments can only be realised as part of broader socio-political struggles.

Yet the unifying element that brought social movement organisations to such prominence over the last few decades was the demand for autonomy (Nash 2005: 22), and it is worth considering why this demand has been deemed so critical. Julia Paley (2008) argues that autonomy enables independent, grassroots organisations to accomplish things that state-managed projects cannot. By remaining autonomous, they can bring new actors to the fore, hold politicians to account, produce political proposals that come from communities, and provide a base outside of the state should internal structures fail (2008: 163). Given the issues I have explained here, perhaps the most obvious benefit of greater autonomy for the CCs would be the ability to

define their own forms of decision-making, their own systems of accountability and their own political visions. Autonomy would not mean refusing to accept state assistance, but rather a more critical distance from the centralising tendencies of *chavismo*. This might seem an unlikely scenario given that the CCs were designed by the government and codified by a law passed in the National Assembly. Yet as Cornwall notes, the distinction between invited and popular spaces is not set in stone:

> Boundaries between "invited" and "popular" spaces are mutable, rather than fixed; "popular spaces" can become institutionalised, with statutory backing, and "invited spaces" may become sites for the articulation of dissent, as well as for collaboration and compromise (2004: 2).

Although the CCs had become the principal forums for community organisation in El Camoruco by 2008, independent grassroots organisations like ASOPRODENCO continued to exist alongside them. Dissenting voices and visions were present in the shadows of state-managed projects, as activists wrestled with the challenge of making future visions of society take shape in the present. This theme is developed further in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6

UTOPIAN DISJUNCTURES:
CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP, FACTIONALISM AND THE COMMUNAL STATE

> No! That's not right! Look, Rafael doesn't *have* a communal council. Rafael doesn't *have* a commune. Rafael is a community leader who took the initiative with a group of women and men to motivate these communities into forming a commune and that's what we've been trying to achieve for two years now. This commune is being built with popular power, but it isn't just our commune. It comes ultimately from Chávez and from Bolívar.
>
> – Rosa

INTRODUCTION

In the statement above, Rosa was issuing a forthright rebuke to a new activist who had just referred to Rafael as the *líder máximo* of ASOPRODENCO. The term, which means "maximum leader", is normally reserved for Chávez, having originated as a referent for Fidel Castro in Cuba. Rosa was profoundly upset because the use of such a deferential term for a local leader was seen to undermine the ethic of self-empowerment, bottom-up participation and socialism *de las bases* (from the bases) that ASOPRODENCO promoted. Rafael, she asserted, was a community leader who facilitated participation among equals, not a *líder máximo* in whom activists should invest their absolute faith. Yet as she sought to articulate this ethic to the activist in question, her own words also revealed an implicit tension in the Bolivarian project: grassroots activists may be building a new system of government from below, but the movement could still "ultimately" be traced back to Hugo Chávez and Simón Bolívar. The slippage in these words highlighted a recurrent problem for the *chavista* activists I worked with, who seemed plagued by an inability to resolve whether or not their constituent power was the genuine motor of the revolution. On the one hand, they were implored to enact popular power and build bottom-up structures of governance that could one day supplant the central state; on the other, they were obliged to show obedience to their president and participate in institutional channels that were increasingly designed and managed by centralised ministries.

In this chapter I present two interrelated stories that encapsulate the tensions Rosa seemed to be wrestling with. First, I analyse the attempt to build a commune across a number of *barrios* surrounding El Camoruco. Focusing on a power struggle between two competing factions of grassroots leaders who undertook this process, I show how competing models of popular participation led to profound confusion about what new forms of participatory democracy should look like and who should have authority over them. One model, proposed by ASOPRODENCO, privileged bottom-up consensus-building among a diverse set of actors, an inclusive approach to local middle-class communities and an alliance-based relationship with the state that maintained a degree of independence. The other model, emerging from a far tighter state-managed framework, advocated a leadership role for elected *voceros*, the immediate acquisition of funding for development projects and a less inclusive approach to the middle-classes. I suggest that the dispute between these two factions highlights a broader tension between constituent and constituted power, in which the desire to enact utopian ideals was overshadowed by disjunctures between different forms of authority and ideology. I differ from scholars who optimistically suggest that constituent power can eventually transform the Venezuelan state and bring it under "communal" control (Ciccariello-Maher 2007; Azzellini 2010), instead contending that constituent power is necessarily being suffocated and co-opted by state management that creates local appendages dependent on the petro-state.

Second, in a closely related "subplot'" to this argument, this chapter explores Rafael's struggle to remain relevant as a popular leader as shifts in community-state relations took place around him. As he attempted to balance overlapping allegiances and remain true to his understanding of popular power, Rafael found himself challenged by emergent actors who resented his standing in the community, and by institutional arrangements that undermined the need for a skilled broker from *las bases*. This, I suggest, constituted a victory of Chávez's "routinised charisma" (Weber 1947) over a local leader who idolised his president.

Before turning to the story of the commune in my fieldsite, I outline the thinking behind the national launch of communes and explain the theoretical terms in which they have so far been understood. I then describe the core dispute between the factions, detailing the ideological divisions, personal rivalries and competing state agendas that shaped a local disagreement. In the conclusion, drawing on Fernando Coronil's (2011a) recent articulation of the "agitated present" and the "spectral

future" of socialist imaginaries in Latin America, I expand on these themes by suggesting that the tensions at the heart of Bolivarianism are not only structural and ideological, but also temporal.

DUAL POWER AND THE COMMUNAL STATE

Launched in 2008 just two years after the CCs, the communes have been proposed by the Bolivarian government as a way of extending the influence of the CCs and establishing parallel revolutionary structures that could eventually replace the bourgeois state. By bringing together groups of CCs from neighbouring localities and using them to form broader networks of popular governance, Chávez states that more and more political and economic power will gradually be "transferred" to a series of interconnected communal territories. The ultimate aim of their development is to pull together the social, political and economic structures of the CCs and other civil society organisations to form the beginnings of a new *estado comunal* (communal state). Since the CCs are limited to communities of no more than 400 households, the aim is that communes provide a more lasting economic model, with the proposed development of *empresas de producción social* (socially productive enterprises, an adapted and expanded form of cooperative) giving communal territories the capacity to provide employment to local people and generate economic resources from within their own communities (Añez & Melean 2011). Communes would also manage more large-scale projects than the CCs, so whilst a CC might obtain funding for a new community centre, a commune could potentially do so for a high school or even a hospital. Though Chávez has stressed that communes must be formed *desde abajo* (from the bottom up), a Ministry for Communes and Social Protection (MPComunas) was launched in 2008 to aid the construction process, and government propaganda promoting the communes was widespread throughout my research period.

Since 2008, communes have emerged as projects-in-construction in various parts of the country and finally received a set of legal guidelines when The Organic Law for the Communes was passed by the National Assembly in December 2010.[72] To work alongside MPComunas, in April 2008 Chávez launched Mission April 13th

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[72] This law was not in place during my field research.

(symbolically choosing the date of the 2002 coup) and announced that it would be charged with assisting with the construction of communes in 74 municipalities and 181 parishes around the country. In the initial stages much of this assistance would be in an advisory capacity, with the need for the communities to build the structures themselves repeatedly emphasised by government officials. Mission April 13th provides funding and technical assistance in the form of Salas de Batalla Social (Social Battle Centres), which are staffed by paid members of the Frente Francisco de Miranda (Francisco Miranda Front, FFM). These FFM employees act as coordinators between leaders of community organisations, *voceros* from the CCs and state funding bodies such as FONDEMI and FUNDACOMUNAL.

George Ciccariello-Maher (2007) draws on Lenin's (1917) articulation of "dual power" to interpret both the CCs and communes. The notion seeks to outline a process in which revolutionary governmental structures are established alongside the existing bourgeois state. Lenin proposed that as the revolutionary forces grow in strength, they gradually bring the existing state under the control of this parallel structure by replacing the police and army with an armed populace and seizing the bureaucratic apparatus. He envisioned that the source of state power would no longer be bourgeois law, but rather the direct organised base of the working classes. Ciccariello-Maher argues that the CCs and communes represent an effort to cultivate a similar model. By creating structures that exist parallel to the established state, they offer embryos of a new communal state that could, over time, supplant the existing infrastructure. His contention is that dual power offers a way out of the "naïve debate" over whether or not radical movements should seize state power (cf. Holloway 2002). The key question instead, he suggests, involves "distinguishing between those forces working within-and-for the perpetuation of the traditional state structure and those working within-and-against that same structure, toward its dissolution" (2007: 7).

Yet there are two crucial differences between Lenin's model – which, of course, never materialised as he hoped – and the model rolled out by the Bolivarian government. The first is that dual power for Lenin was anchored at its base by workers' councils (soviets). While the soviets had a productive base and therefore a means to support themselves materially, the CCs and communes require funding from the central state; their independence from constituted power is thus necessarily limited. The second is that, as Ciccarielo-Maher himself notes, in structural terms the CCs and communes are subordinate to constitutional law rather than the direct will of

the people. It is not a nascent constituent power that undergirds the bodies, but a constitution enshrined in what remains a liberal democratic state. He suggests that the "revolutionary reverence for the law" has a specific quality in Venezuela, since the Bolivarian Constitution was drawn up via a popular consultation process. "This constituted power," he argues, "*relies fundamentally upon the constituent power that enacted it*" (2007: 2, emphasis in original). His reading of this arrangement is that any law remains contingent on the Venezuelan people endorsing it – that is, constituent power underpins the sovereignty of constituted power. But this is essentially a point of political and moral interpretation: structurally, the existing state remains the dominant side of the two dualities and retains the authority to dictate how they function. Given that the CCs and communes are born from state structures that they remain politically subordinate to and economically dependent on, there are thus serious questions to answer about the viability of dual power leading to a radical democratic alternative in Venezuela.

As the ethnography below will show, the constellations of community-state relations that structure the communes are highly complex, and in my fieldsite it was often unclear as to where the "driving force" for particular projects was expected to come from. Certainly, the central state – from Chávez down – was driving and promoting the model, but as with the CCs it was essentially asking that voluntary community activists undertook the bulk of the organising and building. The communes thus represent, I suggest, the central contradiction of Chávez's project: imbued with a radical rhetoric that advocates popular control of resources and a circumvention of pre-Chávez bureaucracy, they are nonetheless a creation of the state that seek to channel participation in line with a centrally-controlled infrastructure.

