

## Socialist Decentralization in the Andes? Explorative Reflections on Radical Democracy and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Neo-Constitutionalism

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### Introduction

Since the 1990s, Latin America has experienced a series of reforms aimed at improving the political participation of disempowered sectors of society, often emphasized as vital for combating political centralism and clientelism and for strengthening democracy and the legitimacy of political institutions. Popular participation and decentralization have progressed as the prime benchmark for democratic quality. In the recent wave of constitutional reforms, the Andean transformations of the legal terrain have been emphasized as being among the most far-reaching in the world in creating devices to enhance popular participation at local level and similarly to narrow the gap between the State and civil society. Andean countries also pioneered in what has been labeled multicultural constitutionalism, increasing the legal recognition of traditionally excluded ethnic groups (Van Cott, 2008). These neo-constitutionalist processes equally challenged the perception of democracy. The Latin American political systems were deeply rooted in a liberal model of representative democracy, whereas neo-constitutionalist actors endorsed a radical participatory form of democracy, at times directly inspired by the visions of the collective will of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Peeler, 2009: 211-213; Ellner, 2010).

The triumph of Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías in the Venezuelan presidential elections of 1998 broke the pattern of neoliberal governments in Latin America, which characterized all democracies of the continent until then. The *Constituyente* (constitutional rewriting) was the central banner of Chávez during the electoral campaign of 1998 and the key strategy to change the political system and get rid of vices of the past. Thereafter a rising number of nations witnessed alterations towards the political Left. In Brazil Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva was elected president in 2002, in Bolivia Evo Morales Ayma in 2005 and in Ecuador 2006 saw the victory of Rafael Correa. In Bolivia and Ecuador radical constitutional reforms were popularly approved subsequently to provide the basis of a more

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participatory and inclusionary model of democracy.<sup>1</sup> The governments of Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela have since 2006 spearheaded the so-called *21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism* in Latin America.

From a continental viewpoint, Hugo Chávez consequently broke new ground, catapulting the alleged leftist transformation of Latin America. His rise to power in Venezuela and the subsequent consolidation of leftist forces elsewhere in the continent signaled that the hegemony of neo-liberal governments in Latin America was broken. True, some scholars view this transition in terms of a populist revival in Latin America (e.g. Roberts, 2007), progressive populism (Clark, 2010) or even a constitutionalization of populism (Kögl, 2010).

The aim of this essay is two-fold. On the one hand a critical reflection will be provided regarding how the constitutional objectives of encouraging social inclusion and local level political participation are reflected in recent political processes in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela, amidst neo-constitutionalism and *21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism*. The study also analyzes how the radical democratic vision of the countries is expressed in the constitutions and I will likewise offer a few examples of probable practical political challenges and contradictions regarding the implementation of these measures for participatory democracy. On the other hand, although still connected to the first aim, there is also a theoretical-analytical purpose in launching a new concept into the scholarly debate: *socialist decentralization*,<sup>2</sup> which is contrasted with previous approaches to decentralization, to better be able to grasp the complex development of politics in Andean socialist democracies.

This study thus approaches a central theme in the more recent wave of Latin American neo-constitutionalism, namely the tensions and contradictions between the national and local political levels amid participatory/radical democracy. Similarly, the mechanisms provided through the constitutional reforms to stimulate political participation at the local level are contrasted with the possible reinforcement of the executive power at national level, including the possible populist and centralist traits of Presidents Chávez, Correa and Morales (and the movements around them). Could the strengthening of the national executive supremacy and neighborhood (or community) level participation be mutually reinforcing?

It should be clarified that in this study *I will not* sort out to which degree Chávez, Correa and Morales should be classified as leftist, socialist or populist.<sup>3</sup> A problematization around

the self-proclaimed epithet “socialist/socialism” in the context of the three regimes will therefore not be included in this study. My concern is rather to problematize the theoretical debate of decentralization and radical/participatory democracy in the three Andean countries and to indicate central challenges also for the political projects around Chávez, Correa and Morales. It is likewise important to underscore that socialism –or other political and economic doctrines- are not completely static concepts, but ongoing processes (e.g. Petras, 2010: 4). The socialist course of Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela are works in progress and depend on individual societal historical circumstances in the respective countries. It likewise merits emphasizing that this *is not* a systematic comparative study; instead the idea is to provide a series of illustrative and explorative reflections on the theme.

