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# Utopian disjunctures: popular democracy and the communal state in urban Venezuela

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the Venezuelan government's efforts to establish a "communal state" through the eyes of working-class *chavista* activists in the city of Valencia. It argues that the attempt to incorporate grassroots community organisations into a state-managed model of popular democracy produces a series of "utopian disjunctures" for the actors involved. These disjunctures, the article contends, stem from conflicting political temporalities within the *chavista* project, as long-term aspirations of radical democracy clash with more short-term demands to obtain state resources and consolidate the government's power. The case highlights the tensions generated by efforts to reconcile radical democratic experiments with left-nationalist electoral politics.

## KEYWORDS

Venezuela, Bolivarian Revolution, *chavismo*, communal state, anthropology of democracy, post-neoliberalism, utopia

## Introduction

Since the global financial crisis of 2008, democracy has re-emerged as a central battleground in struggles over the shape of political and economic futures. Amid the social and economic fallout of the crisis in Europe and North America, novel experiments in direct democracy have been central to anti-austerity movements such as the 15M in Spain and the numerous manifestations of Occupy, which sought to reclaim public spaces and promote alternative democratic practices beyond the political mainstream (Juris 2012; Rasza and Kurnik 2012). As David Nugent (2012) observes, these mobilisations can be traced to the “twin crises of global capitalism and representative democracy” (2012: 281), and to a shared acknowledgement that liberal democracies, grounded as they are in the separation between political and economic spheres, preclude the possibility of a radical redistribution of wealth (2012: 282). Yet while such experiments in direct democracy have garnered much attention, they have not replaced more traditional political formations that continue to seek political power in order to enact social change. Indeed, in the case of the resurgent Latin American left in the 2000s, it was the incorporation of diverse social movements into electoral projects that brought radical democratic imaginaries to the fore (Burbach et al. 2013; Goodale and Postero 2013). But what happens to the demands for a more direct or participatory democracy when extra-parliamentary movements opt to make compromises with mainstream politics and pursue their goals through the ballot box as well as in the streets? What are the consequences for egalitarian political groupings that, for either strategic or ideological reasons, find themselves entangled in the machinations of electoral politics and state power?

This article explores the experiences of a group of working-class activists in Venezuela who chose to align themselves with the left-nationalist government of Hugo Chávez, the former president who led a political movement often known as *chavismo* until his death in March 2013. My ethnographic focus centres on a state-led attempt to construct a socialist commune across a number of working-class *barrios* (shantytowns) in the south of Valencia, Venezuela’s third largest city.<sup>1</sup> For fifteen months between 2008 and 2010, and a further period in 2012, I shadowed *chavista* activists as they involved themselves in new political vehicles being rolled out by the state. Through this case study, I argue that the attempt to incorporate existing community organisations into a state-managed model of popular democracy led to a

series of what I term “utopian disjunctures” for the actors involved. These disjunctures, I suggest, were born of a tension between radical aspirations to establish self-governing democratic institutions on the one hand, and more pragmatic imperatives to obtain state resources and consolidate the gains of the *chavista* electoral project on the other. Examining how rival *chavista* factions put forward conflicting proposals of the future commune, I argue that a disjuncture between two different political temporalities lay at the heart of a series of conflicts and dilemmas for local activists. By “political temporalities”, I mean the ways in which actions and decisions are conceptualised by actors in relation to what is perceived to be politically possible within particular imaginative timeframes. In what follows, I group these issues into three main areas that structure the article: (1) a tension between prefigurative and instrumentalist politics; (2) conflicts over the legitimacy of community leaders and democratic accountability; and (3) divided loyalties between local organisations and the national *chavista* project.

To date, anthropologists working on democracy have broadly made two principal contributions. The first has been to challenge the assumption that what Nugent (2002, 2008) calls “normative democracy” – a particular strand of liberal democracy characterised by representative politics, competitive elections, universal suffrage and individual liberties – is necessarily the form that all democratic projects will eventually arrive at. Instead, anthropologists have demonstrated that the forms democracy can take are as diverse as people themselves (Apter 1987; Brown 2006; Gutmann 2002; Hickel 2015; Holston 2008; Lazar 2008; Michelutti 2007, 2008; Paley 2001, 2008a; Spencer 1997), with numerous case studies showing that the understandings, expressions and practices that constitute different polities draw on “conceptual worlds that are often far removed from theories of liberal democracy” (Michelutti 2007: 641).