GRASSROOTS LEADERSHIP, BROKERAGE AND URBAN CHARISMA

The story of Rafael and the commune he aspired to build is the story of a grassroots leader's struggle to reconcile his guiding political philosophy with the myriad of overlapping loyalties, obligations and imperatives that pulled him in different directions and challenged the values he adhered to. A *barrio* leader who truly occupied the spaces in the "margins" of the state (Das and Poole 2004), Rafael's position in the *chavista* community-state nexus was not easy to define. He certainly

lived both "for" and "off" politics, thereby fitting the criterion for political vocations outlined by Weber (1946). As I have already explained, his political career had taken off during his presidency of El Camoruco's AV, which earned him a reputation as an inspiring community organiser, capable broker and committed revolutionary. Furthering this reputation beyond the bounds of his *barrio* through ASOPRODENCO, by 2005 he felt confident enough to run for political office, attempting to become an MVR councillor in the local *junta parroquial* (parish council). Though ultimately unsuccessful due to a shortage of funding and experience, he did win enough votes to earn a role as *concejal suplente* (substitute councillor). This was principally a backup role, but it provided him with a steady salary for the first time. Thanks to his successes with the AV, between 2003 and 2006 Rafael also spent a period working at the Alcaldía in the Department of Public Services. The Alcaldía was in opposition hands until 2008, but he was employed as a community organiser and charged with developing community participation programmes similar to those that had been piloted in El Camoruco in several other communities. "They offered me a job even though they knew I was *chavista* because they knew we could get things done," he explained.

Throughout the course of the Chávez era, Rafael had occupied a number of voluntary and paid positions, all of which involved a similar set of skills: stimulating popular participation, acting as a broker with state agencies and developing neighbourhood organisations. Trying to track the specific dates of different jobs and projects he had undertaken was often difficult, however, because he struggled to remember when he had left particular roles and when new ones had started. He seemed almost addicted to the motion of struggle and to everyday problem-solving, rarely casting his mind back to projects he had left behind. "I don't like looking back. I'm always thinking about the future, always trying to move onwards, you know that," he would tell me when I attempted to document his working history. This preoccupation with movement and the future seemed to enable the endurance of significant constraints on his life in the present; as I described in Chapter 3, he would go for periods without a regular income, later coming to rely on Yulmi's salary from MERCAL when he needed to temporarily dedicate more time to unpaid projects like ASOPRODENCO or the commune. But Rafael's enthusiasm for popular power and political work was also clearly deepened by the social capital he accrued through the growing number of community, state and party connections he held, which solidified

his career as a "political entrepreneur" (Banerjee 2010: 30). By the time I arrived in his community, he was described adoringly by his brother, José, as "one of the most important people in Miguel Peña." In November 2008 he even ran to become mayor of Valencia, finishing second in Miguel Peña's PSUV primaries behind the eventual winner, Edgardo Parra. "We knew he wouldn't win but we had to put him forward. We had to make a statement that *las bases* [the bases] could do something," Yulmi told me.

Much of the anthropological literature on brokerage and patronage has emphasised the asymmetrical power relations that typically exist between clients, brokers and patrons. Early works such as those of Barth (1959) and Geertz (1960) pointed to the role played by brokers in canvassing political support for political parties or landowners, showing how shrewd and embedded individuals safeguarded their own power by acting as conduits for more powerful actors who needed local knowledge and connections. The cross-cultural perspectives of the 1970s and 1980s sought to find regularities that transcended differences between cultures, focusing on the dyadic, individualised exchanges between patrons and clients and highlighting the importance of inequality to these instrumentalist relationships (Bailey 1969; Schmidt et al 1977). Typically, clientelist practices were viewed as filling in the gaps between the state and civil society (Gellner & Waterbury 1977), with scholars highlighting the active efforts made by brokers to maintain this distance in order to protect their own monopolies on resource distribution (Blok 1974). Scott (1972, 1976) emphasised the agency of peasant clients in such processes, pointing out that pressure could be exerted on patrons by appealing to a "moral economy" of historical dependencies between themselves and patrons. This emphasis has been echoed, to a certain degree, in more recent approaches to clientelism, which point to the ability of clients to manipulate brokers and patrons and use their relational ties as means of asserting political accountability (Burgwal 1995; Gay 1998; Auyero 2001; Lazar 2004). As Deborah James (2011) notes, moral ambiguity has been present throughout anthropological studies of brokerage. Brokers can be both heroic figures who provide much-needed resources to excluded communities, but they can also been regarded as "hustlers" who take advantage of structural exclusion in order to enrich and empower themselves. Importantly, James observes that a broker is not only a figure who links popular sectors to centres of power, but also one "who activates the continuing interplay between apparently irreconcilable discourses and practices" (2011: 335).

Precisely because they occupy the margins between policies and practices, brokers make the seemingly contradictory possible in the everyday.

James's observation is prescient in Rafael's case, since his political work involved a continual back-and-forth between different spheres of political activity and different currents of Bolivarianism. During my research period he had three main points of activity: PSUV, ASOPRODENCO and the Alcaldía. His main work with PSUV tended to be "seasonal", taking place in frantic periods around elections when he would assume responsibility for local promotion campaigns and the rounding up of voters on polling days. The week I arrived in El Camoruco, in early February 2009, was one such period. It was the final week before the national referendum on whether to lift the limit on presidential terms (*la enmienda*), and much of it was spent squashed in the back of cars belonging to members of Rafael's informal political team, who were busy visiting community events, radio and television stations and various PSUV *puntas rojas* distributing caps, t-shirts, posters and leaflets in support of the president. For Rafael, the week was a kind of rolling carousel of speeches, interviews and public assemblies, all interspersed with a constant stream of phone calls and text messages as he coordinated pro-Chávez events across the south of the city.

Although these election periods with PSUV were hugely significant for the continuity of Bolivarianism as a national movement, it was ASOPRODENCO that Rafael regarded as his most important project, passionately calling them "*mi gente*" (my people). As I described in Chapter 4, he, Rosa and Oneidys, the core leadership of the organisation, would speak and meet several times a week, often travelling out to different communities to carry out training sessions on behalf of the group. They also arranged regular meetings with up to 30 other ASOPRODENCO leaders, in which local problems could be discussed among a wider audience. National issues such as new laws were raised in these meetings, so that leaders could collectively deliberate on a topic and relay the information to their communities. Most ASOPRODENCO leaders had come to know each other through Rafael, and although the network was horizontally organised, it was also clear that he was its de facto leader and spokesperson. Other activists in the group were open about the fact that he possessed qualities that set him apart from the rest. As Rosa put it, "Rafael just has a way with people, a special charisma that others don't have."

Much of this specialness was evident in the gravitas with which Rafael spoke and the respect he commanded as an oratory performer. Although all ASOPRODENCO activists were experienced community leaders who spoke clearly and forcefully, Rafael did so like a great statesman, somehow having the capacity to communicate complex ideas in simple phrases and provide insights that others missed. In meetings, when arguments broke out or people strayed from the main topic, he had a way of bringing things back into focus with motivational statements designed to remind people of their ethos. "Comrades," he would say in moments of difficulty, "This is a great laboratory we're in, a laboratory of popular power and participatory democracy. We can't fail, and we need to rise above these arguments and conflicts." There was a grandiosity to his words that seemed to intensify the significance of everyday conversations and decisions. Through the weight of his oral deliveries, Rafael could link the everyday travails of local politics to much broader visions of twenty-first century socialism and self-renewal, thereby evoking the feel of Chávez and giving the organisation a sense of coherence and belief. In this sense he was not dissimilar to a preacher, the force of his personality acting as a constant reservoir of faith that others drew from. Owing to this ability and the strong friendships that anchored ASOPRODENCO, he enjoyed tremendous loyalty from those involved in the organisation. Indeed, in line with Weber's (1947) original formulation of charismatic authority, it could be said that he embodied the values of the group as a whole, which formed a "moral team" (Bailey 1969: 28) around him and utilised him as a collective asset. Those close to Rafael said that his leadership skills were a *don* – a gift from God.

The respect Rafael commanded among his comrades fostered a remarkable level of self-confidence and optimism that was particularly evident in his attitude towards insecurity and violence. Although, as I described in Chapter 2, he worried greatly about the safety of his children, he refused to own a gun and, unlike most *barrio* residents, would happily venture into alien *barrios* in the dead of night. Many of my fondest and most abiding memories from fieldwork are of late-night meandering *vueltas* (laps or circuits) around the *barrios* of Miguel Peña in Rafael's battered 4x4 in search of beers, cigarettes and parties. At three or four in the morning, when the streets of Valencia's *barrios* would be completely deserted, he would wind down his windows and blast out the revolutionary music of Ali Primera, singing along at the top of his voice. There was a self-conscious defiance to this act, a refusal to be

intimidated by stigmas about other *barrios* and a performance of faith in the inherent goodness of "his people". As he explained,

> If the *malandros* walk by they say hello to me. If I want to buy cigarettes or a drink at whatever hour I'll find it, even if I have go to another *barrio* – that's liberty for me. I feel good walking around here, *jodiendo*, mixing with people. Why would I carry a gun around here? I'm a happy person, I'll walk anywhere and greet anyone without problems. How could I talk about socialism and sharing and trust if I had a gun in the house? I work with people who've got guns, I have to *manage* people who've got guns. But I haven't got one and I'll never have one.

Sentiments such as these underlined Rafael's firm desire to live his political philosophy as fully as possible, expressing a refusal to fear his neighbours and a complete confidence in his own ability to navigate his surroundings.

According to Luke Freeman, power is accumulated "by communicating an aura of unusual efficacy" (2007: 287). In Rafael's case, his natural charisma was backed up by significant connections at the Alcaldía that enabled him to solve a myriad of everyday problems for local people. On any particular day, it was possible to witness him arrange for leaking water pipes to be repaired in one community, find legal advice for a lady who had been robbed in another, and organise the reconstruction of *ranchos* in a squatter settlement that had been ravaged by fire. Finding solutions to problems were daily tasks for Rafael, and he would constantly be fielding phone calls and text messages from people throughout Miguel Peña. Like the Peronist brokers described by Auyero (2001), his connections endowed him with significant social capital, and in small ways he acted as a "mini-patron" by providing temporary paid jobs to friends like Nucho (see Chapter 3). Yet his relationship to those in both his "inner circle" and those at a greater distance was not a traditional system of clientelism of the kind described by Gellner (1977) or Schmidt et al (1977), since he lacked the resources to routinise a system of support and favours. Nor was he able to "monopolise" economic problem-solving through regularised party channels, as in the case of Auyero's Peronists (2001: 116) – as I have already discussed, party-based clientelism at the neighbourhood level had greatly declined with the end of *puntofifismo*. Instead, Rafael was a broker who achieved sporadic infrastructural improvements through popular mobilisations and the use of extensive social networks, and who could on occasion transfer resources that passed through him. Although these acquisitions were generally small in size, they were significant as

symbols of his "extra-local connections to centres of power" (Blom Hansen and Verkaaik 2009: 16). In a typical example that expressed his loyalty to ASOPRODENCO, when a government ministry sent him a motorbike to assist with his community organising, he gave it to Miguel, a particularly poor activist who worked voluntarily for ASOPRODENCO.

