

*Gendering Popular Participation:
Identity-Politics and Radical Democracy in Bolivarian Venezuela*¹

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Introduction

I am a woman with a new life ever since the Bolivarian² Revolution knocked on my door... It is time for a new independence, a more colored one. A revolution that enhances feminine participation on equal conditions as those of men. We have to leave traces and show that we're no longer invisible, but invincible (Pielrooc Montenegro, "dignified" *barrio* woman, interviewed in *Aporrea* 2010; translation by author).

On May 30, 2011, the mayor of the Vargas state, Alexis Toledo of the government PSUV party (*Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* / Unified Socialist Party of Venezuela), invited me to participate in his radio program "Constructing Popular Power" (*Construyendo el Poder Popular*) that was recorded and broadcast live at the Plaza Bolívar of El Cojo sector in the beautifully located parish of Macuto by the Caribbean coast. The program was an essential part of a project of empowering the previously marginalized sectors of Venezuelan society, and more precisely to diminish the gap between formal elected State authorities and citizen collectives at grassroots level.³ In Venezuela, the most important organizational form at neighborhood level since 2006 is the Community Councils (*Consejos Comunales*). The radio show was an event open for all citizens and developed in a workshop style, with interventions of the mayor and representatives of the Community Councils and other grassroots organizations. The great majority of the participants were darker-skinned women from the humble sectors of society, a few younger ones, but mainly middle-aged and above.

This study deals with the empowerment of Venezuelan women that previously were marginalized along the lines of gender, ethnicity and class. This empowerment has been achieved through their protagonist roles in the new participatory democratic model introduced under the Presidency of the late Hugo Chávez Frías. The tensions and contradictions of identity-politics constitute an old theoretical and ideological debate within the Leftist academia around the world, particularly since the 1960s

¹ Chapter in: *Multidisciplinary Latin American Studies: Festschrift in Honor of Martti Pärssinen*, edited by: Harri Kettunen & Antti Korpisaari, Department of World Cultures, University of Helsinki, 2016: 149-173.

² The name of the Venezuelan Republic was changed to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela as a result of the constitutional reform of 1999. This is a tribute to the Liberator Simón Bolívar and *Bolivarian* is often used symbolically as a synonym to projects associated with Hugo Chávez and his politics.

³ Comments from the meeting can be read in the blog of Alexis Toledo (2011).

(Hobsbawm 1996), namely on how to deal with the identitarian elements of class, gender and race/ethnicity in a broader political-societal setting. Is there a kind of hierarchical order between the three elements in each context, for instance in the specific Venezuelan case? This essay contributes to the Leftist debates on the quandary of multiple identity groups in broader political projects and explores the complex identity-politics of Venezuela in times of *Chavismo*, particularly between 2006 and 2013, with a particular focus on the grassroots level political participation of women of the urban popular sectors. Moreover, as regards the centrality of the recognition of identity-based human rights, i.e., citizenship as the core of democracy and the viewpoint on recognition understood as the right not to be discriminated on gender, class, ethnic, religious or other grounds, the study contributes as well to debates on democracy and human rights.

Women's empowerment at grassroots/neighborhood level will be examined, particularly through their protagonist role and activism in the *Consejos Comunales*. The identification on behalf of the actors in terms of gender, class and ethnicity will be scrutinized. Most female activists in the Community Councils are from the "poorer" sectors of society, and for that reason it is pertinent to add the components of class and ethnicity to the analysis. Gender, class and ethnicity are intimately and complexly intertwined among the protagonists, and these identitarian elements intersect at the local levels of politics. The study thus comprises a problematization of identity-based politics. A central claim of the text is that the participatory model of democracy within the community councils and other grassroots organizations largely benefitted a sizeable segment of women of these sectors in terms of strengthened political, social and cultural citizenship. A further argument is that, in a broader socio-political context, the class-defined identity tends to be superior to both that of gender and ethnicity, albeit similarly complexly entangled with them. An underlying complementary aim is also to seriously question the myth of Venezuela being "the least racist country" in Latin America.

The study draws on ethnographic fieldwork in Venezuela since the early 1990s, with participatory observation and conversations with different actors of the political society. Hundreds of interviews have been carried out, although only a selection of these will be mentioned. After the contextualization offered above, the disposition of the text is as follows. First, a more theoretical discussion of identity-politics and intersectionality is offered, followed by a brief section on historical and contemporary gender- and ethnicity related discrimination in Venezuela and Latin America. This discussion likewise includes a few clarifications on methodological issues during the fieldwork, when dealing with the sensible issues of ethnic identity and self-identification. Next, the radicalization of democracy and politics in Venezuela is presented, followed by a brief section on the community councils. Subsequently, the feminization of participatory democracy and the presence and role of marginalized

women in the community councils are examined, as are also some individual interpretations by a few female protagonists. Finally, a few pertinent conclusions and final remarks close the essay.

Identity-Politics and Intersectionality

The protagonism of women from the humble sectors in Venezuelan participatory democracy in times of Hugo Chávez constitutes the core of this study. This focus likewise comprises, as mentioned, an old debate of the intellectual Left, namely how to deal with representation of separate identities in political projects. While the positions towards this quandary vary among intellectuals, more broadly speaking two tendencies or standpoints may be perceived. The first one emphasizes the superiority of class struggle and international solidarity before the particular grievances of specific identity groups (e.g., Hobsbawm 1996). The second standpoint underscores the need to problematize the existence of multiple and complexly integrated identities in the analysis of structural injustices in society. This position will be represented by academics of gender studies focusing on intersectionality, that will be considered in due course (e.g., Crenshaw 1989; Yuval Davis 2006).