In broader terms, certain similarities and decisive differences between the countries can be observed. Venezuela stands out for its early democratization, already in 1958, compared to 1979 in Ecuador and 1982 in Bolivia. The three resemble each other regarding strong oligarchic structures, elite settlements and unequal distribution of incomes. In Bolivia, powerful economic elites have been concentrated mainly in the lowland Santa Cruz area and in Ecuador big business has principally been concentrated in coastal Guayaquil.<sup>4</sup> Venezuela presents a more differentiated panorama in terms of economic elite groups. New elite groups emerged through the democratization of 1958 around the two dominant political parties –social democratic AD (*Acción Democrática*) and Christian Democratic COPEI- with strong control of social organizations and ties to business sectors. Until the early 1990s Venezuela had a strong two-party-system, although with decentralization since 1989, this partisan dominance was rapidly undermined with the emergence of alternative political actors at sub-national levels. In comparison, pre-Chávez Venezuela lacks tradition of mass movement mobilization. In Bolivia decentralization took place in 1994, with the Law of Popular Participation/LPP and the municipalization of the political system. The LPP became a vital platform for the MAS party/movement (*Movimiento Al Socialismo*) of Evo Morales, even if other factors contributed, like protest activities and social mobilization.<sup>5</sup> Ecuador has longer historical traditions of municipal and provincial elections than many of its neighbors. In practice, though, political leaders at these levels have been politically weak due to lack of economic transferences. Only in 1998 a principle of co-participation and economic transfers to the sub-national governments were established through a legislative reform.

## 21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism

In the late 1990s, few analysts believed that the movement around Hugo Chávez (*Chavismo*) would evolve into a new alternative to neo-liberalism on the continent. Although, only recently -since 2005- has the Chávez government itself classified the Venezuelan transformation as a socialist project, i.e. at the time socialist political forces triumphed in Bolivia and Ecuador. This is no coincidence. There are both domestic and continental explanatory factors behind this ideological shift. It is most likely that the strategies of the Venezuelan opposition between 2002 and 2005, including a coup attempt, protest marches, strikes, paralyzation of the economy, referendum on the President's mandate, among others, forced *Chavismo* into radicalization and closer to socialism. The oppositional strategy to boycott the parliamentary elections of 2005 made this radicalization easier for *Chavismo*, since the National Assembly facilitated presidential law-making through decree, leaning on its majority in parliament. The leftist transformation in Latin America since 2002 also contributed, understood as a kind of recognition of the Venezuelan direction and a cross-continental unification of different forces, i.e. an anti-imperialist alliance strategy, at times referred to as *Bolivarianismo* (as a tribute to Andean Liberator Simón Bolívar).

The notion 21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism appeared gradually already in the 1990s as a reflection of the discontentment with neo-liberalism in Latin America. The novelty of the concept is expressed –not only in terms of differing historical contexts- but also in its rejection of the Soviet socialist model, considering its dictatorial traits and economic malfunction. Broadly speaking, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism endorses increased state regulation and authority within a democratic structure and strives for a more efficient distribution of resources. Traditionally excluded actors are motivated to take a more active part in politics and economic production (Petras, 2010; Kennemore & Weeks, 2011).