In this sense, Rafael's style of brokerage was strongly characteristic of the "infrapower" that Thomas Blom Hansen and Oskar Verkaaik (2009) have recently articulated as central to their model of "urban charisma". Seeking to update Weber's definition of the "specific gifts of spirit and body" (1947: 245) that set charismatic leaders apart, they argue that a particular form of charismatic authority emerges from techniques of urban governance that rely on the specialist knowledge of brokers from a city's popular locales. Intimately tied to the "unknowability" (2009: 8) of urbanised communities, this infrapower is based on the capacity to read, navigate and manipulate the postcolonial city's spaces, networks and power structures. The authors suggest that it is less a result of the "absence" of governance and more a corollary of a specific kind of "governance at a distance" that stems from "the need for order and connectivity in poor neighbourhoods combined with colonial reliance on native forms of authority, self-styled leaders and popular big men" (2009: 21). By combining the popular charisma of a *barrio* leader with the connectivity of a community-state broker and aspiring politician, Rafael seemed perfectly placed to facilitate the myriad of Bolivarian initiatives that were rolled out by the *chavista* state from 2003 onwards. He decided not to involve himself directly in the CCs when they were launched in 2006, believing his energies would be better spent as a coordinator and educator with ASOPRODENCO. But because it covered a greater number of people and entailed a more complex process of construction, the proposal to establish a commune in Miguel Peña in late 2008 offered him an ideal opportunity to utilise the full scope of his urban charisma and put a transformative political and economic project in place.

THE COMMUNE IN MIGUEL PEÑA

In January 2008 Rafael returned from a conference in Caracas with the exciting news that El Camoruco and its surrounding communities had been chosen as a pilot zone for the development of a commune. The move was born out of connections that he

and ASOPRODENCO had established with FUNDACOMUNAL over several years, largely through the training workshops they offered to new CCs. This link with FUNDACOMUNAL put Rafael in contact with Caracas-based government officials and intellectuals like Marta Harnecker, a Chilean writer and sociologist who works for Chávez as an advisor on endogenous development and popular power.[73] Following extensive discussions with Harnecker and other senior figures behind the commune project, Miguel Peña was deemed an appropriate place for one of the pilot communes, with ASOPRODENCO's existing grassroots network regarded as a good starting point for the development of an inter-community body. MPComunas had been establishing communication with similar grassroots organisations and networks in other parts of the country, but most of these were in rural regions with established traditions of political and economic integration. At the time of my arrival, the proposed commune in Miguel Peña was the only urban project in the country. Rafael was proud of this fact, pointing out that an initiative of this kind was far harder to develop in a stratified and complex urban setting: "Here we have the problems of an urban community: the injection of individualism, of consumerism and of capitalism – it's really *arrecho* [tough/difficult]," he told me. Nonetheless, he was determined to make the commune work, believing the vision of the communal state to be "the most important project in Venezuela right now."

ASOPRODENCO assumed stewardship of the proposal and began to promote the commune among local activists. In a series of public assemblies and organising meetings in early 2008, Rafael, Rosa and Oneidys formed a promotion committee and set about galvanising local interest in the project. On the back of the now established CCs, the early response was positive, with good attendance at the assemblies and a diverse representation of communities present in the planning stages. Numerous CCs and community groups expressed an interest in becoming involved and, echoing the structural approach of the CCs, provisional committees were established in areas such as health, political formation, citizen security, social economy, media and communication, housing and services for the elderly. Particularly encouraging for Rafael and Rosa was the involvement of a number of *chavista voceros* from CCs

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[73] Harnecker's (2008) book *Transfiriendo Poder a la Gente* (Transferring Power to the People) documents the process of commune construction in a rural region of Lara State. It details how new popular structures and a localised constitution were built through self-organisation and the cooperation of an "enlightened" local mayor, Julio Chávez (no relation).

based in middle-class *urbanicaziones*, many of whom had never been involved with *barrio* activists before. Their participation presented an opportunity to bridge some of the tensions that existed between *urbanizaciones* and *barrios* and move away from the stark social and political polarisation that was so pervasive in Venezuelan society. By early 2009 some 22 CCs in the zone surrounding El Camoruco had provisionally signed up to the commune, with plans to incorporate a further 18 communities also underway.[74] In total it was thought that the commune could cover a population of up to 70,000 people.

Yet as ASOPRODENCO set about what they believed to be the early stages of commune construction, another *chavista* institution emerged in the zone following the launch of Mission April 13th. In late 2008 a Sala de Batalla Social was established in El Camoruco, complete with a small concrete office that was erected next to the *cancha*. Funded directly by MPComunas, the Sala was headed by an employee of the FFM named Norma, an outsider who was brought in to facilitate integration between the CCs in the area and work towards a commune in line with Chávez's framework. Several other paid FFM activists were attached to the Sala, including two young men from El Camoruco, Jhonny and Jesús, who had undertaken the group's training programme in Cuba. Initially making contact with *voceros* from El Camoruco's CCs, Norma acted independently of ASOPRODENCO and established her own links in the community. Meanwhile, the FFM activists began appearing at CC meetings and in the local missions, usually armed with clipboards, piles of government documents and a seemingly encyclopaedic knowledge of the Bolivarian constitution and the most recent laws. As salaried activists, their official role was to provide administrative and logistical assistance to any Bolivarian project in their community, but they also seemed to be charged with a motivational role.[75] Often, at the closure of meetings, Jhonny would enthusiastically extol the virtues of the revolution and inform those assembled of its forthcoming achievements: "This year we're going to see so many advances for the Bolivarian revolution," he would exclaim. "Advances with the *consejos comunales*, the *comunas* and popular power!" Despite the fact that the CCs were officially non-partisan and open to all community members, he would then ensure that the participants swore allegiance to the revolution by loudly proclaiming

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[74] These communities were either those that had CCs who had yet to sign up to the proposal or those who had yet to form CCs.

[75] At the time of field research, the FFM activists I knew received a monthly "scholarship" payment of Bs.F 1,500 (USD $348.83). This was the national minimum wage at the time.

the first line of Chávez's slogan: "*Patria, socialismo o muerte…*" As everyone knew, it was implicitly mandatory to collectively conclude the refrain in customary fashion: "*¡Venceremos!*"

ASOPRODENCO's response to the arrival of the Sala and the FFM was lukewarm to say the least. No official communications from either Norma or MPComunas were made when it was first established, and there was both confusion and resentment that local leaders with a long history of organising were effectively being overlooked by the new arrivals. As Rosa commented, "We need to define what the role of the Sala actually is here. That little office just appeared next to the *cancha* but no-one has explained it or asked our opinion." Seemingly, ASOPRODENCO had jumped ahead of the rest of the country by forming a commune promotion committee before the state infrastructure from MPComunas had rolled out its own framework in the zone. The arrival of the Sala represented the "official" state model, which Rafael had unwittingly pre-empted thanks to his connections in Caracas. The presence of two steering teams, one born from the locality and one from the state infrastructure, undoubtedly presented problems, and early signs of these began to emerge as the new activists began involving themselves in local political organisations.

Tensions were evident in particular between many *voceros* and the new FFM activists, whose sudden appearance at meetings and close attention to governmental rules and regulations rankled established community leaders. On one occasion, Jose Ramón, a *vocero* from Sector 1, concluded a public meeting by telling the rest of the CC that they still had 30 days to register their community's proposed projects with FUNDACOMUNAL. No sooner had he finishing speaking when a non-local FFM activist corrected him: "No, you're wrong comrade. I have the laws here and that isn't correct…" Jose Ramón tried to defend his position, saying he still thought they had 30 days to make their submission, and intimating that it was not really that important, since FUNDACOMUNAL were always behind schedule anyway. But the FFM activist raised his voice, brandished his documents and repeated his claim, this time slowly and deliberately for effect. He also invoked Chávez, in an apparent effort to align his own argument with the sovereign power: "It says here, *on this document*, signed by *President Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías* [drawing out each word], that the way you're doing it isn't in accordance with the law. It's people like you who are dividing the revolution here in El Camoruco. You need to learn the laws and act in line with

them." After the man left, Jose Ramón expressed his fury to those who had stayed behind:

> Who is that guy? I don't even know who he is, but he's not from El Camoruco that's for sure. He comes in here and tells me, someone who grew up here, that *I'm* dividing the revolution in this *barrio*! He was the one creating the argument and doing the dividing, not me. It's always like this with the *Frente*, they think they're more revolutionary than the rest of us, like they're 'professional revolutionaries' and we're just amateurs. Someone's got to do something about them, this keeps happening.

This exchange typified emerging tensions between established local leaders and newer, semi-professionalised actors who represented the growing influence of state institutions in local organisations.

It was also true, however, that there was substantial resentment towards ASOPRODENCO's leadership from a significant number of newly-elected *voceros*, particularly among those from El Camoruco. As the disagreement over the failed rubbish project in Chapter 5 showed, some of those who had emerged as CC leaders in the *barrio* objected to the continuing influence of Rafael in particular. Since they had effectively occupied the spaces left behind when he and Rosa chose to focus their energies on ASOPRODENCO, *voceros* such as Angel and Ernesto disliked the fact that Rafael and Rosa retained the ability to act above their heads, especially as *voceros* had earned their right to lead through local elections. As the local influence of Norma and the FFM grew, this group of dissident *voceros* began to associate themselves with the Sala and develop their own plans for a commune. I was unaware of these tensions when I first arrived, and in the early months of fieldwork the growing rivalry between ASOPRODENCO and the Sala was only evident through rumour and gossip. Yet as the weeks wore on, it became apparent that the Sala were actually proposing a commune of their own that contradicted a number of elements that were pivotal to ASOPRODENCO's model. With ASOPRODENCO's initiative already moving ahead, a power struggle looked increasingly likely as each faction sought to defend their vision of the commune and win popular support.

By mid-2009 Miguel Peña's would-be commune was thus a highly complicated picture. ASOPRODENCO, with their history of local organising, their established networks beyond El Camoruco and their connections to senior government figures in Caracas, felt they had legitimate claims on the stewardship of the initiative and encouraged the dissident *voceros* to talk to them and join their

proposal. In turn, the faction aligned with the Sala boasted the support of MPComunas (which entailed funding), around 30 elected *voceros* from El Camoruco's CCs and a position directly inside the proposed skeleton of the new communal state. Seemingly, in an archetypical case of what Ellner terms the "duplication of bureaucracies" (2008: 135), different organs of the *chavista* state had conspired to create a power struggle by respectively backing different sets of prospective commune leaders. The two initiatives were thus developing parallel to one another, with substantial confusion over where the "true" source of authority lay. To complicate matters further, the factions were not split evenly between different CCs. Rather, there were divisions *within* individual CCs, with different *voceros* from the same communities pledging their allegiances to different commune proposals. This was a particularly fraught affair in El Camoruco, where Rafael and Rosa encountered neighbours and comrades who were openly aligning themselves with the Sala. The same was true for *voceros* like Angel and Ernesto, who were accused by local ASOPRODENCO activists of siding with an outsider – Norma – over one of their own.