In 1996, Eric Hobsbawm wrote a short text on the challenge of identity-politics for Left-wing political movements. Traditionally, identity-based collectives were not central to the Left (Hobsbawm 1996:42–44). However, at the same time, the Left has certainly supported a great number of identity groups.

The political project of the Left is universalist: it is for all human beings. However we interpret the words, it isn't liberty for shareholders or blacks, but for everybody. It isn't equality for all members of the Garrick Club or the handicapped, but for everybody. It is not fraternity only for old Etonians or gays, but for everybody. And identity politics is essentially not for everybody but for the members of a specific group only. This is perfectly evident in the case of ethnic or nationalist movements... The nationalist claim that they are for everyone's right to self-determination is bogus. That is why the Left cannot base itself on identity politics. It has a wider agenda (Hobsbawm 1996:43).⁴

⁴ Evidently, there are huge differences between Latin American and, for instance, Western European social settings, and in the former it is still easier to discuss a Leftist project in terms of the proletariat. In Europe, on the other hand, the social bases of the traditional Left have altered with the knowledge and technological progressions, the weakening of trade unions and the waning of labor-intensive industries in these countries. Moreover, European Leftist party supporters are no longer mainly (industrial) "working class." The cultural-geographic contexts also differ historically as the projects of nation-building are concerned, and in Latin America these projects are centered in decolonization, independence, etc. See, for example, Anderson (1991).

While this standpoint might be interpreted as a subordination of particular identities within the Left and the superiority of class struggle, universality and international solidarity, Hobsbawm similarly acknowledges the multiple identities of individuals and collectives. Consequently, Hobsbawm criticizes the assumed negation of multiple identities among the advocates of specific identity politics, but equally emphasizes that the specific identities should be encompassed in a broader political project.

In contrast, in women's studies these identitarian liaisons have been studied under the theoretical and methodological banner of intersectionality. What ethnicity and women's studies have in common as academic disciplines is that both are rooted in oppositional social movements (Mohanty 2007:224). In political, social and cultural analysis, the intersectionality approach can be used to problematize, as well as to better comprehend the complex mixture of identities that influence collective and individual behavior in society (e.g., Crenshaw 1989; Mohanty 2007; Yuval Davis 2006).

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a lawyer specialized in the rights of Afro-descendant women, coined the concept of intersectionality in the late 1980s. Her metaphor of gender, class and ethnicity-based discrimination as a traffic and crossroads situation has been frequently quoted:

Intersectionality is what occurs when a woman from a minority group... tries to navigate the main crossing in the city... The main highway is 'racism road'. One cross street can be Colonialism, then Patriarchy Street... She has to deal not only with one form of oppression but with all forms, those named as road signs, which link together to make a double, a triple, multiple, a many layered blanket of oppression (Crenshaw 2001, quoted in Yuval Davis 2006:196; see also Crenshaw 1989).

The consciousness-raising among actors around two or more of these bases of social identity might strengthen the concerned social group. The intellectual debate on intersectionality is intimately intertwined with that of empowerment.

[Empowerment is the] process by which oppressed persons gain some control over their lives by taking part with others in development of activities and structures that allow people increased involvement in matters which affect them directly. In its course, people become enabled to govern themselves effectively (Jill Bystydzienski quoted in Craske 1999:23).

It should be emphasized, though, that identities are not static. The different identities – or the relative position and relationship of each identitarian element towards each other – of an individual or a collective may change with altered contexts. Identities, cultures, social/political movements and ideologies also change over time. In each particular context, while one identitarian element for the individual could be perceived as being superior to the others, each situation might be so complex that it

results impossible to only place one element on top, since each identity is related to other identitarian elements (class, gender, ethnicity, religion and so forth).

However, simplifying the matter somewhat, what I aim to show is that changing contexts might change the relationships of the identitarian elements. As an example, in a previous study I focused on the intersectionality in the identity-politics of the Ecuadorian Evangelical Indigenous peoples and the clashes between ethnicity, religion and class. One of the conclusions in that paper was that the “hierarchy” of the identity elements changed following the altered social contexts. While religion could be the central identity in the private sphere, ethnic and class identity tended to be superior in the socio-political settings, such as political mobilizations and elections (Lalander 2013).

Nevertheless, sociologist Nira Yuval Davis emphasizes the risks associated with the adoption of perspectives on gender, class and ethnicity as hierarchical orders. In its place, she suggests a viewpoint on *mutually constitutive intersectionality* (Yuval Davis 2006), which assumes that power struggles are contextual and that the social identities embraced by the actors depend on the relative confluences of gender, class and ethnicity. Such an understanding might contribute to explanations of whether in some settings marginalization along the lines of ethnicity also produces a consciousness of class position. This indicates recognition of power politics and a reality of *antagonisms*. The nature of the latter and how to cope with it from the viewpoint of deliberative democracy are thus immersed in a multitude of “intersectional challenges.”

As regards the theoretical framing around identity-politics amidst a Leftist political project, two fundamental views are thus placed against one another; the more universalist and class-intensive position, represented mainly by Hobsbawm, and the standpoint of intersectionality. The differences, boundaries and liaisons between the two positions are indeed minimal and floating, and the author is well aware of the risks of simplification. Both positions emphasize struggle for social justice, equality and the eradication of oppression, repression, domination and discrimination. But, whereas Hobsbawm, as mentioned, does not reject the importance of multiple identities among the actors, he concludes that identity-politics could not constitute the basis of the Left. The intersectionality approach, on the other hand, holds that specific social identities, for instance gender and ethnicity (or a combination of intersecting identitarian elements, such as gender-ethnicity-class), can, and should, be central in the political struggle.