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism is frequently described in terms of revolutionary processes. But, of course, the characteristics of each process should be carefully examined and the characterization of each case depends on the conceptual interpretation of “revolution” and “revolutionary”. Undoubtedly, in the political discourse the revolutionary stance is central, the anti-U.S. and anti-capitalism rhetoric, as also the emphasis on popular participation in the societal transformation addressed by Chávez, Correa and Morales. In Venezuela the central banner has been

the Bolivarian Revolution and the people's protagonism (*la Revolución Bolivariana y el protagonismo del pueblo*), in Ecuador a Citizens' Revolution (*La Revolución Ciudadana*) and the slogan "the Fatherland is for all" (*La Patria ya es de todos*) whereas in Bolivia the national project has been built around a Democratic and Cultural Revolution and the pluri-national state. Bolivian social movements linked to Morales frequently state that they are the government (*¡Somos gobierno!*). By the way, it is pertinent to address whether the processes really are revolutionary. Or, as political theorist and leading Trotskyist Alan Woods discusses (2008), would it be more correct to label these regimes and processes reformist? Although Woods does not conclude that Chávez should be defined as reformist. However, the three countries –and particularly Venezuela- have shown obvious efficiency in reform execution.

### **Socialist Decentralization?**

Since the late 1980s decentralization has been associated both with elite dominated neoliberal policies and every so often to grievances of identity-based social movements (onwards also referred to as the multicultural perspective), for instance indigenous organizations (e.g. O'Neill, 2005; Van Cott, 2008). The 1990s in Latin America became characterized both by a continuation of neoliberal regimes and a process of decentralization reforms. What economic elite groups and identity based social movements had in common was a belief in decentralization, even if their arguments and definitions of decentralization differed. After 20 years of Latin American decentralization, the theoretical concept has thus been associated with political standpoints. Political actors and academics often speak of decentralization in other conceptual terms, such as participatory, deliberative, radical or direct democracy (Cohen & Fung, 2004; Wilpert, 2007; Van Cott; 2008; Zuazo, 2009; Ellner, 2010; Petras, 2010) or even socialism from below. Frequently, however, these concepts are used normatively by the political actors (and certainly by some scholars as well).

This study hence launches a new concept to the debate on contemporary Latin American democracies: *socialist decentralization*. Historically, socialism in its Marxist-Leninist tradition has been associated with political centralization. However, recent Andean experiences in socialist reformation draw more on traditions in which the strengthening the state at central level is combined with the reinforcement of the political participation at sub-national levels. This constitutes an analytical challenge -and empirical contradiction- in the study of the three Andean cases, and is presumably a source of conflicts within the political organizations. The challenge for socialist governments has consequently not only been to combat neo-liberalism and colonialist societal structures, but also to make decentralization an essential component of the proper socialist project. Contrasts can facilitate in the "identification" of these new experiences: e.g. departing in the critique of neo-liberal decentralization as a smokescreen for privatization processes of state enterprises. The approach poses appealing research challenges as for the centralist traits of each national socialist government.

So, is there a "socialist model of decentralization" in Latin America, to be contrasted to the neo-liberal and multi-cultural views? I argue that this is the case. In this framework, it is compelling to approach how socialist government projects enter an already decentralized political

structure. How does this socialist definition differ from the neoliberal and multicultural viewpoints? The relationship and differences between the socialist interpretation of decentralization and the neoliberal one are undoubtedly a lot easier to perceive. The neoliberal view highlights individual rights and is more business-oriented, whereas both the multicultural and the socialist ones emphasize collective rights. The tensions between socialist and multicultural views of decentralization are empirically more attention-grabbing, since they are closer to each other ideologically and partly merged after processes of organizational divisions and alliance-building. Moreover, both standpoints are fundamentally anti-neoliberal and therefore, in future studies it will be interesting to examine situations and developments in which the multicultural agents are in opposition to the socialist government, in the field of decentralization. Obviously, one might argue that the socialist governments of Morales, Correa and Chávez should also be considered as multicultural (or intercultural and/or plurinational), although in order to facilitate the analysis I choose to make the categorization and distinction between the two standpoints.