DEMOCRACY AND INCLUSION

In May 2009, after months of rumour and gossip, ASOPRODENCO organised a public assembly in the hope of airing both factions' grievances and working towards an agreement between the two proposals. A great deal of effort was put into the event, which was attended by the Vice Minister of MPComunas, Lidice Altuve, together with a group of Australian solidarity activists who were touring different Bolivarian projects around the country. ASOPRODENCO arranged food and drinks, decorated the civic centre with red balloons and drew up detailed maps and slideshows showing their elaborate plans for the commune. The event began relatively well, with different *voceros* and community leaders from across the territory recounting their experiences with participatory democracy since the inception of the CCs, and various provisional committees from ASOPRODENCO's proposal describing the kinds of projects they hoped to mount when the commune was a working entity. But after the initial niceties, as more individuals from the Sala took their turn to speak, it soon descended into a slanging match between the two sides. Far from repairing the differences

between the factions, by the end of the day the resentment had only worsened. As each side sought to defend their position, accusations and counter-accusations transformed what had been murmurings of discontent into a hardened political conflict.

The ideological and strategic divisions between the two factions were exemplified by the question of which communities should participate in the commune. As they explained at the assembly, one of the Sala's main problems with ASOPRODENCO's proposal was the involvement of middle-class *urbanizaciones* in the project. Pointing to the great social and political differences between the sets of communities, they suggested that the commune should be comprised solely of *barrios*. Norma argued the following: "Those [middle-class] communities don't have the same material needs as these *barrios*. They have everything [material] resolved already, so what's the point in having them in the commune? We need to focus on ourselves." Her comment suggested that the Sala's main focus was on obtaining state funds to make infrastructural improvements to the *barrios*. This was a huge point of contention for ASOPRODENCO, who were immensely proud of the fact that they had crossed social divides and built a network of diverse individuals and communities. Rafael firmly defended their policy of inclusion. He reminded people that middle-class residents from Los Mangos used to be afraid to cross into El Camoruco, whereas now these same people were working as community leaders alongside *barrio* activists. In an impassioned response, he spoke of a broader vision of anti-discrimination, unity across communities and the need to tackle the endemic social and political polarisation in Venezuelan society, even suggesting that some of the middle-classes had been radicalised by being involved in a shared project. "To me the strongest element in our proposal is our integration of different communities," he said. "This is about human sensitivity to others, no matter where you're living – Chávez always says this. This commune is for everyone. It's not about how much you have but about your participation." Miguel supported these claims, rising from his chair to say the following: "The commune can't be a *chavista* commune, it has to be for everyone."

This particular disagreement can be understood as a dispute over the extent to which the commune should be antagonistic and exclusionary towards non-*chavistas* and non-*barrio* residents. Drawing on the appeal of populism and its Manichean separation between fundamentally opposed forces (Laclau 2005; Hawkins 2010), the

Sala seemed intent on reinforcing social boundaries in order to ensure *chavista* hegemony in the locality. Seeking political and practical coherence, they were concerned that middle-class involvement would complicate the commune's capacity to claim resources from the state. As a representative of MPComunas, Norma also seemed determined to ensure that the revolution would retain strong electoral support in the *barrios* by meeting their material needs as soon as possible. "If we want this revolution to continue, we have to *dar la respuesta* [give the response, or meet the needs] right now," she said. For the Sala, the inclusion of *urbanizaciones* seemed to be inefficient and lacking in clear political purpose.

Ernesto was another member of the Sala faction who subscribed to this view. He argued that ASOPRODENCO's proposed commune, which currently numbered 22 communities, was far too large. Keeping the number of communities small, he suggested, would make decision-making easier and the acquisition of state funding faster. He talked about the problems with gangs and violence and argued that the *barrios* in the communal territory needed, above all, state resources so they could establish a network of EPSs and economically uplift the area. These socially productive, community-run enterprises would, he argued, provide employment for young men and generate resources that could be reinvested in the zone's infrastructure. "We all know how hard it is to make decisions even in just one *consejo comunal*," he said. "So imagine how it's going to be with more than 20 communities. It's crazy. What we need is a small commune of just ten *barrios* so it's easier to manage. If the *urbanizaciones* want to build a commune too, fine, there's no problem with that. But our needs are different to theirs."

Rafael, however, was adamant that while the project was still a proposal, it was undemocratic to arbitrarily exclude any community from joining the project. "It's not a commune yet, it's a *proposal*," he argued. "So how can we decide which communities should be in and which shouldn't? It's for the people to decide." His insistence on "the people" deciding seemed to be an effort to remind the opposing *voceros* that community leaders should not be making decisions above the heads of their communities. But the problem with this position was that this imagined "people" seemed to be as divided as their leaders, meaning that further debate was the only logical outcome. He was backed up by a number of the middle-class *voceros* from Los Mangos, one of whom pointed out that political connections between the two communities had existed for almost two years: "No-one can say how big a commune

should be. A commune and its size should be decided by the people in it, by the collective. If you've got ten groups but an eleventh appears and wants to be part of it, you've got to let them join. No-one can say what it should and shouldn't be – including Chávez." As these responses showed, a commitment to a consensus-based model of democracy was predominant in the ASOPRODENCO proposal. By refusing to place limits on size or participation, they were in effect refusing to act as a coercive authority and retaining open-ended dialogue as the means through which decisions would be taken. In their response to Rafael, members of the Sala contended that, as emotively compelling as his vision of intra-community unity sounded, ASOPRODENCO were presiding over a proposal that only seemed to be leading to more discussion. Whilst they spent meeting after meeting incorporating more communities into their proposal, they moved no closer to finalising the structures that would act as depositories for state funding. For the Sala, ASORPODENCO's search for democratic purity was making them less effective brokers and inhibiting the acquisition of the resources their communities needed.

This disagreement over decision-making echoed debates that have long-preoccupied radical political movements. An advocate of anarchist modes of organising, David Graeber (2004) argues that the non-hierarchical, consensus model of democracy is "typical of societies where there would be no way to compel a minority to agree with a majority decision – either because there is no state with a monopoly of coercive force, or because the state has nothing to do with local decision-making" (2004: 89). Yet critics of the model contend that it is unsuitable for large groupings, highly inefficient and open to manipulation. Harry Walker (2011), for example, suggests that in Amazonia, decisions that may appear to be taken by consensus are in actual fact constructed through covert alliances cultivated over long periods of time. The "consensus" on display in public meetings, he suggests, is often a public spectacle designed to ensure social harmony rather than a genuine process of decision-making. Not dissimilarly, Jason Hickel (2011) asserts that effective action in the Occupy movement was significantly inhibited by a dogmatic reliance on consensus. He suggests that the approach rests on a problematic liberal ethic that, in its desire to promote inclusiveness, openness and tolerance, loses the dynamic of antagonism that is often central to the formulation of political claims. As he writes,

In practice, however, the consensus model falters precisely because it takes the liberal ethic to its extreme: it forecloses the possibility of hegemony and vacates the place of power. Discussion about decisions carries on until everyone agrees, or at least until no one disagrees enough to block a given proposition. This alienates people who don't have reams of spare time, and often means that discussions founder on the mundane logistics of camp life without ever graduating to the question of how to coordinate a coherent international movement (2011: 6).

This criticism is strikingly similar to the Sala's position, who regarded ASOPRODENCO's efforts to build bridges between communities and remain open to new arrivals as inefficient and politically naïve. As one dissenting activist put it at the assembly, "A lot of people are tired of all these meetings where nothing happens. Come on, let's get moving and do something!"

LEADERSHIP STYLES AND PERSONAL RIVALRIES

On top of the differences in ideology and strategy, there were significant tensions between particular individuals in the two factions that manifested themselves in debates over legitimacy and leadership. As an outsider, Norma managed to avoid the worst of these hostilities, but still faced criticism from those loyal to ASOPRODENCO. Echoing the sentiments of those who objected to the incursions of salaried FFM activists, Yulmi was scornful of her clipboards, leaflets and affected revolutionary expertise: "She's like, 'Oh I'm so revolutionary, I'm the most revolutionary of them all!'"

Yet the most embittered rivalries were among people who had known each other for a long time. A few days after the assembly, I spoke to Ernesto in the hope of finding out more about his opposition to Rafael and ASOPRODENCO. A long-standing resident of El Camoruco, he had been involved in *La Joc* during the same period as Rafael and had returned to activism after the arrival of Chávez – a significant personal change that I described in Chapter 1. Although acknowledging Rafael's historic contribution to the community, Ernesto's felt that he had no legal right to coordinate the commune, whereas *voceros* from the CCs like himself had been elected to constitutionally sanctioned bodies. "A *consejo comunal* is something concrete, something official with laws," he told me. "What is their commune? How big should it be? We still don't know." This point cut to the heart of a debate about

which kind of "popular power" was sovereign. For Ernesto, an elected *vocero*, it was "the laws" – that is, the legal conference of legitimacy the state had given to the CCs – that gave them the right to manage any proposed commune. In his view, the fact that he held a formal, electoral mandate with the local community gave him legitimacy that ASOPRODENCO, despite their history of grassroots organising, could not match. Making a distinction between his own "community" work and what he pointedly described as Rafael's "political" work, he told me that he regarded Rafael as a political schemer:

> You need to open your eyes. Rafael has been put forward to be a councillor, he's got the connections in Caracas. He's a *politico* [politician]. Now there's nothing wrong with *politicos*, we need them to help our communities. But the danger with *politicos* is that they can become *politiqueros* [political schemers]. I mean, all he does is talk, talk, talk without doing anything.

By mentioning Rafael's connections in Caracas (the main reason a commune had been proposed in the first place), Ernesto portrayed his own faction as an embattled bastion of the "real" grassroots struggling against the Machiavellian manoeuvrings of a political player. The insinuation that ASOPRODENCO's proposal was a convenient vehicle for Rafael's personal ambitions allowed the Sala to style themselves as a more authentic and trustworthy group.

But Ernesto went further still, suggesting that an unnamed member of ASOPRODENCO had tried to persuade him to siphon off money from his CC's communal bank that the two of them could share. I had no way of knowing if this accusation was true, but Ernesto clearly wanted to smear ASOPRODENCO's proposal by accusing them of being power hungry, corrupt and greedy. As Lazar (2008) notes, accusations of corruption and self-interest can be used to "highlight the moral integrity of the accuser, as well as throw some mud (not always undeserved) at the accused" (2008: 76; see also 2008: 213). In a context in which the collective good was privileged as paramount, accusations of this kind were efforts to denigrate the opposing faction and show moral superiority. Yet the content of Ernesto's statement also highlighted a paradoxical problem for Rafael and ASOPRODENCO: it was precisely their commitment to dialogue and open-ended participation that was leaving them open to the claim that they were *politiqueros*. Talking, which they placed at the heart of how they felt popular power should work, was set against *action* – and action,

for Ernesto and the Sala, meant being able to *dar la respuesta* and achieve things in material terms.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the weeks following the assembly Rafael and ASOPRODENCO made counter-accusations against the Sala. Too many newly elected *voceros* in the rival faction, they argued, were self-interested and obsessed with money, failing to understand that building socialism should be about far more than accessing state funds. "There are too many people who don't understand what popular power is and who want to be the boss of their *consejo comunal*," argued Rafael. For them, the Sala's search for funding had blinded them to a more far-reaching vision of socialism that emphasised, in line with Che Guevara's New Man [*sic*], the making of new socialist people as its first principle. As Yulmi put it: "Ok so their proposal has money, but is that socialism? Socialism is about the development of people, the development of up here [pointing to her head]. That's what we have." Time and time again, ASOPRODENCO activists would return to this question of *formación*, arguing that the Sala's refusal to cooperate with their proposal revealed the persistence of capitalist values and a misunderstanding of participatory democracy. Oneidys typified this view:

> I'm worried that [the Sala] are trying to keep the power for themselves, not necessarily because they're corrupt but because they don't understand popular power. Yesterday I said this several times – that it isn't us who decide what happens, it's the people. I kept saying it because I want to make sure that we're clear on this. It's the difference between constituent and constituted power. I've never trusted the institutions because these things always come from above and it's always about power. I've got to work with them [the Sala] though because that's what there is at the moment, we've got to work with what we've got.