Since this essay deals with the empowerment of women from the urban popular sectors and the relative makeovers of cultural, social and political citizenship, it is opportune to connect to the anthropologist

James Holston (2009)⁵ and his conceptualization of *insurgent citizenship*. Holston discusses how new organizational forms emerge in politically transformative popular urban neighborhoods and contribute to changes of the patterns of citizenship in a society. Women have been the most represented actors in these mobilization processes in Holston's studies, which add also to the democratization of society and, particularly, the socio-cultural and political development at the local/neighborhood level. Social groups or categories may achieve their own space amidst urban transformation. Holston criticizes previous interpretations on social conditions in these localities and accentuates the importance of examining the real capacity of collective action of citizens in order to change their situation of poverty and marginalization. Mobilizations of the excluded in their struggle to become included in decision-making procedures constitute an important step amidst the relative citizenship position of the actors and also contribute to the processes of (re-)construction of the *barrio* (shantytown) and consequently the city.

Historical Discrimination in Venezuela and Latin America

The racist and patriarchic discriminatory structures of Latin American societies are legacies of the colonial era. The participation and representation of women in Latin American politics has traditionally been hindered by the culture of *machismo* and *marianismo*. The *machismo* cult refers to a principle of masculine bravery and is associated with a sexist attitude and behavior of men, and an idea of male being superior to female. Some of the negative traits and cultural norms of *machismo* are: embroidered aggressivity, arrogance towards women (and their rights), domestic violence and a conception of "honor and absence of fear," which should grant the man certain rights as superior in the man-woman relationship. Furthermore, according to these norms, the man may have his life outdoors (in society), whereas the "good" women/mother/wife should stay at home (Craske 1999; Trigo 2008:103–110).

Marianismo refers to a cult of moral supremacy of women, rooted in the devotion to the Virgin Mary (*la Virgen María*). According to this belief, motherhood is central and the woman should be virgin and self-negating, but also a good mother. In practice, though, the mother-virgin ideal is an impossible equation. For men, in comparison, fatherhood is not central. Of course, women cross the private-public spheres and work in the community and different activities, but these undertakings are considered as secondary and merely complementary to their normal lives as mothers/wives. These socio-cultural impediments and gendered distinctions in the daily life contribute to the accentuation of stereotypes rooted in *machismo* and *marianismo* (Craske 1999).

⁵ The author would like to express gratitude to Juan Velásquez-Atehortúa for the introduction of Holston and the debate of insurgent citizenship. See also Lalander and Velásquez-Atehortúa (2013) and Velásquez-Atehortúa (2014).

Social and cultural transformation requires time and learning processes, particularly since we deal with changes of mentalities and social structures based on patriarchy and *machismo* culture. As reflected by Venezuelan philosopher and feminist activist Alba Carosio in 2007:

There will be neither socialism nor democracy if the transformations fail to include the elimination of patriarchic structures. Patriarchy constitutes the institutionalization of masculine power... It is viewed as normal that women fulfill their social and family roles that press them to many more hours of work, including remunerated, domestic and communitarian work. The Bolivarian Revolution presents among its achievements the broadest communitarian participation of women (*mesas de agua, consejos comunales, misiones*, etc.), which in itself is positive and has produced personal empowerment, self-esteem and sentiments of worthiness, particularly among women of the popular sectors. Still, this reality has not been accompanied by service schemes, social mechanisms or educational or ideological transformations that would modify domestic and family-related responsibilities and associated burdens. Generally, the participatory protagonists find themselves obliged to transform into heroic laborers fulfilling their multiple roles without failing in any one of them... If the Constitutional reform really should be the monitor of the construction of a democratic, socialist society of humanist justice, the gender perspective is an indispensable ethical imperative... The Bolivarian socialism of the twentyfirst century should be feminist in order to be truly fair and human (Carosio 2007; translation by author).

As concerns discrimination based on race/ethnicity, there are no exact or completely reliable official statistics on the ethnic/racial composition in Venezuela. Social imaginaries of assimilation/*mestizaje* have been central in the strategies of nation building and social integration. A popular metaphor on the ethnic mixture in Venezuela is that of the *café con leche* (coffee with milk), which holds that practically all Venezuelans are of mixed origin. The degree of darkness of the skin, according to this view, depends on the proportions of “coffee” and “milk” respectively (e.g., Herrera Salas 2005; Wright 1990).

The appearance of the ideology of *mestizaje* (miscegenation), also known as the myth of democracy or racial equality, served to mask racial discrimination and the socioeconomic situation of the Afro-Venezuelan and indigenous communities. This ideology attempted to close the wounds produced by the clash of different cultures and hide the unequal relations of power between the different ethnic groups. In practice, however, it identified the white European as the civilizing agent, making Africans and the indigenous and their descendants largely invisible (Herrera Salas 2005:76).

The ethnically defined identity-politics of the Venezuelans differ remarkably from those of the indigenous peoples in Bolivia, Ecuador and elsewhere. Class and ethnicity are intimately and complexly

entangled in Venezuela⁶ and generally ethnicity tends to be subordinated to the element of class, particularly while speaking of the Afro-Venezuelan population (e.g., Cannon 2008). A degree of confusion regarding ethnic identity among Afro-Venezuelans is evident in comparison with the black population of neighboring Colombia, where Afro-Colombians have been better organized and more clearly recognized in the Constitution and secondary legislation (e.g., Wade 2012).