The neoliberal perspective is expressed mainly through oppositional leaders at sub-national level (primarily in Santa Cruz, Guayas and Zulia respectively). In Bolivia and Ecuador the main representatives of the multicultural perspective are the indigenous movements. In Venezuela, indigenous organizations have been merged into other social and political movements, particularly associated with *Chavismo*, as the PPT (*Patria Para Todos*) and MVR (*Movimiento V República*) parties, and since 2006 the new socialist party/PSUV (*Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela*). Subsequently, the countries present three different scenarios. In Bolivia the principal (multicultural) conglomerate of social movements is a chief ally and backbone of the Morales government,<sup>6</sup> whereas the principal Ecuadorian social movement -the indigenous confederation CONAIE/*Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador* and its political-electoral organization Pachakutik- has generally acted in opposition to President Correa. In Venezuela, social movements have been partially merged into -or co-opted by- the Chávez government, a tendency that is palpable in Ecuador and Bolivia too. Actually, in the three countries the multicultural and socialist identity-based groups have partly amalgamated. In both Ecuador and Bolivia the indigenous movements have divided through this process. Notwithstanding, this process of possible co-optation could also be viewed as a unification of social and political forces, i.e. when organizations believe that they would be better positioned to place their demands on the political agenda through a strategic alliance. In Ecuador, a

common grumble in the indigenous movement has been that their discourse and political agenda have been directly co-opted by Rafael Correa and his PAIS Movement. Indeed many former leaders of the indigenous movement today hold important positions on different political-territorial levels within the Correa government (Lalander, 2010).

Analytical challenges might emerge, for instance when opposition actors of both multicultural and neoliberal trajectories act united around a thematic defense of decentralization and political autonomy and in opposition to the socialist government, as has been the case in Ecuador since 2007, for instance, with meetings between representatives of the Guayaquil economic elite and the indigenous movement. Under similar conditions, the Bolivian indigenous movements have also experienced divisions, for instance in La Paz and the Southern Chuquisaca and Santa Cruz departments. In Venezuela the political frontiers between Left and Right have been blurred through strategic anti-Chávez alliances, and often around the thematic issue of decentralization and sub-national autonomy. Decentralization and pressures for augmented political autonomy have accordingly functioned as a thematic platform for different oppositional forces – both Left and Right-wing- in the three countries.

For the socialist governments it has thus been important to “conquer” the idea of decentralization and make the issue their own. In order to identify the potential traits of “socialist decentralization”, it is necessary to first examine individual particularities of the cases, and the classification also depends on the initial definition of decentralization. A minimal categorization of socialist decentralization could be the opening/deepening of possibilities for participation, inclusion and political decision-making at the local level(s), being all at once part of a national socialist project. Obviously, decentralization is a wide-ranging concept (and political project), and in practice neither a completely centralized, nor a totally decentralized political system would function in contemporary societies.

It is important to question whether certain expressions of decentralization and political autonomy in the three cases rather could be classified as a deconcentration of power. Decentralization can be related theoretically and conceptually to deconcentration, since both refer to a transfer of powers (e.g., from national to regional/provincial/departmental or local level). However, deconcentration concerns the process through which the national central government is present *in*

local and/or regional/provincial entities. Decentralization on the other hand –understood in its most extended degree: sub-national political autonomy - refers to the transfer of services, competencies and resources from the central, national government to local communities and/or the regions.<sup>7</sup> Political autonomy is considered as a degree of political decentralization and fundamental for the perspectives and possibilities of self-government of a sub-national political-territorial unit. Yet, when popularly elected sub-national authorities are from the same political movement as the national government, then the question to approach is whether political decision-making processes at sub-national levels are relatively autonomous.

### **Participation and Neo-Constitutionalism**

Radical democrats are committed to broader participation in public decision-making. Citizens should have greater direct roles in public choices or at least engage more deeply with substantive political issues and be assured that officials will be responsive to their concerns and judgments. Second, radical democrats emphasize deliberation. Instead of a politics of power and interest, radical democrats favor a more deliberative democracy in which citizens address public problems by reasoning together about how best to solve them—in which no force is at work, as Jürgen Habermas said, “except that of the better argument” (Cohen and Fung, 2004: 23-24).

As mentioned earlier, the Andean political and constitutional transformations brought forward new connotations of democracy. Whereas the previously dominating liberal form of democracy was based on a representative political system and placing individual rights as superior to collective rights, in radical democracy principles of the popular will, collectivism, cooperativism, participatory processes at grassroots level, and the inclusion of previously excluded citizens/sectors are key priorities. The current constitutions of Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela were all characterized by an amplification of rights, social inclusion and participation, but likewise strengthened presidentialism (e.g. Ibarra, 2010: 124).