Worst of all for Rafael was the fact that the Sala, all of whom were locals aside from a few of the salaried FFM activists, were siding with state bureaucrats over a figure they had grown up with:

> What the Sala were saying about me was totally contradictory. 'Oh, why does Rafael have to be the coordinator, why this and why that?' They said that about me and I'm *from here*. I was born here in the *barrio*. And then when they send that guy from the ministry they were all like, 'Oh yes sir, of course sir' [mimicking a soldier's salute]. It just shows how we still have this problem of *formación* – people still don't understand popular power.

Clearly feeling betrayed by these events, Rosa argued that the Sala's attitude was typical of a broader inferiority complex, in which *barrio* residents looked to outsiders

to solve their problems. "There's a saying here: 'There are no prophets in your own land,'" she told me. "It's like that here. For example, people see you coming and they say, 'Wow, Mateo's here from England, how exciting!' But they don't even realise what they've got here, in their community, with Rafael. People don't value what they have."

One wonders if ASOPRODENCO's almost obsessive emphasis on ideological purity and *formación* was an effort to hold on to something symbolic as their influence waned in the locality. Rafael was clearly hurt by the dispute, and perhaps baffled that his charisma and popularity were no longer guarantees of local support. Indeed, the entire episode highlighted a peculiar relationship between his leadership style and his fervent belief in participation and dialogue. Because of the reputation he had established and his known capacity for accessing centres of power, it was perhaps precisely the danger of being labelled a *politiquero* that led to such a dogmatic commitment to dialogue and open-ended decision-making. As Bourdieu observes, because their authority rests on repeatedly convincing their followers of their exceptionality, charismatic leaders are "especially vulnerable to suspicions, malicious misrepresentations and scandal" (1991: 192). Ever in danger of suffering such accusations, Rafael seemed to feel the need to assuage the efficacy of his own authority by repeatedly deferring to popular power: "It's for the people to decide." Yet in the very act of doing this, he left himself open to accusations of inefficiency, self-interest and vanity. As he and his followers attempted to understand why his charisma could no longer guarantee political control, they repeatedly returned to a moralist interpretation, identifying the problem as a lack of socialist consciousness among other *chavistas*. In truth, both factions probably had legitimate complaints about the conduct of their rivals, but the intensity of their criticisms seemed to elide a broader set of questions about the structural frameworks that lay behind much of the disagreement.

COMPETING AND OVERLAPPING STATE AGENDAS

As well as signalling a struggle between different attitudes to democracy, participation and leadership, the commune dispute highlighted how different arms of the state – including individual government actors in Caracas, MPComunas and the

local Alcaldía – had begun to overlap and compete with a concomitant set of brokers and clients jostling for position at the local level. ASOPRODENCO's commune proposal had been driven by personal contact between Rafael and key players close to Chávez in Caracas, but these connections had seemingly been either superseded or overlooked by MPComunas when they launched the FFM and the Sala de Batalla Social in the zone.[76] To further complicate matters, Rafael had been seeking support from the *chavista* mayor of Valencia, Edgardo Parra, for some time. Parra, an unpopular figure who had a difficult relationship with Rafael, eventually agreed to publically back ASOPRODENCO's commune in December 2009. Most activists I knew felt that he had done so largely because he feared losing the votes Rafael and his networks could bring. Beyond the required platitudes about popular power and revolution, the Alcaldía's general attitude towards the commune had been largely lukewarm, perhaps unsurprisingly given that communes seek to eventually replace municipal structures. But owing to the mutually beneficial outcome of a deal for both men, the mayor officially endorsed ASOPRODENCO's commune at a public assembly in El Camoruco shortly before Christmas.

Rafael's decision to involve Parra in the process emerged after six months of tensions with the Sala that followed the disastrous public assembly described above. ASOPRODENCO repeatedly sought conciliatory talks in the intervening months, but were consistently rebutted by Ernesto, Norma and the others. During the same period, Parra began making overtures to Rafael about the possibility of him working with the Alcaldía's Public Services Department once again. He was keen to involve Rafael in service delivery in Miguel Peña, where major infrastructural problems were damaging Parra's already poor standing with local residents. Because of his record with community improvements, Rafael was a logical choice for the mayor, particularly given his dual role as both a proven problem-solver and PSUV organiser. I was not party to the conversation that took place between them, but Rafael's acceptance of the job in December 2009 coincided with Parra's endorsement of ASOPRODENCO's commune. Seemingly, a deal between the two of them had been agreed, with Rafael's frustrations with the Sala finally leading him to call on the most powerful patron he could find. If this seemed contrary to the principles of popular power and bottom-up

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[76] Since the launch of the communes by MPComunas was part of a national policy, it is entirely possible that the two processes simply happened independently of one another, with the activists on the ground having to deal with the resulting confusion when it arrived.

organisation ASOPRODENCO had been espousing for so long, Rafael argued that he had been left with no other choice: "If they [the Sala] don't come to the our meetings, what can we do? We'll have to go above them. Once we've got the mayor's support on this, they can't form another commune on top of ours." Yet at the public assembly in which Parra officially backed ASOPRODENCO's commune, the Sala demonstrated that this was precisely what they intended to do. Whilst Parra was speaking on El Camoruco's *cancha*, the Sala activists sat pointedly outside the event and held their own meeting. There were enough of them to make a clear point: *You cannot do this without us*.

Indeed, as Figure 1 below shows, the Sala had significant state backing themselves. In fact, their connections with MPComunas, FONDEMI and the FFM were the "official" institutional structures as designed by the national government. The position they occupied inside the skeleton of the new communal state was one of their principle justifications for pursuing their own agenda, and like ASOPRODENCO they were supported by significant government actors. The most prominent of these was Lidice Altuve, the Vice Minister of MPComunas. During the fractious assembly recounted above she had been invited principally as a guest and observer, but had stepped in to make some telling remarks towards ASOPRODENCO's leadership:

> I say this to you: revise your structures. You can't have structures of coordination and promotion committees. With these committees of coordination and promotion, you're in danger of destroying the ethic of participation. There has to be more communal participation. How many people here really take decisions among you? The commune has to be something functional. You need a more formal structure of government, like the sort of structure central government has with different ministries.

Like the Sala's criticisms, the insinuation in her statement was that the informality of ASOPRODENCO's leadership structure was undemocratic and open to manipulation. Clearly, the recommendation of a "more formal structure of government" was a statement in support of the model being driven by MPComunas and the Sala. Although Altuve was careful not to issue orders or impose a decision on the two factions, implicit in her words was the need to adopt the institutional model that originated in the national government. The situation that had now emerged was wryly summarised by Norma when she re-emphasised the Sala's position to Rafael in early

2010: "So we've got still your commune with the support of the Alcaldía and ours with the support of the Ministry [MPComunas]."
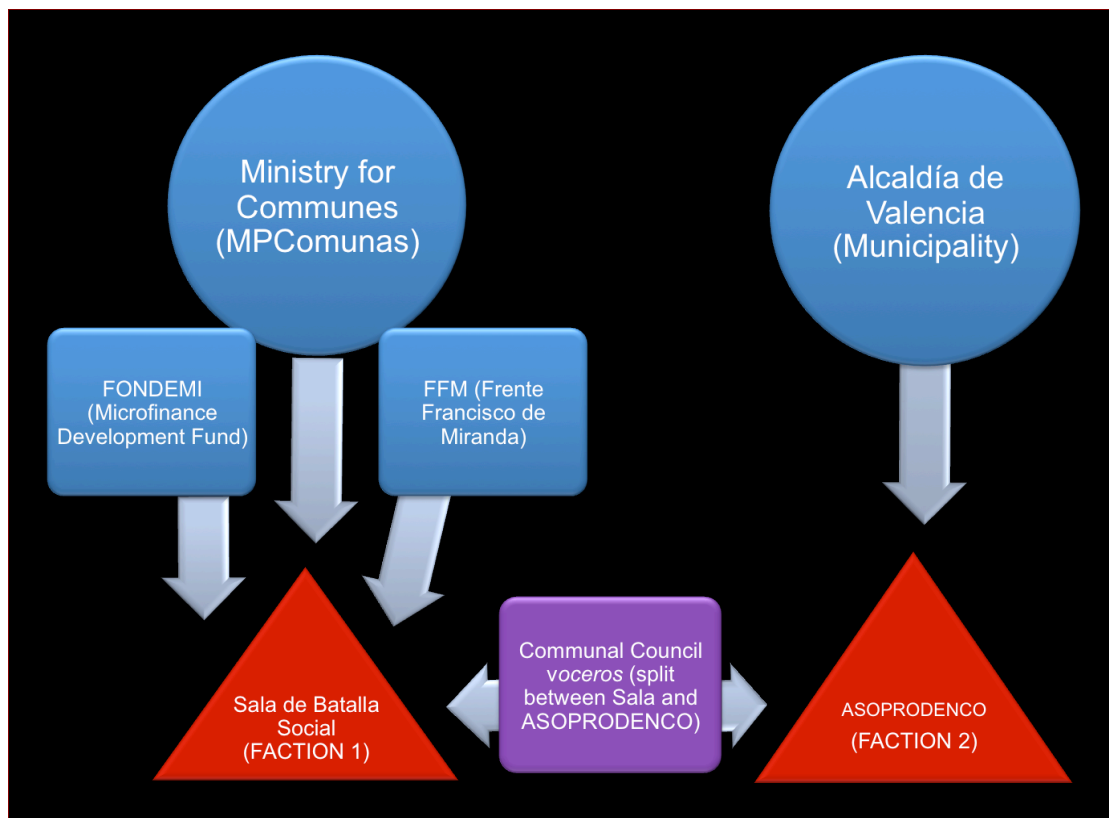

Figure 13: The competing factions in the Miguel Peña commune, with their different state backers

As recent anthropological work makes clear, the state rarely functions as a coherent and unified entity. Rather, it is both fragmented and porous, and frequently subject to the competing interests of different actors and groups (Fuller and Harriss 2001; Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Das and Poole 2004). In this instance, the emerging picture surrounding the commune suggested that the expansion of capillaries attached to MPComunas was threatening the power of the local Alcaldía, which was in turn drawing on traditional ties to brokers and clients (Rafael and ASOPRODENCO) in an effort to maintain its local sphere of influence. While this was happening, different configurations of grassroots activists were simultaneously jostling for control of desired state resources, with a dense web of overlapping ideological positions and personal allegiances structuring their strategies. It was thus not only community leaders who faced worrying shifts in their connections to centres

of power, but also political patrons like the mayor who saw new institutional channels threatening their dominance as the principle source of resources for local communities.