During my fieldwork in Venezuela since the early 1990s, informants frequently referred to the *café-con-leche* metaphor as a kind of “proof” of Venezuela being less racist than other Latin American nations, for instance by expressing “we are all *café con leche*” (see also Strønen 2014:198–211). Furthermore, while being asked about the practice of nick-naming friends, colleagues, neighbors and so forth in ethnic terms (*negro*, *morena*, *india* etc.) a typical answer was that the label according to the “color” or ethnicity of the person in question was based on tenderness and sympathy. While this might be true (including to be perceived as such by the nick-named person) in specific social relations, it still constitutes a relationship of ethnic differentiation and unequal power structures, as this study will illustrate. However, what needs to be clearly emphasized is that, as expressed by sociologist Barry Cannon (2008:741), “[m]ost Venezuelans are black or mixed race.”

In the Venezuelan population census of 2011 new categories of social/cultural/ethnic identity were introduced and provided opportunities for the respondents, for instance, to specify the degree of “darker-skin” identity; black, Afro-descendant, *moreno/a* (dark), white, indigenous or other. Anthropologist and political scientist Luis Angosto-Ferrández (2014) has examined the results of the census and also contrasted these with interpretations achieved during fieldwork. While the two strongest identitarian categories of the census were dark (*moreno/a*) with 49.9 percent of representation and “white” with 42.2 percent, these figures should be examined cautiously. The findings of Angosto-Ferrández suggest that due to the pejorative connotations of the categories black and Afro-descendant, many informants preferred to identify as *morenos* (dark). He also illustrates how difficult it was for several respondents to decide which identitarian category to choose. The ethnic dimension is indeed a problematic issue in Venezuela. During my fieldwork in the country, I perceived how female activists recurrently were not that aware of their own identification in ethnic terms. However, on several occasions they admitted that they were nicknamed “*negra*,” “*mulata*” etc., i.e., with references to the skin color and female gender. Generally, it was a lot easier for them to identify in class terms, i.e., the humble sectors.

⁶ Of course, also in Bolivia and Ecuador the elements of class and ethnicity are intertwined in indigenous politics, as among the indigenous minority groups of Venezuela. However, what I wish to clarify is that the ethnic identification of the Afro-Venezuelan population (including mulattoes) in comparison is weaker and less expressed publicly in Venezuela.

Radicalization of Democracy in Venezuela

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).

The victory of Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías in the presidential elections of December 1998⁷ broke what had up until then been a dominant neoliberal pattern of government in Latin America. Thereafter a number of countries underwent a leftward shift in political leadership. From a continental perspective, Chávez broke new ground, catalyzing the so-called Leftist transformation of Latin America. The re-writing of the constitution – the *constituyente* – was, together with class struggle, poverty reduction and redistributive justice⁸, Chávez’s main electoral banner in 1998; and his key strategy to change the political system and get rid of the vices of the past.

In 1999, a series of referenda and elections were held to rewrite the Venezuelan constitution. The socio-cultural impact of the 1999 constitutional process is worth emphasizing: Chávez placed constitutional reform on the agenda and promoted its accessibility to “ordinary people,” who were inspired to read the drafts and the final document as something that really mattered to them (this is sometimes referred to as *popular constitutionalism*). The process contributed to awakening political interest among previously apolitical and excluded sectors. From this angle, it became the most democratic process of popular consultation and constitutional approval ever undertaken in the history of constitutional rewriting in Latin America to that date. Pedro Trigo is a Jesuit priest and university teacher who has lived for decades in a popular sector of Caracas. In 2008 he reflected upon the popularity and impact of Hugo Chávez in the *barrios*:

⁷ Chávez came to power as the presidential candidate of an alliance between the Fifth Republic Movement (*Movimiento Quinta República*, MVR) party and the Patriotic Pole (*Polo Patriótico*, PP) alliance.

⁸ In the Venezuelan petro-state, redistributive justice in times of *Chavismo* refers mainly to a redistribution of the revenues of oil exports to benefit the traditionally marginalized sectors. See Strønen (2014).

Hugo Chávez, with his really extreme communicational capacities, changed the meaning of popular culture⁹ on the national horizon... The people of the popular sectors felt that their cultural being was no longer viewed as something recessive or shameful, but rather perceived as something that was openly expressed and filled with dignity and even articulated through television by the one that directed the others as a kind of citizens' paradigm, that is, the President and Head of the State (Trigo 2008:231; translation by author).

The constitutional change likewise challenged the broader perceptions 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. Historically, in practice the Latin American constitutions had functioned to protect the property rights of elite groups. The new constitutions of Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia were characterized by an expansion and deepening of rights, although at the same time by a reinforcement of the executive power (e.g., Lalander 2012).¹⁰

As regards the ethnic rights in the 1999 constitution, the preamble states that the state is multiethnic and pluricultural, and article 100 declares the equality of cultures, giving particular attention to constitutive popular cultures. There are no statements of particular rights of the Afro-Venezuelans in the constitution, although the indigenous peoples are explicitly recognized with 41 direct mentionings, including an entire chapter (República Bolivariana de Venezuela 1999:VIII, articles 119–126). Certainly, the protection of the Afro-Venezuelans and their rights to not be discriminated is incorporated in the constitution, for instance in article 21 on human rights.¹¹

Contrary to the references on polarization that usually characterize studies on Venezuelan development, the political transformations in the country could equally be viewed as paradigmatic in terms of equality and social inclusion in government decision-making. Notwithstanding, it would not be very innovative to examine, for instance, gender equality on a national level, such as statistics on women's presence in the legislative bodies at national, regional and municipal level. Even though radical reforms may be approved in the National Assembly, or sanctioned by presidential decree, they

⁹ During the administrations of Hugo Chávez, huge investments in popular culture were realized, which adds to the self-esteem of the concerned population.