A second strand of work has examined the explicit challenges to normative democracy among various anti-capitalist movements in recent years. While these movements are by no means uniform, there are several key traits that link the Zapatista uprising in Mexico to the alterglobalisation movement and Occupy. Chief among them are mobilisation against neoliberalism and corporate power, a disinterest in seizing control of the state, a preference for direct democracy and prefigurative politics over representation, and horizontal, network-based organisational structures (Albro 2006; Barmeyer 2009; Garces 2013; Graeber 2002, 2004, 2013, 2013; Hickel

2012; Juris 2012; Juris and Khasnabish 2013; Khasnabish 2004; Maeckelbergh 2012; Nash 1997; Razsa and Kurnik 2012).

This article aims to build on these bodies of work by highlighting how conflicting political temporalities can produce highly disjunctive experiences for actors within radical democratic projects. In particular, it demonstrates that the entanglement between new participatory arms of the Venezuelan state and nascent experiments in popular democracy simultaneously enabled and impeded egalitarian aspirations, as local activists struggled to reconcile competing political imperatives that co-existed within the same movement. By exploring these trends, I seek to deepen our understanding of the challenges that egalitarian projects may encounter as they attempt to establish alternatives to capitalism and representative democracy in the coming years.

### **Popular democracy and the Bolivarian Revolution**

The Venezuelan case is a pertinent one to compare with post-2008 social movements, since the rise of *chavismo* was born of similar discontents with neoliberalism and representative democracy. Like much of Latin America, Venezuela went into rapid social, economic and political decline following the sovereign debt crisis of the early 1980s (Ellner and Hellinger 2003; Harvey 2006; Phillips 1998; Roberts 2003). During the era that followed, a huge contraction in social spending meant that by the mid-1990s more than 60 percent of the population was living in poverty, including 36 percent in extreme poverty (Organización Panamericana de Salud 1998; República de Venezuela 1995, both cited in Roberts 2003: 59). The incumbent political regime, a two-party duopoly that had governed since 1958, lost any remaining credibility when it violently suppressed a popular uprising against austerity measures in 1989 (Coronil and Skurski 1991; Lopez Maya 2003; McCoy and Myers 2004), resulting in hundreds and perhaps thousands of deaths.<sup>2</sup>

Chávez, a radical army colonel who was jailed for leading an abortive coup in 1992, was elected in 1998 after building a broad leftist coalition, the Fifth Republic Movement (Movimiento Quinta República, MVR), which drew strongly from existing traditions of neighbourhood organising in the country's *barrios* (Ciccariello-Maher

2013a: 243-244), as well as on Chávez's ties to the military. Historically, *barrio* community bodies have displayed a great diversity of strategic and ideological positions, ranging from close clientelist ties with political parties in the early years of settlement (Karst 1973; Peattie 1968; Ray 1969) to radical mobilisations around amenities and public services during the 1970s and 1980s (Ciccariello-Maher 2013a; Fernandes 2010; Velasco 2011).

Chávez called his political movement the “Bolivarian Revolution”, adopting Simón Bolívar, Latin America's foremost republican hero, as his central icon. In the early years of his presidency, his principal focus was on the reduction of poverty and inequality. After reasserting control over the state oil company, PDVSA, the government launched a series of petro-funded social missions (*misiones sociales*) providing subsidised food, local healthcare and free education to millions of previously excluded Venezuelans (Ellner 2008; Wilpert 2007). These measures helped to solidify the government's support among the country's poor, and Chávez embarked on a more radical set of reforms after rebranding his project as “twenty-first century socialism” at the World Social Forum in 2005 (Coronil 2011).

A central pillar of the Chávez's second phase in office was the drive to reform and rejuvenate Venezuelan democracy. After laying the groundwork for a new form of “protagonist and participatory democracy” in the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution (Alvarez 2003), the government faced substantial opposition from municipal authorities during initial attempts to stimulate public involvement in governance (see Wilpert 2007: 56-60 and García-Guadilla 2008: 6). As a result, subsequent efforts have channelled funding to local bodies via centralised ministries rather than through local municipalities, thereby allowing the government to circumvent uncooperative elements within the existing municipal bureaucracy by simultaneously strengthening the central executive and devolving power to local citizen-led organs. In line with this approach, in 2006 the government passed a law giving citizens the right to form neighbourhood-level communal councils (*consejos comunales*, CCs) in their localities. Drawing on the traditions of *barrio* assemblies and neighbourhood associations, the CCs are formed of elected voluntary spokespeople (*voceras* or *voceros*) who manage state-funded community development projects in areas such as health, water, food, land and education. By 2010, over 20,000 CCs had been formed in Venezuela (Ellner 2010: 67), with an estimated \$1 billion being transferred directly to them in the first year of their launch (López Maya and Lander 2011: 74).<sup>3</sup>