In sum, the dispute between ASOPRODENCO and the Sala cut to the heart of a debate about how popular power should be interpreted and how local organisations should relate to the central state. In different ways, both Rafael's informal charismatic authority and the state-sanctioned, electoral power of the dissident *voceros* aligned with the Sala had been won through popular mandates. But Rafael's authority could not easily be classified, functioning as a peculiar fusion of grassroots activism and clientelism that was based on reputation, loyalty, connectedness and accumulated moral capital. The potency of his urban charisma meant that he could also draw on support from different sectors of the state, whether at the Alcaldía or in the upper echelons of *chavista* power in Caracas. Yet crucially, for the large part these were not stable, routinised relationships that carried electoral legitimacy or guaranteed resources. In contrast, although none of the *voceros* involved in the opposing faction possessed anything close to his charisma or moral capital, they had effectively formed a new base of community power by occupying state-managed capillaries such as the CCs, the Sala and the FFM. The steady emergence of the Sala as a coherent grouping backed by powerful state bodies was hugely problematic for ASOPRODENCO. Despite being the original grassroots organisation in the area, they were increasingly accused of being anti-democratic because they were not working within channels of Chávez's making. Thus, regardless of the practical failings and ideological flaws that each faction perceived in the other, it was increasingly apparent that the state's constituted power was reluctant to let constituent power develop its own models organically. As with the CCs, the pressure to adhere to a state-managed model of participatory democracy was having significant consequences for local political practice.

EL COMANDANTE AND CONSTITUENT POWER

The resolution of the commune dispute in Miguel Peña highlighted the myriad difficulties that activists faced in reconciling the divergent currents that underpinned their efforts to establish participatory democracy. ASOPRODENCO's inability to

unify all the zone's *voceros* meant that the infrastructural projects they hoped to develop could not begin. Their apparent prioritisation of prefigurative politics over the acquisition of resources was an approach that left them open to the charge of ideological indulgence, and the Sala were effective at exploiting this tendency. As a case in point, the *voceros* from a CC in a nearby squatter settlement announced that they would be leaving ASOPRODENCO's proposal and aligning themselves with the Sala after being promised funding from FONDEMI to turn their *ranchos* into houses. As Miriam, their lead *vocera* explained to me, "We decided to link up with the Sala because it doesn't seem like ASOPRODENCO's proposal is going anywhere. We're going to build our own houses now and that's always been our dream." Thus while ASOPRODENCO were concerning themselves with the minutiae of popular power, the Sala were gradually winning over their traditional supporters by offering what appeared to be a more reliable route to state resources.

Developments such as these made a significant impact on Rafael, and in mid-2010 he announced that he had decided step aside from his involvement in the commune. Some members of ASOPRODENCO left the project with him, choosing to refocus on issues in their own communities. Others, with some consternation, agreed to link up with the Sala. As they had proposed, the commune would now consist of just ten CCs, all in *barrios* linked to Norma's FFM office in El Camoruco. The middle-class communities that had accompanied ASOPRODENCO's proposal for two years were jettisoned, although they were encouraged to form their own commune that might one day form part of a larger "communal territory". After a private meeting with the Sala in which Oneidys and Rosa agreed to dissolve ASOPRODENCO's commune, Rafael sent a text message to both factions, in what was tantamount to a resignation:

> Comrades, I've just been told that last night a huge step forward was made in the formation of the commune. I'm so happy for this community, which has waited so long for development. I continue to be at the service of the community in whatever way I can be to help establish the Communal State. *Un abrazo* [a hug].

I was surprised by Rafael's decision, but he had become increasingly busy with his new job at the Alcaldía and seemed to have concluded that he would not win the commune dispute through persuasion.

An even greater surprise, however, was the news that Oneidys was among those who had chosen to stay on and work with the Sala. She had always been one of their strongest critics within ASOPRODENCO, a passionate advocate of popular power who believed in the process of *formación* above all else. Most surprising of all was the explanation that she gave for her decision: "It's to do with the *lineamiento* [guidelines or regulations]," she told me. "It's the Salas de Batalla who are supposed to be managing the construction of the communes, and that comes directly from Chávez. *That's how the lines go* [my emphasis]." Having always maintained a suspicion of the involvement of state bodies in local affairs – "it's all about power," she had told me before – Oneidys was now versing the same arguments that ASOPRODENCO had fought for so long. She even referred to governmental regulations – *lineamiento* – as if they were unquestionable. Perhaps most glaringly, the phrase "That's how the lines go" referred to the hierarchical chain of command that came from Chávez and went down through MPComunas, the Sala and the FFM. Having seen Rafael squeezed out of the project, it thus seemed that Oneidys had completely altered her view and abandoned her commitment to organising outside of the state infrastructure.

While such a shift may seem morally problematic for an ASOPRODENCO stalwart, it is worth considering the insights of Miriam Shakow (2011), who observes that in practice political actors often combine actions and ideals that they declare to be distinct in theory (2011: 316). Although those who self-identify as revolutionaries seek a transcendent politics, they are invariably met with an inability to unshackle their projects from the historical and material exigencies in which they are situated. They are forced to make compromises that contradict their visions, and they shift their conceptual frameworks retrospectively as new imperatives channel their practice in particular directions. Oneidys strove for ideological purity and a far-reaching vision of socialism from the bases, but in the end seemed willing to accept a more contingent reality and work with a situation that fell some way short of her ideal. As I described in Chapter 4, such strategic concessions have been common throughout the history of *barrio* organising in Venezuela. Shakow argues that the recent re-emergence of revolutionary aspirations in Latin America has not erased more pragmatic calculations among political actors. Instead, these revolutionary ideals have "added to, rather than replaced" (Shakow 2011: 317) more instrumental approaches that accept contingent alliances when necessary. The importance of Oneidys's acquiescence, therefore,

revealed less about her personal morality and much more about the structural forces that were shaping her decisions. It signalled that the "lines" she spoke about were now coming inexorably from above and heading downwards. If this was in direct opposition to the approach ASOPRODENCO had always advocated, it nonetheless *came directly from Chávez* and was thus extremely difficult for *chavistas* to challenge.

These final developments in the commune dispute were some of the last I witnessed before leaving El Camoruco, and they seemed to mark a new phase in the constellations of political power in the locality. The successes that Rafael had enjoyed through *La Joc*, the AV and ASOPRODENCO had unquestionably laid the groundwork for the move towards a commune, engendering a culture of participation and political engagement that emanated from El Camoruco and spread out into much of Miguel Peña. Charismatic brokers, by having the power to both penetrate and transcend bureaucracies, enact what Blom Hansen and Verkaaik term a "rhizomatic logic" that "always reproduces fuzzy edges, loose ends [and] porous institutional practices" (2009: 20).[77] Yet for government bureaucrats in MPComunas and aspiring leaders in the CCs, the "fuzziness" of Rafael's charisma was a direct threat to their emergent power, a vestige of older and looser patterns of more personalised arrangements between the state and local communities. As the *chavista* state had begun to further embed itself in local-level participation by institutionalising and routinising the distribution of resources, his "infra-power" had come to be less necessary, even undesirable for those who stood to accrue power and influence through the bureaucratic tightening of community-state linkages.

Having launched the CCs in 2006 as part of an anticipated "explosion of revolutionary communal power," the Bolivarian government had undoubtedly created the capacity for new social actors to emerge and for new kinds of community-state relationships to be established. But these new configurations of political and economic power at the local level also worked to circumscribe the conditions in which new democratic models could be imagined and tested. The issue with Miguel Peña's commune was not that one faction was "right" and the other "wrong", but

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[77] Blom Hansen and Verkaaik's use of the notion of the *rhizome* is taken from Deleuze and Guattari (1988), who posit that dominant forms of social organisation can be thought of as a tree – with roots, a centre and an origin. The rhizome is that which sits outside the "arboreal" centre. It constitutes the "parasitical forms of 'wild thought' and 'wild social forms'" (2009: 18) that inevitably shoot off from dominant assemblages of social organisation. The two always coexist – the rhizome is always spun from the tree, whilst the tree is always a potential outcome of rhizomatic formations.

rather that neither group was given sufficient space in which to develop proposals and work them out in their own terms. Regardless of whether the Bolivarian government truly sought to make constituent power the ascendent force in Venezuelan society, the top-down exhortation to follow a particular political model with particular goals in mind necessarily constrained the practical and imaginative possibilities that could make such a vision possible. The *chavista* state may well hope to supplant liberal democracy with its own vision of radical participatory democracy, but unless it is prepared to grant community organisations the autonomy to develop their own models of leadership and participation, or to let them choose the terms in which they engage with the state, "the bases" that Chávez championed so readily will always remain subordinate to the constituted power he purported to abhor. Thus if the *chavista* state seeks to stimulate an explosion of communal power, I suggest that this explosion is very much a controlled one: above all, the drive towards a communal state channels popular participation in line with a centralised chain of command that deepens dependency on the petro-state. As such, state power at the local level has been concomitantly enhanced by "transferring power to the people".

CONCLUSION: THE AGITATED PRESENT AND SPECTRAL FUTURE OF BOLIVARIANISM

This chapter has argued that the struggle to build a commune in Miguel Peña reveals two central problems for *chavistas*. The first is that, despite a discursive climate that repeatedly emphasises the importance of popular control *desde abajo*, local-level activists aligned with Bolivarianism have increasingly little space in which to develop their own political visions, deliberate over their own forms of leadership or negotiate their own terms of engagement with the state. By being part of a national project that emanated principally from Chávez and the central government, grassroots leaders struggle to reconcile local forms of political thought and practice with the imperatives that come from Miraflores. Because most *chavistas* remain staunchly loyal to their president and his discourse, their difficulties in defining the form and content of their political projects are often experienced as disputes over which path is "truer" to the Bolivarian ideals that underpin the movement as a whole. Factionalism is generated by a myriad of overlapping local and national processes, but disputes are often understood as a question of Bolivarian purity: activists situate their disagreements in

broad moral arguments about individualism, self-interest and socialist consciousness. These trends are significant, since they signal that doubts about the direction of the Bolivarian project are not necessarily targeted at their structural and political causes, but rather at other local actors who appear to be someone ideologically impure.