¹⁰ Generally, the Bolivarian government has been characterized by a high degree of personalism, including a cult status of Hugo Chávez as the maximum leader of the process.

¹¹ As observed by Barry Cannon (2008), also in the legislative processes during the Chávez era, the relative negligence of the Afro-descendant population can be perceived if compared with the rights of the Venezuelan indigenous peoples.

need to be anchored in society, i.e., materialized at the grassroots level. All democratization processes depend on social consolidation.

The identity-politics of class, ethnicity and gender are complexly intertwined in the revolutionary project of *Chavismo*. There are abundant interpretations about the impact of the Chávez era in the political development as regards the improvements of the marginalized sectors of society. However, relatively few studies have emphasized how the government – directly or incidentally – has achieved the empowerment of women, mainly of the popular segments, i.e., the most excluded and invisible sectors of society. The constitution of 1999 opened the path toward a more egalitarian society. For instance, the constitutional text aimed at avoiding a sexist language (García and Valdivieso 2009:138). Generally, women became more visible in politics, as reflected in a public discourse by Chávez in 2008:

There would not be a true and authentic Bolivarian Revolution without the Venezuelan women making their revolution. I am very aware of this reality. For that reason, every day and within the scope of my attributions, I will facilitate, impulse and help the Venezuelan women to seize protagonism, from the top levels to the more direct and daily levels in the *barrios* and communities. Well, look here at the President of the National Assembly, the People's Defender, the President of the Supreme Court of Justice and the Comptroller General of the Republic [all these authorities being women] (Chávez Frías 2008; translation by author).

As regards ethnic identification amidst the socialist project, in public discourses Chávez recurrently referred to his Afro-descendant and indigenous origins with pride. Moreover, he connects racism in Venezuelan politics to capitalist and imperialist strategies:

Racism is very characteristic of imperialism. Racism is very characteristic of capitalism... Hate against me has a lot to do with racism. Because of my big mouth, because of my curly hair. And I'm so proud to have this mouth and this hair, because it is African (Chávez quoted in Cannon 2008:741).

Oppositional media and activists have frequently used pejorative racist discriminatory discourses and images to portray Chávez and the *Chavista* supporters (Cannon 2008; Strønen 2014:204–211). Cannon's research findings on social polarization and the complex class-ethnicity liaison during the first decade of the government of Hugo Chávez correspond to a large extent to my observations during my fieldwork in Venezuela since the early 1990s.

Examining Venezuelan history from the colonial to the contemporary era the paper shows, unlike most previous work on Bolivarian Venezuela, that race is an important subtext to this class-based support, and that there is indeed a correlation between class and race within the Venezuelan context. Furthermore, class

and race are important positive elements in Chávez's discourse, in contrast to their negative use in opposition anti-Chavismo discourse (Cannon 2008:731).

Even if a gradual radicalization of the political system occurred ever since the installation of President Chávez in early 1999, the explicit shift toward socialism took place from 2005 onwards. The move towards socialism also brought forward new models of popular participation and social inclusion at grassroots level, which could be comprehended as a *radicalization of democracy*. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe consider socialism to be a necessary ingredient within radical democracy. However, they make a clear distinction between democratic and anti-democratic socialism. As they argue, only a democratic socialism can pave the road for radical democracy:

Every project for radical democracy implies a socialist dimension, as it is necessary to put an end to capitalist relations of production, which are at the root of numerous relations of subordination; but socialism is *one* of the components of a project for radical democracy, not vice versa (Laclau and Mouffe 2001:178; emphasis in original).

As mentioned, Chávez put poverty reduction and the poor on the political agenda. Between 2002 and 2007, poverty and extreme poverty were reduced by 18.4 and 12.3 percent, respectively (Ellner 2010:90). Generally, poverty reduction characterized the period between 2005 and 2012. Over a longer period, the poverty index was reduced from 55.6 percent in 1998 to 21.2 percent in 2012, whereas the extreme poverty diminished from 25.5 percent in 1998 to 6 percent in 2012 (cited in Strønen 2014:99).¹² A central strategic mechanism to achieve these positive indicators regarding life conditions of the population has been the series of Bolivarian Social Mission programs (*Misiones Sociales*).

The *Misiones* have been directed by the presidency and may be interpreted as functioning in two directions. On the one hand, they have been implemented from the Presidency of the Republic in order to provide social welfare and to gradually overcome the institutionalized exclusion of the citizens of the popular sectors, even more so during the previous neoliberal governments. On the other hand, the *Misiones* have played a key role to promote the incorporation of "the popular power" (*el poder popular*) in the execution of policies by the central government. The enhancement of this participatory and inclusive element also required a far-going transformation of the executive structures of the state. In order to institutionalize popular participation, in recent years different legal reforms aimed at establishing the judicial framing of the "Communal State" (*el Estado Comunal*), which would replace the old liberal-representative model, have been approved by the National Assembly and occasionally the president via decree.

¹² Nonetheless, from 2013 onwards this positive trend has been reversed.