The Venezuelan Constitution of 1999 has been considered among the most progressive of the world (e.g. Wilpert, 2007), and made up the legal platform of Hugo Chávez in his aim of transforming the country. The constitution set the basis of a participatory model of democracy, compared to the representative and party-mediated one that functioned since democratization in 1958. The 1999 Constitution was followed by secondary legislation on political participation and divisions of political-territorial authorities, and a constitutional amendment in

2009. The socio-cultural impact of the constitutional process is worth emphasizing; Chávez placed the Constitution on the agenda and endorsed its accessibility for “ordinary people” that were inspired to read the drafts of the *Carta Magna* and the final document as something that really concerned them. In all, this contributed to an awakening of political interest among previously apolitical (and excluded) sectors. Similar patterns are observable in recent *Constituyente* processes of Bolivia and Ecuador.

The discourses of the three presidents around the participatory traits of (radical) democracy have been reflected in the constitutions. As for the project of a *Citizens’ Revolution* in Ecuador, there are more than 100 references to citizenship/citizen power etc. in the Constitution of 2008. Further, the concept of “citizen participation” (*participación ciudadana*) is mentioned 38 times (compared to six in the Venezuelan Constitution and four in the Bolivian). For instance, article 95 of the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution reads:

Citizens, individually and collectively, shall participate as leading players in decision making, planning and management of public affairs and in the people’s monitoring of State institutions and society and their representatives in an ongoing process of building citizen power. Participation shall be governed by the principles of equality, autonomy, public deliberation, respect for differences, monitoring by the public, solidarity and interculturalism. The participation of citizens in all matters of public interest is a right, which shall be exercised by means of mechanisms of representative, direct and community democracy.

Ecuador equally scores highest in direct constitutional expressions of “decentralization/decentralized”, 73 references in the 2008 Constitution (compared to 15 both in the Venezuelan Constitution of 1999 and the Bolivian of 2009). In Bolivia too, the reflections of the participatory democracy are noticeable in the Constitution. Moreover, Bolivia probably possesses a world record in direct expressions (62 references) of the autonomy concept in the constitutional text.

Now, it is important to underscore a fundamental difference between the countries being analyzed, namely the implication of large indigenous populations in Bolivia and Ecuador. The constitutions of Bolivia (2009) and Ecuador (2008) are the hitherto most radical constitutions of the world<sup>8</sup>, both in the field of recognizing indigenous grievances, such as legal pluralism, territorial autonomy and collective rights, and declaring the state to be intercultural and plurinational, and similarly the *Rights of Nature*, i.e. the constitutional protection of the environment/Mother Nature

(*Pachamama*). For the Bolivian and Ecuadorian indigenous peoples the aspects of territoriality and harmonic relationship with the environment are central as concern ethno-cultural rights. Bolivia and Ecuador have among the richest biodiversity systems of the world, which are being threatened by the pollution and deforestation caused by industrial resource extraction. In both countries, the indigenous principle of *Sumak Kawsay* (*vivir bien/buen vivir*, right livelihood) is constitutionally established.<sup>9</sup> Although in practice, powerful economic and political interests clash with indigenous and environmental rights, and in the context of nationalization of vital industries (mainly hydrocarbons, agro-business and mining), the constitutions also declare the industrialization and commercialization of natural resources to be key priority of the State, albeit taking into consideration rights of nature and indigenous peoples, and provided that revenues should be aimed at the common good. This is accordingly a concrete example of a constitutional contradiction wherein socialist state capitalism clashes with indigenous rights to self-government.