The second problem was perhaps unique to Rafael. His ultimate failure to maintain a central role in the commune suggested that his particular form of charismatic authority had run its course, as a model of "governance at distance" (Blom Hansen and Verkaaik: 21) was replaced by a certain kind of "governance close-up". By eventually forcing Rafael out of the commune, the Sala had in effect defeated his charisma, and had done so by using the promise of resources as their principal weapon. Weber foresaw such defeats when he observed that because charismatic authority becomes salient in periods where traditional or legal-rational authority are in flux, it is vulnerable to economic forces that supersede such periods of exceptionality. "Every charisma," he wrote, "is on the road from a turbulent emotional life that knows no economic rationality to a slow death of suffocation under the weight of material interests: every hour of its existence brings it nearer to this end" (1968: 1120). Yet the Sala had also drawn heavily on the authority of Chávez to make their case against ASOPRODENCO, asserting that it was policies and structures that came "direct" from the president that lay behind their proposal. Their victory, then, can also be understood as an example of Chávez's routinised charisma overruling the more fragile authority of a local leader. If the difference between "good" and "bad" charisma rests, as Feuchtwang and Mingming suggest (2001: 12), on the question of accountability, then at least Rafael could console himself with the fact that his authority remained subject to the constituent power he so fervently believed in. By contrast, there are perhaps urgent questions that *chavistas* must ask themselves about how accountable Chávez was, and about the extent to which they want their political visions to be largely prefigured by what Coronil terms a "monological voice of the state" (2011a: 254). At the start of this thesis I explained why Chávez functions as a "master-signifier" for many working-class Venezuelans; perhaps the challenge for *chavistas*, then, is how they choose to manage the fact that this signifier is also the head of state and chief policymaker.

Finally, the dispute between ASOPRODENCO and the Sala also highlighted a problem of a temporal nature for revolutionary activists. Although the ideological differences and personal rivalries were significant, the ephemeral presence of a

desired utopia seemed to weigh heavily on both factions. One of the reasons ASOPRODENCO were so reluctant to abandon the middle-classes was that the cross-class alliances they had built seemed to offer glimpses of an altogether different future, inchoate social coalitions that had yet to fully form. By giving up on these fragments of a desired future and submitting to the strategies and prejudices of the conflictual present, they perhaps felt as if they were giving up on the very utopian ideals that ultimately motivated them. Coronil (2011a) considered this problem in his final polemic, describing how the present-day Latin American left seems haunted by an imagined future that it cannot clearly see. He argued that a strange paradox seems to characterise the continent's contemporary social and political movements: although there has been a "proliferation of political activities inspired by socialist or communitarian ideals," there is also a "pervasive uncertainty with respect to the specific form of the ideal future" (2011a: 234). Contemporary political actors, he suggested, are thus caught between an "agitated present" and a "spectral future", in which

> the future appears phantasmatic, as if it were a space inhabited by ghosts from the past and ideal dreams, and the present unfolds as a dense field of nervous agitation, constantly entangled in multiplying constraints, a conglomeration of contradictory tendencies and actions leading to no clear destination (2011: 247).

This passage seems an appropriate summary for the predicament with Miguel Peña's *comuneros*, who found themselves contending with glimpses of possibility that were then submerged beneath a swell of countervailing forces, vested interests and political necessities. If this provides us with a succinct summary of how the "what is" is experienced by working-class *chavistas*, it also raises important questions about how the "what is to be" can remain a motivating force for everyday political practice. In Chapter 1 I argued that doubt at the level of subjectivity can provide an important galvanising energy for committed revolutionaries. Yet could it equally be the case that the "pervasive uncertainty" identified by Coronil is all too often directed inwards at the self or along to other activists at the local level, rather than at the structural limitations that continue to impede utopian ideals? Bringing together the two parts of this thesis, I attempt to answer this question in the conclusion.

> It must sometimes seem as if the entire country has been converted into a mausoleum with statues of the Liberator nailing down the state of the whole good and tight; all this naming and picturing and retelling in words and stones, paint and bronze, all this effort visible through imagery bespeaking some enormous love if not unshakeable *anxiety*, all this *effort…* the untiring ubiquity of it all so serious that one can only laugh, then freeze struck dumb by fear of some nameless retribution, precisely this moment of free-fall that is sacred (Taussig 1997: 110).

This thesis has analysed the appeal of a radical populist project to working-class *barrio* residents. It has shown how *chavismo* encompasses not only a set of social and political demands, but also a moral struggle over Venezuela's natural and political bodies (Coronil 1997: 116). In the Chávez era, many working-class citizens have benefitted from the redistribution of resources, the arrival of numerous social missions and the emergence of new channels for political participation. But *chavistas* who have adopted Bolivarianism as a life project do not merely see their political support as a reward for state paternalism. Rather, they engage with Bolivarianism's discursive and ideological imperatives and develop what I call a *political morality* that is woven into the fabric of everyday life. It seeks to establish a new moral order by repairing the damage done not only to Venezuela's national body politic, but also to the bodies and souls of *el pueblo*. By understanding imperialism, *puntofijismo* and neoliberalism as contaminating forces that have corrupted the Venezuelan citizenry, *chavista* activists seek to transform themselves through everyday conduct and their communities by building new political structures. These endeavours are in constant dialogue with the backdrop of words that were, until recently, propelled from the mouth of Hugo Chávez on an almost daily basis.

In Chapter 1, I showed how new political subjectivities were established through the steady build-up of betrayals and brutalisations of working-class Venezuelans by those who purpoted to be "magnamimous sorcerers" (Coronil 1997: 5), but who turned out to be little more than *tramposos* (tricksters). When Chávez emerged, his language of change spoke to people like Rafael and Yulmi, and the dialogic process of interpellation began as they witnessed someone who looked and sounded like them confronting entrenched powers both domestic and foreign. Through an attempted coup, an oil shutdown and a recall referendum the *chavista* identity emerged as a discrete entity, finding its sharpest edges through class

confrontations that had been denied expression by the myths of past polities. In its place came a new mythology, one that spoke about *barrio* residents as the soul of Venezuela and asked them to change themselves in order to change their nation. Some *chavistas* had been community organisers for years when Chávez arrived, while others rediscovered the radicalism of their youth through the emergence of the Fifth Republic. Still others "converted" to twenty-first century socialism, building new life narratives that imagined their past selves as lost souls labouring under the false consciousness of individualism and greed. Bolivarianism, I argued, can be utilised as a "technology of the self" (Foucault 1986, 1988) in a manner that both resembles and draws on religious doctrine. Doubts and uncertainties are integral to this process, and by observing these at the ethnographic level we can see a political morality at work; subjects seek to align everyday ethical conduct with their adopted political ideals.

Chapter 2 built on these observations by exploring the effects of everyday violence on the residents of El Camoruco and their political aspirations. Drawing on my own experiences with paranoia and insecurity, it examined how fears for oneself and one's family fashion "practices of insecurity" (Rotker 2002) that then feed into the desire for a new moral order. Family, as both a practical set of supportive relationships and a reified ideal, accrues a heightened political and moral significance as a result of insecurity. Because residents must balance the uneasy co-existence of mistrust and solidarity, the strong kinship ties they hold become markers of "how things should be", while perceived harbingers of immorality or *malandraje* (delinquency/gangsterism) are utilised as exemplars of everything one should not become. At times, it is evident that the hegemonic discrimination and stigmatisation of Venezuela's urban poor is reproduced by *barrio* residents themselves. This underlines the importance of *chavista* political morality, since it shows how efforts to establish a new moral order are (not always successful) struggles against symbolic violence as well as structural and everyday violence. I showed how young men face huge pressures to express particular forms of masculinity in the midst of gang violence, thereby deepening the desire to provide alternative "models" on the part of families like *Los Hernández*.

This theme was developed in Chapter 3, where I examined different households in El Camoruco and their "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai 2004: 59) in the Chávez era. A common theme that predated the arrival of Chávez was the *poco a poco* ethic, in which *barrio* residents continually planned for the future in small and

incremental ways. *Chavismo*, I argued, has deepened and acceralted the reach of this ethic, but in an uneven fashion. While strong families with extensive social resources have made successful use of Bolivarian projects, others have been limited by the fact that they have fewer resources to draw on. Being committed political activists can buttress careers in the *chavista* state, meaning that loyalty to *el proceso* and a burgeoning career in Bolivarian institutions go neatly hand in hand. While working-class Venezuelans on the whole undoubtedly have more options available to them now, serious inequalities within *barrios* still persist. Gender relations is one domain in which contestation and struggle remain of critical importance, as new options for women also bring new burdens and demands. For *chavista* families like Rafael and Yulmi's, social mobility is a morally ambiguous terrain, resulting in various attempts to regulate consumption through word and deed. Most importantly, Chapter 3 showed that the characterisation of Bolivarianism as a "movement of the poor" overlooks critical complexities within working-class communities.

In Part II I focused more closely on the attempt to establish participatory democracy in and around El Camoruco, examining the intersecting and diverging efforts of both grassroots organisations and the state to establish a new form of democracy in Venezuela. Chapter 4 provided a historical and theoretical basis for this analysis, showing the history of hybrid political formations that have characterised *barrio* organisations, their evovling relationship with the state and the historical contingency of their political aspirations. It focused on the experiences of ASOPRODENCO and demonstrated their commitment to empowering local communities and developing political structures *desde abajo*. I showed how new pressures and challenges have emerged for leaders like Rafael and Rosa, and provided a critical perspective on the characterisation of *chavista* participatory democracy as an alliance between constituent and constituted power.

In Chapter 5 I carried out a case study of the communal councils in El Camourco, and argued that they should be considered as "contested spaces". I highlighted how participation in the CCs is highly gendered and showed how a separation has emerged between elected *voceros* and non-elected participants. The specialised nature of the voluntary work that is required of *voceros*, their close contact with state instituions and officials and the discursive exhortation to stimulate more participation create tensions between elected representatives and local people. Everyday practice in the CCs, I suggested, is characterised by a myriad of different

attitudes towards participatory democracy, with some residents happy to defer decision-making to *voceros* and others, particularly more experienced community leaders, suspicious of their motivations. As yet, I suggested, these competing understandings of the CCs remain unresolved.

Similar themes characterised Chapter 6, where I focused on the attempt to build an inter-community commune in Miguel Peña. At the crux of this construction process was a power struggle between competing factions of *chavistas*. One faction was drawn from ASOPRODENCO and their history of grassroots organising, the other from a group of CC *voceros* who coalesced around the Sala de Batalla Social, a state-managed institution brought in to supervise the would-be commune. I showed how the dream of the "communal state" encounters significant difficulties when debates over leadership structures, decision-making, inclusivity and the influence of state ministries generate profound disagreements between activists. I also paid attention to the role of grassroots charismatic authority in this process, showing how the charisma of Rafael was essentially marginalised by the routinised charisma of President Chávez. This chapter showed the extreme difficulties that activists face in the attempt to bring about a vision of self-government and participatory democracy, as a series of "utopian disjunctures" occur in the margins between state management and grassroots autonomy.

Overall, this thesis contributes to several existing literatures. Firstly, while much recent political anthropology has focused on social movements, citizenship and the state (Paley 2001; Nash 2005; Holston 2008; Lazar 2008; Paley 2008; Fernandes 2010), there has been far less attention paid to populism and its grassroots bases (Auyero 2000). As a case such as ASOPRODENCO shows, the lines between social movement organisations and populist projects are often blurred, particularly in contexts such as Latin America's "leftwards turn", where progressive political parties have gained access to the state. I have shown how complicated relationships emerge as grassroots organisations seek to balance their autonomy with the need for resources, the desire for political influence and their loyalty to broader political coalitions such as *chavismo*. Populist movements capitalise on the social networks and political efficacy of ground-level leadership structures, and reward talented leaders like Rafael, Yulmi and Rosa with positions in the state infrastructure. Such developments provoke difficulties for these leaders as they attempt to juggle their political ideals with opportunities for career advancement and financial security.