Political decentralization with the direct elections of regional state governors and municipal mayors was introduced already in 1989, partly as a compromise with Leftist political actors and due to the almost general discontentment with the political system that by tradition was centralized (Lalander 2004). In an interview in 2002, Hugo Chávez voiced an undeniably essential theoretical and empirical point, namely that decentralization as a concept and as a political project should reflect a broader and deeper concern with popular participation and inclusion. In his view, the liberal representative democratic model is insufficient, and power should be further deconcentrated from the sub-national representative authorities to the community and neighborhood levels. This radical model of grassroots popular inclusion is also at the core of the national development plan, although with stronger ties to the national level and greater independence from the regional and municipal levels (Chávez in Harnecker 2005:114).

This radical democratic model could be understood as the construction of a *parallel sphere* for popular participation. The dynamics of the popular sphere at the local level, in Venezuela often referred to as the Communal State (*el Estado Comunal*) or Popular Power (*Poder Popular*), require a high degree of flexibility on behalf of elected authorities at subnational levels. Municipal and regional state governments thus need to adapt to the expansion of the popular power, a process that requires consciousness-raising, capacity building and a lot of suppleness of functionaries and authorities, as well as of citizens and collectives, accustomed to the political culture of liberal institutions.¹³

The more socialist structure of the state from 2004 onwards was reflected in a transformation of *Chavista* grassroots organization. Between 2004 and 2005, worker cooperatives flourished. Nonetheless, *Chavismo* has sometimes been characterized as organizationally fragile at the grassroots level. Organizations have been short-lived and have lacked autonomy from the national level. President Chávez has strong cult status in these organizations. But, other movements of *Chavismo* that existed before Chávez reached the presidency (social organizations dealing with water or land issues, for instance) have succeeded in maintaining a higher degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the president and his party.¹⁴ Even though the class struggle generally is supreme in relation to other (intersecting) interests, the recognition of women, HBTQ, indigenous peoples and Afro-Venezuelans has been persistently

¹³ Undoubtedly, the historical vices of corruption, clientelism, institutional inefficiency and exaggerated bureaucracy – not directly originated in (neo-)liberalism – constitute serious challenges also for more socialist governments. Since even before being elected president for the first time in 1998, Hugo Chávez repeatedly expressed that these vices constitute a major challenge to his administration, i.e., a kind of cultural-institutional legacy of the previous regimes (Chávez quoted in Lalander 2012).

¹⁴ In recent years, land, water and women's committees have been gradually incorporated into the Community Councils.

incorporated both tacitly and explicitly in government discourses and the implementation of policies. In what follows, the hitherto most successful of the grassroots organizations will be discussed.

The Community Councils

The community council cannot be an appendix of the party, which would mean that we would kill the baby. We would commit an abortion. What baby? The community councils. You cannot permit that. The party helps. It has to help. The party promotes, it has to promote, the party forms the cadres. The community councils cannot be the appendices of the mayoralties, they cannot, they should not, do not let them. The *communes/comunas* cannot be the appendices of the governorships, neither of the Ministry nor of President Chávez or anybody. They belong to the people; they are created by the masses, by you (Chávez 2009:43; translation by author).

Since 2006, the prime organizational units for local participatory democracy have been the Community Councils, a continuation of the Local Councils of Public Planning (*Consejos Locales de Planeamiento Público*, CLPP) that were established in 2002¹⁵ (these experienced difficulties when choosing work priorities at the community level and were frequently co-opted by municipal mayors). Article 184 of the 1999 constitution provided the mechanisms and jurisdiction for popular participation and self-government at the community and neighborhood levels, but the municipal mayors and regional state governors could still intervene and control these organizations. The Law of Community Councils of 2006 (República Bolivariana de Venezuela 2006) sought to correct this flaw, making Council leaders more independent from politicians or local parallel institutions.

Chávez and other critics argued that the mayoralties and governorships were inefficient or ignorant about neighborhood life and needs, which made the Community Council law necessary. The Community Councils are in charge of local social and political projects and coordinate the activities of organizations within a given territory. Their key objective is to promote local development. This function communicates directly to the definition of radical/deliberative democracy by Cohen and Fung (2004) in which citizens should identify and work together to solve common public problems according to the logics of the best arguments.

In urban areas, each council is constituted by between 200 and 400 families and is organized into different thematic committees. In rural areas, 20 families is the required minimum to constitute a Community Council, and in indigenous communities the number is ten families. The councils are in charge of the planning, financing and administration of public works and the construction of housing in the

¹⁵ Article 182 of the 1999 Constitution; CLPP law of 2002.

neighborhoods. They are horizontally structured: at the top of the decision-making pyramid is the Citizens' Assembly (*Asamblea de Ciudadanos y Ciudadanas*). All council spokespersons (*voceros/voceras*), who are approved in the Citizens' Assembly, work without salary and are equal in rank. The *voceros* can belong to one or several committees.¹⁶ A communal bank (*Banco Comunal*) can be established to manage grant money given to the councils. Further, a Social Comptroller (*Contraloría Social*), which is made up of five council members, supervises spending. Members of the community can be remunerated for work undertaken for Community Council projects.

In 2013, there were around 44,000 Community Councils throughout Venezuela (Azzellini 2013). Approximately one third of the Venezuelan adult population has participated in the Community Councils or similar grassroots organizations, which is to be compared with the 2–3 percent participation in the most well-known experience of participatory budgeting in the world, that of Porto Alegre in Brazil (Goldfrank 2011:47). However, the autonomy of the councils is often weak, as they depend strongly on the national government, particularly on the Ministry of Participation and Social Protection, and other state institutions and companies. They also depend on local and regional government authorities, to which the councils can present projects and proposals for eventual approval and financial support (Ellner 2009:12). This relationship evidently includes risks of clientelism and selective state paternalism.