Connecting parenthetically to the central theme of this journal edition, could the turn to the left in Latin America be considered a new independence? The answer will be both yes and no. The political and economic structures are indeed more complex today than two centuries ago and economic domination by foreign multilateral actors still prevail in the continent. Although from the viewpoint of inclusion and recognition of the previously excluded citizens, a relative independence has been achieved with the involvement of marginalized sectors in politics and economy. One of the most evident examples is found in Bolivia and its project towards a plurinational state. Going back to 1781, indigenous rebel Tupak Katari uttered to his executioners: “You will only kill me, but I will return and I will be millions.” This declaration is often quoted by Evo Morales. Furthermore, it is noteworthy to underscore the particularity of the Bolivian transformation in its marked anti-republican standpoint. The preamble of the 2009 Bolivian Constitution reads that:

...We put our colonial, republican and neoliberal past behind us. We seize the challenge to collectively build a plurinational, communitarian and unitarian social state of rights, that integrates and articulates the objectives to move toward a democratic, productive, peace inspiring Bolivia, aimed at integral development and the free determination of peoples.

Of course, the establishment of a constitutional framework in the struggle to eliminate colonialism and exclusion is one thing, whereas the practical implementation of constitutional principles implies a far more difficult challenge. As some Bolivian and Ecuadorian indigenous leaders expressed: “We

are only wrapping up the constitution in a poncho, so far it is not reflected in political and cultural practice” (anonymous interviews, Dec. 2010-Jan. 2011).

### **Deconcentrated Decentralization**

Several of the divisions of the movements of Morales, Correa and Chávez can be traced to decentralization and political-territorial divisions of power structures, which highlight the complexity and importance of this theme for political actors. In Venezuela, decentralization and sub-national autonomy have been a central source of conflicts since Chávez came to power, mainly reflected in different interpretations on how decentralized political power actually should function. Neoliberal as well as leftist oppositional actors first claimed that the 1999 Constitution threatened to eliminate decentralization. Although from 2006 onwards, the Bolivarian Constitution evolved into a central platform of opposition. Reconnecting to the theoretical debate on decentralization versus deconcentration, in an interview made in 2002, President Chávez expressed his view on decentralization and its relationships with the national political plans:

There is a contradiction there, and we have found the only possible solution allowed by our Constitution, or at least one of the only solutions – planning through democratic, participatory, public debate. We have been accused us of being “enemies of decentralization,” but really we are only opposed to the decentralization that disintegrates the country’s unity. One of the five strategic axes of the national development project is precisely deconcentrated decentralization. That is, we add the term “deconcentrated” to the concept of decentralization in the federal model... A central element of our decentralization plan is the deconcentration of political, economic, and social power. Really, the old, neoliberal style of decentralization created power centers within state governments. Governors became local *caudillos*, with total control at the regional level, at the same time as community participation from below was cut out of the picture. They understood decentralization but up to a point, up to the point where the communities actually started to get a share of the power and at that point they didn’t decentralize anything (Chávez, in Harnecker, 2005: 114).<sup>10</sup>

Chávez is undeniably touching upon an important theoretical and empirical dispute, namely the extension of decentralization as a concept and political project to a broader and deeper concern with popular participation and inclusion, notwithstanding with stronger connections to the national level. Although from the grassroots perspective the Chavismo has generally been characterized as organizationally fragile, with temporal organization forms that have replaced each other, and with weak autonomy toward the national level. The degree of personal cult status concentrated in

President Chávez is high within these organizations. However, other Chavismo movements that existed already before Chávez reached the presidency, for instance water or land committees, have succeeded in maintaining a higher grade of autonomy toward Chávez and his party (Lalander, 2011).

Since 2006 the prime organizational unities for local participatory democracy are the Community Councils (*Consejos comunales*), a continuation of the Local Councils of Public Planning/CLPP that were established already in 2002 (through article 182 of the 1999 Constitution and the CLPP law of 2002). Although, the local planning councils had experienced difficulties in their work on choosing work priorities at community level, being frequently co-opted by municipal mayors. The article 184 of the 1999 Constitution provided the mechanisms and jurisdiction for popular participation and self-government at community and neighborhood levels, although the municipal mayors and regional state governors still had the possibility to intervene and control. The Law of Community Councils of 2006 strived for correcting this flaw, giving council leaders self-sufficiency from politicians of local parallel institutions. Chávez and other critics argued that the mayoralties and governorships were inefficient or ignorant regarding the neighborhood level. Therefore the Community Council law was necessary. The Community Councils are in charge of local social and political projects and coordinate activities of organizations within a given territory. In comparison with the Bolivarian circles –which was the principal grassroots organization form of Chavismo between 2000 and 2004- the Community councils are bigger organizations. Each council consists of between 200 and 400 families and is organized into different thematic committees.