These are important dynamics to contend with, yet while studies of populism remain largely in the domain of surface-level political science, our understanding of the appeal and efficacy of populist projects will remain limited. Anthropology, I suggest, needs to pay greater attention to the links between "horizontal" and "vertical" political movements.

Secondly, the growing anthropological interest in morality provides significant opportunities to deepen our understanding of how people are moved by political ideals. The perspectives of ethical freedom (Laidlaw 2002), moral value-spheres (Robbins 2004) and moral breakdowns (Zigon 2007) are all approaches that could be tested and sharpened by exploring their utility in contexts of political change and upheaval. As I have argued in this ethnography, political moralities, particular those of a radical bent, provide intriguing divergences from existing studies because they offer a particular orientation towards the future. Activists aspire towards ideals premised on future imaginaries, meaning that actions and decisions made in the present are in constant dialogue with utopian aspirations and desires. Following Goodale (2009), the ethnographic evidence presented in this thesis suggests that an anthropology of political morality would benefit debates in both subdisciplines greatly.

Finally, while the Chávez era has led to Venezuela becoming one of the more talked about countries in the international media, it remains ethnographically underresearched. Surface-level accounts on both sides of the pro/anti-Chávez divide continue to offer oversimplified and often misleading representations of a nation and political situation that defies casual analysis. As the diversity of themes covered in this thesis shows, there is a wealth of complex and interrelated phenomena that requires further examination, and a need for an anthropology of Venezuela that pays far more attention to the dynamics of everyday life. Each chapter of this thesis could easily be the subject of a full study in itself, and I hope that this ethnography encourages further studies of Venezuelan political and social life.

THE DEATH OF HUGO CHÁVEZ AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

What final conclusions can be drawn, then, about the future prospects for *chavistas* and other working-class Venezuelans, particularly after the recent death of Chávez?

What strategies are they likely to pursue as they strive to build on the improved standards of living they have attained and, at least for some of them, to push for more radical visions of democracy and equality?

In June 2012 I returned to Venezuela for a short visit, primarily with the aim of presenting my research conclusions to my collaborators, but also to see what had been happening in the two years since I left El Camoruco. The Hernández family, as I expected, had continued to thrive. Yulmi had graduated from Mission Sucre and was a now working as a teacher in the same project. She was also helping out with the development of a Bolivarian University in the south of Valencia, and remained a regional manager for MERCAL. Cristina was close to finishing her studies and hoped to go into teaching as well, but was planning to defer finishing as she was due to give birth to her first child in early 2013. Eduardo, now a father himself, was training in Chávez's new National Bolivarian Police. This new force was designed to provide an alternative to the notoriously corrupt regional forces, and promised to pay officers significantly more in order combat a culture of bribery and criminality. The improved wages would go a long way for Eduardo and his young partner, who had moved into the upstairs annex after Pablo and Paula returned to the country. As for Rafael, after leaving the commune project and resigning from the Alcaldía's Public Services Department, he had been given a new "bespoke" job by the mayor. Employed by the Alcaldía, his official title was now Comissioner for the Development of Communes. This role was essentially a waged recognition of the work he already did in grassroots community development. He continued to spend his days problem-solving, making connections and training new community organisers, but was now paid a full salary to do so. Each member of the family, then, was now closely linked to the *chavista* state in one way or another. Their success as a unit had been bolstered by their loyalty to Chávez, and they were now reeping the rewards. No-one in the family was being paid huge sums for their work, but they were all enjoying benefits that, back in 1989, would have been unthinkable: access to free local healthcare, university education, secure salaries and state pensions. With further renovations taking place upstairs and plans to build a third floor on the house, things were undoubtedly going well for *Los Hernández*.

The health of the president was a major concern for *chavistas* in 2012, as the run-up to October's presidential elections was dominated by rumours about Chávez's illness. After being diagnosed with an unnamed type of cancer in 2011, the president

had been back and forth to Cuba for treatment for much of the year. Following his victory in the elections, he was rarely seen in public again. When he died in March 2013, the state funeral he received echoed the scenes that accompanied the retun of Bolívar's body to Venezuela in 1842 (Taussig 1997: 101). The government announced that Chávez's remains would be embalmed and placed on display in a new Museum of the Revolution, as the magical realism of Venezuelan statecraft went into overdrive.

On the last night of my return visit, Rafael and his brother Alejandro had a furious argument about the local CCs. The rumours about corruption had worsened since I left, and Alejandro was proposing to formally denounce a former comrade who was accused of embezzling money. The argument centred on whether or not to approach the state in order to resolve the issue. Rafael, in keeping with his consistent belief in popular power, urged direct action, while Alejandro felt that the community needed the state to intervene, suggesting that there was an "official process" that should be observed. "We need to tell people what this *coño de la madre* [motherfucker] is doing," he said. "But we need to call in FUNDACOMUNAL and the ministry. There needs to be a formal government investigation."

"Do you know what will happen if you do that, Alejandro?" interjected Rafael. "People will just think it's another stupid argument over money between three or four people. Some bureaucrat who's probably more corrupt than anyone here will come in, and no-one will want to be involved anymore. If you want to do something, I'll tell you what you should do: organise a group of people, occupy the office and demand to see the accounts. If they can't prove where the money's gone, they should be kicked out by the community. Do something that involves local people, otherwise it's just *la misma vaina* [the same thing] again."

As was so often the case, the debate centred on the extent to which the state should be involved in local political affairs, and the best way of involving local people in political decision-making. While Rafael clearly still believed in empowering local people and challenging the political establishment, with his new job he was also now part of that same establishment. Although he continued to move between state institutions and grassroots organisations, his efforts to act as a bridge between "popular" and "invited" spaces (Cornwall 2004: 2) had often floundered when real institutionalised power was called into question – this was certainly the case with the commune, when he was effectively forced out because he was no longer needed by a

state-managed project. Evidently clientelism, dominance by local elites, state-level instransigence, insufficient resources, dependency and apathy can all cause significant problems for participants in state-sponsored invited spaces. Yet popular spaces, too, present their own challenges. Citing the case of the Zapatistas in Mexico, Ruiz (2004) and Barmeyer (2009) point out the difficulties encountered by communities who were faced with a choice between the autonomous popular spaces of the Zapatistas and the invited spaces of the Mexican government. Many Zapatistas refused any resources from or cooperation with the government on the grounds that they were in political dispute, viewing resources from the state as an "effective counterinsurgency technique" (Barmeyer 2009: 122). But other groups close to the Zapatistas chose to collaborate with the government in order to access resources, albeit while maintaining a critical stance and continuing to back the Zapatistas' demands. As Barmeyer (2009: 134) points out, the extreme poverty that many communities in Chiapas face means that sacrificing resources in the name of revolutionary struggle is difficult to maintain.

Given the Venezuelan state's monopolisation of resources, perhaps the most sensible approach for grassroots activists who strive to establish participatory democracy would be to seek out a route that both defends autonomy and allows contingent engagement with the state in order to access resources. Such a position might benefit from drawing on the experiences of neighbourhood bodies in Caracas, where successful demands have been made on state institutions alongside an ongoing antagonism that resists co-option and envisions self-government as a real possibility (Fernandes 2010; Velasco 2011). But in order for such positions to be tenable, activists have to want this kind of autonomy in the first place. If there is a danger that characterises an effective populist movement like *chavismo*, it is that grassroots activists, either by their own will or the demands of their political leaders, privilege loyalty to the president or the party over and above the needs of their communities. This is where political morality becomes critically important, since activists must choose how they understand difficulties, intransigencies or disputes in their struggles. As Rosario Montoya observes (2007), there is a common tendency for socialist projects to blame problems on the moral failings of individual subjects. In the search for moral exemplarity at the level of subjectivity, such perspectives overlook the structural limitations that underpin their projects, instead locating blame at the door of themselves and their comrades. She writes the following regarding failed attempts to establish co-operatives in Sandinista Nicaragua:

The role of the state in producing such a situation, however, was rendered invisible by the very discourse of socialist achievement – of becoming the New Man. For the desire the Sandinistas created for the New Man mystified state-campesino relations by assuming a state that primarily represented campesino interests. Thus, they failed to recognise that the national scenario they had constructed prefigured, by its continued economic and power inequalities, the inevitability of campesino noncompliance (2007: 82).

The crucial point here is that the very drive to create a new moral order and the predominant attention to the *formación* of particular kinds of subjects potentially elides the macro-structural constraints that lie beneath a discourse. It conceals the power relations and dependencies that limit the viability of radical political visions, instead pushing activists to accuse each other of failing morally. This was perhaps the point that Rafael was trying to make to Alejandro.

While Chávez communicated a profoundly compelling mythology of moral struggle and built an identity around it, there is little evidence to suggest that he radically altered Venezuela's political economy or the inherent difficulties that come with it. The country remains in a dependent position in the global economy, and its citizens remain dependent on the circulation of wealth accrued from its mono-resource. As Coronil concluded in *The Magical State*,

The Venezuelan state has presented itself as a miracle worker that could turn its domination over nature into source of historical progress. But largely because much of its power is borrowed from the powers of oil money rather than being produced through its mastery over nature, the state has been limited to magic performances, not miracles (1997: 389).

Perhaps an appropriate way to summarise *chavismo*, then, is that more people than ever before have received the benefits of these magic performances. For families like Rafael and Yulmi's, it is not surprising that they believe in miracles, since the relative changes their lives have undergone in recent years show that major realignments are possible. But given that Chávez deepened the nation's reliance on black gold (Ellner 2008; Coronil 2011a) and therefore the power of the state too, the prospects for a more profound form of democracy remain distant. Unless *barrio* residents are able to see that this is the central problem, rather than the moral makeup of themselves and their neighbours, such democratic desires may remain unfulfilled.

Although I suspect that Rafael and Yulmi would not agree with me, the death of Chávez may present an opportunity for those who desire a democracy they truly control. The capacity to identify the source of a political movement's intransigencies must surely be the first task for those who seek radical change, and this requires a plurality of voices as its starting point. The great irony of Chávez's monopolisation of public discourse was that it undermined the very democratic vision he sold. His alchemic fusion of charisma and state magic produced genuinely enthralling performances of sorcery, but he also marginalised democratic possibilities because he imposed his own vision on people; he did not truly believe that ordinary Venezuelans could build a different form of democracy for themselves. The future imaginary that Chávez summoned, then, was a deeply contradictory one that left activists in a kind of temporal no-man's land full of what seemed to be unfulfilled dreams. Given that the weight of this desired future lies so heavy on those who reach towards it, perhaps the first task for the post-Chávez era should be the democratisation of the imaginary itself.

Figure 14: Simón Bolívar and Hugo Chávez on a wall near El Camoruco (Matt Wilde)

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