However, the insistence on grassroots activism and organization suggests that working at the local level to influence politics has taken root in the minds of citizens. True, activists at this level have been directly engaged in community-level political organizations by President Chávez; but as Ellner emphasizes, so far the Councils have not displaced the authority of the municipal governments, since the former merely carry out priority neighborhood projects. Further, he notes that the grassroots organizations should be examined from their specific historical perspective, and that council activists tend to be critical (Ellner 2009; see also Fernandes 2010; Lalander and Velásquez-Atehortúa 2013).

Gendering Popular Participation

As you visit the Community Councils you will see that most of the spokespersons are women. And that is what you also observe in the Technical Energy Boards and Technical Water Boards. When the Urban Land Committees were formed in 2002, we were working in the promotion of their organization, and

¹⁶ The working committees mentioned in article 9 of the Community Council Law include health, education, urban and rural land, housing, social equality and protection, popular economy, culture, security, communication and information media, recreation and sports, food, water, energy and gas, and services. The law also says others can be formed according to community needs.

most of the organizers were women. That is, since Chávez came to power, women really achieved visibility. Furthermore, women have been in the forefront of the organic processes and struggles in each of the communities... Here in Vargas, particularly in the case of La Esperanza, I would say that 99 percent of those that participate responsibly in the Community Councils are women. 99 percent. And I refer to women's groups as a vanguard precisely because they know the realities. They manage the reality and make diagnoses of what the reality is. They plan, propose and execute. That is the reality that we have regarding women... and the search of solutions to mediate and immediate problematics (Mata, interview, Macuto, June 3, 2011; translation by author).



Libia Mata, interview, Macuto, June 3, 2011.

Most of the active spokespersons of the *Consejos Comunales* are women, as reflected above in the declaration by Libia Mata, a middle-aged women of darker skin (*morena*) and a grassroots-level activist in the state of Vargas who has been involved in popular participation for many years, including in the dynamics between the parallel sphere of popular participation and the institutional state authorities. In the most recent municipal elections of 2013, Mata was elected to the municipal council on the slate of the PSUV party. Undoubtedly, her previous grassroots activism served as her electoral platform and base of recognition among the electorate.

The prominence of women from the popular sectors adds an essential qualitative dimension to the debate about how grassroots-level organizations are contributing to inclusion and democratization and how they can empower previously excluded actors along gender (and ethnicity) lines. Generally, the ethnic characteristics of the population in the popular sectors are different degrees of “colored/dark.” Understandably, the average “skin color” of the population is reflected within the Community Councils and, consequently, with the risk of generalizing, the proportion of darker-skinned women in these participatory spaces is high.

Rosa Reyes Cabrera is *vocera* of the *Consejo Comunal Renacer en el Alba* in San Agustín, Caracas. When asked about her ethnic self-identification she first got a bit confused and did not really know how to

label herself, although she mentioned that the neighbors frequently call her *morena* (dark, in reference to her skin). She highlights several dimensions of local level democratization and gender-based empowerment through this participatory space:

The novelty of the Community Councils process is that participation embraces the entire community, beyond political aspirations. There are people from opposition parties, people who do not militate in parties at all, and our people who sympathize with the revolutionary process. There are some opposition people who at least recognize that this is an achievement of the revolution... Earlier, participation was scarce and the majority of those who participated were men. Now participation is massive and the majority are women. Our president says he is a feminist and that the revolution has the face of a woman. Women participate in all processes, the Community Councils, the women's movement, in capacity-building, in the Bolivarian University, in cultural missions; we are involved in all spheres of the participatory movements... We are in the middle of this learning process, learning that we have the power and that the participation process has begun. People are learning what is meant by the participation process (Reyes Cabrera, interview, Caracas, June 9, 2011; translation by author).



Rosa Reyes (left), interview, cable-car (metro cable), San Agustín, Caracas, June 9, 2011.

Anthropologist Sujatha Fernandes examines women's empowerment amidst populism in the popular neighborhoods of Caracas. Fernandes maintains that even if the cult status around President Chávez is high, many grassroots-level activists present a critical position. For instance, she concludes the following regarding her key informant (a middle-aged black woman named Carmen Teresa):

Carmen Teresa is aware that she knows her "Carretera", as she calls her barrio, better than the president ever could, and when she disagrees with Chávez she is not shy about showing him his error. Carmen Teresa's assertiveness and independence of mind complicate our understanding of populism as a necessarily manipulative relationship, for she is clearly expressing her own initiative, her own judgment of what is best for her community, without waiting for orders from above. Carmen Teresa's narrative also demonstrates the self-worth that poor women activists feel as a result of Chávez's emphasis on the centrality of the poorer classes as a force for social change (Fernandes 2010:212).

Human geographer Juan Velásquez-Atehortúa examines women's empowerment in popular urban areas. Drawing on the work by Faranak Miraftab he argues that in times of *Chavismo* the prominent role of women can be understood through their participatory activities in “invited” as well as “invented” spaces of citizenship:

The invited spaces are those grassroots actions legitimated by governments and allied NGOs “to cope with systems of hardship”. Invented spaces are “those collective actions created by the poor that directly confront the authorities and challenge the status quo” (Velásquez-Atehortúa 2014:841).

For Velásquez-Atehortúa, the reforms of the Chávez government reinforced the vision of the communal state to emerge by passing parts of the executive power to communal councils and associated organisations. The popular power was thus strengthened and was subsequently further consolidated when, as exemplified in the article, people from the *barrios*, particularly women, could develop these *invited spaces* towards their own *invented spaces* of insurgent citizenship (Velásquez-Atehortúa 2014).