In 2011, there are approximately 38.000 community councils in Venezuela. However, the structure of the councils frequently presents weak autonomy. The councils are strongly depending on the national government, particularly the Ministry of Participation and Social Protection, other state institutions and companies, but also local and regional government authorities, to which the councils can present projects and proposals for eventual approval and financial support (Ellner, 2009: 12), which easily could contribute to increasing clientelism and selective state paternalism. Rather than developing into a more genuine (autonomous) strengthening of popular participation, these traits -clientelism and paternalism- have often characterized the local-national relationship from the viewpoint of the councils.

Nonetheless, at the same time the insistence of grassroots struggle and organizing suggests that the very local level of influencing in politics has taken roots in the mentality of citizens. True, similarly activists at this level have been directly enhanced to engage in community level political organization by President Chávez. Similarly, Steve Ellner accentuates that so far the councils have not displaced the authority of the municipal governments, since the former merely carry through priority projects in the neighborhood, and likewise that the grassroots organizations should be examined in historical perspective:

The fixation on autonomy, however, is somewhat misplaced. Social programs and the organizations they create, not autonomous social movements, are the backbone of the *Chavista* movement. Prior to Chávez's election in 1998, Venezuela lacked the kind of vibrant, well-organized social movements that paved the way for the election of Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador. For many years in Venezuela, neighborhood and worker cooperative movements were independent of the state, but they failed to flourish or play a major role in the lives of non-privileged Venezuelans...In spite of financial dependence on the state, rank-and-file *Chavistas* tend to be critical, and their support for the government is hardly unqualified – thus explaining, for instance, Chávez's defeat in the constitutional referendum of 2007 (Ellner, 2009: 13-14).

Since 2009, Venezuelan participatory democracy has expanded. Several community councils can construct a commune (*comuna*) and the *comunas* could form a communal city (*ciudad comunal*) which more clearly would challenge the authority of the mayoralties. It should also be stressed that oppositional activists have entered the communal political structures and been involved in the community councils, i.e. recognizing this participatory space at local level. Other oppositional activists at communal level have uttered feelings of systematic exclusion and in 2011 a bloc of oppositional councils was established as the *Frente de Consejos Comunales Excluidos*.

The participatory democracy of *Chavismo*, established through the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution and subsequent laws, has often been demonized or portrayed as a *cubanization* of the political system. Although I argue that onwards scholarly attention to the Venezuelan process should also consider the links to other experiences of participatory budgeting, as those related to the *Partido dos Trabalhadores/PT* in Porto Alegre and elsewhere in Brazil, radical (indigenous) municipal governments in Ecuador and Bolivia (e.g. Van Cott, 2008; Lalander, 2010), the *Frente Amplio* in Uruguay, and Venezuelan municipalities where the leftist radical party *Causa R* governed in the 1990s. Of course, a difference between the community councils and other Latin American examples

is that the latter rather depended on initiatives by radical mayors, whereas the former are part of a national strategy to increase participation.

### **Final Remarks**

After decades of scholarly concentration on the confrontational relationship between neo-liberalism and social movements in Latin America, academic attention is now increasingly directed toward emergent leftist regimes, with a strengthened role of the state in the economy, there is a need to deepen studies on how state-society relations are reflected in new constitutional settings. Decentralization, political participation and the empowerment of previously excluded social sectors are central and contradictory issues in the three Andean neo-constitutional projects. In this article, complex settings have been portrayed around diverse concepts and ideological fundamentals being merged in different political schemes in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela. The neo-constitutional course in the three countries is undeniably work in progress. In approaching analytically these processes we need to simplify a lot to perceive the characteristics of each element and course of action.