Since the beginning, the Bolivarian transformation depends on strategies both from above and from below, i.e., government reforms and the active participation at grassroots level. Obviously, this twofold strategy at times produces clashes, misunderstanding and tensions. In the words of Dario Azzellini, for instance, the Venezuelan process should be understood as a tension between the constituent and constituted powers:

Constituent power is the legitimate collective creative capacity of human beings expressed in movements and in the organized social base to create something new without having to derive it from something previously existing. In the Bolivarian process, the constituted power – the State and its institutions – accompanies the organized population; it must be the facilitator of bottom-up processes, so that the constituent power can bring forward the steps needed to transform society (Azzellini 2013:25).

The constituent power refers to what I have labeled the *parallel sphere* and what Chávez and the government label *poder popular* and *Estado Comunal*. Venezuelan participatory democracy and the “parallel sphere” have expanded since 2009–2010. The Law of the Communes (*Ley de Comunas*) was established in 2010 and signifies that several councils can establish a Commune (*Comuna*) and the *comunas* can form a Communal City (*Ciudad Comunal*), which could clearly challenge the authority of the mayoralties. On the one hand, the result might be confusion regarding the jurisdictions of communal cities and the territories covered by the mayoralties. On the other hand, the new participatory structure may complement the institutions of representative political authority. Success or failure in this regard

will logically depend on consciousness-raising and capacity-building among the various actors (neighbors, council spokespersons, members of *comunas* as well as mayors, municipal councilors, governors and other state authorities and civil servants).

One of the female participants in the radio broadcast workshop of the mayor of the Vargas state in June 2011 (referred to in the introduction) is Marta Berroterán, a black senior woman from the coastal village of Macuto. She has participated for several decades in different grassroots-level organizations. Since 2011 she is the principal spokesperson of the *Comuna Socialista Guaicamacuto*, and she works constantly for the coordination between different community councils and local assemblies of neighbors. I conducted interviews with her on several occasions between 2011 and 2013, and she invited me to observe the work of the *Comuna*. According to Berroterán, the participatory project of President Chávez is by far superior to previous models, as it concerns learning and consciousness-raising processes and as the new scheme grants neighborhood organizations the authority to identify, design, administer and execute projects. In her words, the aim of the *Comuna* and of the Popular Power ought to be:

To impulse the empowerment of our people, that our people take responsibility, that they use the power they have in the law. That's my objective, nothing more. But, simply, I will feel satisfied the day all our citizens of different sectors that constitute this Commune understand the power they dispose. [It is a process of] consciousness-raising, that's it, my dear. I do not need to be no place else but where I am. Here I am, in my commune, empowering in my community, helping people to take responsibility, to move forward with conscience. That day I will feel satisfied, the day we succeed in having a community without moving around with papers asking for support, that day we'll be popular power... Yes, there is, there is indeed a recognition of women (Berroterán, interview, Macuto, January 29, 2013; translation by author).



Some members of the Comuna Socialista Guaicamacuto (Macuto, January 2013), Marta Berroterán top left.

Concluding Remarks

This study has examined the empowerment of Venezuelan women who previously were excluded along the lines of gender, ethnicity and class. This empowerment was achieved through the female protagonism in the new participatory democratic model introduced by the late Hugo Chávez Frías. An additional aim, albeit entangled in the first one, was to seriously question the myth of a non-racist Venezuelan society. The chapter has provided several examples of racism in Venezuela, both before and during the Chávez era.

A particularity of the Venezuelan case is the way women of the humble sectors joined the more class-intensive struggle as a collective within the schemes of the *Chavista* transformation of society. The community councils were obviously not initially designed specifically for female participation, although women have largely been the most visible and persistent actors within these spaces of social inclusion and popular participation, as has been argued and exemplified in the present study. Women of the popular sectors have thus achieved political agency and reinforced social, political and cultural citizenship. So, essentially, the community council as a participatory deliberative space has contributed to the empowerment of women from the popular sectors.

Reconsidering the dilemma of ethnic identity amidst social and political struggle on behalf of the protagonists, it is a bit more difficult to provide “proofs” related to the question whether the community councils also strengthened individuals and collectives defined first and foremost according to race/ethnicity. Nonetheless, since (discrimination and identification based on) gender, class and ethnicity have been so complexly intertwined in Venezuelan history, and considering the more “colored profile” of many of the most prominent council leaders, it is indeed possible to conclude that the social/political inclusion for ethnically defined groups has been reinforced, even if the identification in class terms is generally superior in this sense. So, if a type of hierarchical order should be made between the three chief identitarian elements discussed here, then class generally tends to be the superior, closely followed by gender and then ethnicity. From this reasoning, based on the material provided in this study, some readers may conclude that Hobsbawm was right as regards the subordination of gender and ethnicity in relation to the superior class element in the political projects of the Left.

As mentioned, the ethnic identification is indeed a somewhat complex question in Venezuela. Frequently I perceived how female activists during interviews recurrently were not that aware of their own identification in ethnic terms. Nonetheless, when being asked they conceded that they were often

labeled *negra* or *mulata* etc., referring to their skin color and female gender. In comparison, the class perspective as an identitarian platform was generally more natural for the informants, as evidently also the one of gender. Of course, the ethnic identification may be superior in the specific indigenous or Afro-Venezuelan organizations, i.e., in contexts where they are organized politically first and foremost on an ethnically defined platform. So, generally, in ethnically mixed/heterogeneous social settings, the class element tends to be superior to ethnic identification as concerns the informants of the present study.

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