So, is there a socialist decentralization advancing in the Andes? The answer depends logically on the question regarding what decentralization is and which analytical tools and political standpoints are applied. Discourse and constitutional recognition of decentralization, sub-national autonomy, popular participation and inclusion of disempowered sectors are placed against centralist practices, populism, politics of socialist state capitalism and so forth. A definitive characterization of the criteria required to be classified as a model of socialist decentralization will not be provided at this point. Although some general characteristics are shared by the three regimes, as the strengthened role of the state in local politics, neighborhoods level political reinforcement, and the creation of mechanisms for empowerment of previously excluded groups.

But, could not the advancements of the socialist projects even be considered as contributing to a political re-centralization? Or, has a deepened decentralization –and democratization- occurred with the socialist reforms, in terms of possibilities for direct popular possibilities to influence in decision-making at local level? As the Venezuelan case suggests, re-centralization (strengthening of the national executive power) could go parallel to a deepening of decentralization and that they could occur through the same reform or process, depending on the

analytical focus of the observation and the criteria applied to define the concepts. Undoubtedly, the local level political participation can develop in parallel to a strengthening of the national executive power and thus be mutually reinforcing.

It is still too early to meticulously indicate more enduring impacts of the most recent neo-constitutional mechanisms for reinforced participation of previously disempowered citizens in Bolivia and Ecuador. In future research it will be important to examine how strategies and discourses related to Andean (socialist) decentralization contrast to previous political approaches to the concept, a dimension of the political development that hitherto has not been comparatively analyzed. Considering that the new constitutions aim at amplifying the promises of citizen participation, one might examine whether these reforms in practice embrace territorial horizontal dimensions of decentralized decision-making.

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<sup>1</sup> The constitutional texts quoted in this work can be found at the Political Database of the Americas/PDBA: <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/constudies.html>

<sup>2</sup> After finishing the first draft of this study, I found that Chilean sociologist and Marxist popular educator Marta Harnecker since recently also applies the concept of socialist decentralization (Harnecker 2010; Moldiz 2010)

<sup>3</sup> Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador are far from being purely socialist societies. They still have mixed economy. However, the discourse, ideological direction, and reform components can be traced to socialist ideology.

<sup>4</sup> Regionalist tensions have been manifest since national political authority and economic power are concentrated in different places in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela. The chief political opposition has been concentrated in traditional economic strongholds -Santa Cruz department in Bolivia, Guayas province in Ecuador, and the regional state of Zulia in Venezuela-, epicenters associated with pressure for sub-national political autonomy. From an economic perspective, considering their richness in natural resources, Santa Cruz, Guayas and Zulia would undeniably benefit from an extended political and economic autonomy.

<sup>5</sup> In both Bolivia and Ecuador, a *Chávez effect* could be added as explanatory factor behind the triumphs of Morales and Correa, i.e. a snowball effect as for the leftist transformation. Chávez was indeed present in the electoral campaigns of these two countries.

<sup>6</sup> The MAS party is generally viewed as the political instrument of the social movements. Since 2009, however, there are signs of decomposition of the social movement conglomerate behind Morales and MAS, and the important highland Aymara and Quechua confederation CONAMAQ as well as the lowland Indigenous confederation CIDOB have mobilized against the government.

<sup>7</sup> Broadly speaking, decentralization can be categorized in four degrees (beginning with the most centralist grade): deconcentration, delegation, devolution and autonomy (e.g. Rondinelli et.al. 1984).

<sup>8</sup> As for recognition of indigenous collective rights, actually the Venezuelan Constitution of 1999 was far more progressive than the Bolivian constitution of that period and comparatively equal to the Ecuadorian constitution of 1998 in this field.

<sup>9</sup> In recent years, the Chávez administration has embraced the *Sumak Kawsay* principle, at least in discourse.

<sup>10</sup> Also in Bolivia and Ecuador the *deconcentrated decentralization* stance can be observed in the implications of recent constitutional reforms. In Ecuador neighborhood organizations are granted augmented power, whereas in Bolivia local self-government mechanisms mainly relate to the project of indigenous-peasant autonomy.

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