In an effort to build on these achievements, in 2008 the government began encouraging CCs in adjacent communities to group together and form communes covering much wider territories. Amid much fanfare and public promotion, Chávez proposed that these larger organs could go on to become new structures of popular governance at the local level, eventually supplanting the country's existing system of local municipalities with a "communal state" (*estado comunal*).<sup>4</sup> Though the president stressed that the communes must be constructed by citizens "from below" (*desde abajo*), a Ministry for Communes and Social Protection (MPComunas) was launched in 2008 to aid the construction process. By proposing to "transfer" the "constituted power" of the state to the "constituent power" of the people (Harnecker 2008), the communal state is envisioned as a dialectical site of struggle, in which radical elements within the existing state open up new spaces for local-level self-government, offering the general population the opportunity to eventually supplant the bourgeois state with their own structures (Azzellini 2010, 2013; Ciccariello-Maher 2013b).

### **Piloting the commune**

In January 2008, a group of community organisers from a *barrio* known as El Camoruco returned from a conference in Caracas with the exciting news that their community had been chosen to sit at the centre of Venezuela's first urban commune.<sup>5</sup> As influential community leaders in their locality, the group had been invited to the conference with the aim of launching a series of pilot communes across the country. Chávez had promised that the government would provide funding for development projects once the communities themselves had established the political structures necessary to receive this funding. El Camoruco, a community of approximately 4,000 residents, was well-placed to launch the commune in Valencia. It was one of the better connected *barrios* in Miguel Peña – a predominantly poor urban parish of around 500,000 people – and had been one of *chavismo*'s electoral strongholds in the city for the past decade.

For Rafael, Rosa and Oneidys, three *chavista* activists with a long history of community organising in Valencia's poor southern zones, the pilot commune seemed the perfect opportunity to establish lasting structures of popular governance. Rafael

and Rosa, two firm friends who were at the heart of *chavista* politics in the area, had cut their teeth in El Camoruco's neighbourhood association (*asociación de vecinos*, AV) during the late 1990s and early 2000s. The two of them had been integral to the transformation of the AV into a combative and collectively active body that put major pressure on the municipality through large community mobilisations. Between 1999 and 2003, newly asphalted roads, streetlights, telephone lines and a community health scheme had all arrived after a series of large rallies and demonstrations forced the municipality into action.

Eager to build on their achievements in El Camoruco, Rafael, Rosa and other key figures from the AV had gone on to form a grassroots network known as the Association for the Promotion of Endogenous Community Development (ASOPRODENCO), which incorporated several younger activists, including Oneidys. Based on the voluntary commitment of around 40 community leaders, ASOPRODENCO's principal aim was to establish participatory community organisations like El Camoruco's in other neighbourhoods. The organisation received no state funding, and much of its work centred on the facilitation of new AVs and, when they were launched in 2006, communal councils (CCs). When a community showed an interest in establishing a CC, ASOPRODENCO would send several members to offer training on how to conduct the process, which could take up to a year to complete.

Often, ASOPRODENCO's work as community facilitators took place in the squatter settlements of wooden and tin *ranchos* known as *invasiones* (invasions) that had begun appearing throughout the south of Valencia in the Chávez era. A typical day early on in my fieldwork would involve driving out in Rafael's battered 4x4 to a new settlement on the fringes of Valencia's industrial sprawl. There, he, Rosa and Oneidys would engage the community in a question and answer session concerning the importance of community organising and the meaning of terms like popular power. Part of this would involve discussions of logistical practicalities, during which Rafael would outline how to organise a promotional team, how to arrange a public assembly and how to elect street wardens. But much more of ASOPRODENCO's focus was on providing ideological and moral guidance that, they believed, had to prefigure any attempt to become a community body. "What makes a community?" Rosa would ask those assembled, before delivering a well-rehearsed speech:



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

Generally, Rafael would follow Rosa's introduction with a line that he would repeat over and over again: "The most important thing is the participation of the people."

In emphasising these points, ASOPRODenco sought to engender the kind of communitarian sociality and moral personhood that is common to the practice of "prefigurative politics". First coined by Wini Breines (1980), prefigurative politics rests on the idea that a new society can only be realised by creating non-capitalist and non-hierarchical relationships "prior to and in the process of revolution" (1980: 421). As David Graeber observes, the key to this approach is the belief that "the form of our action should itself offer a model, or at the very least a glimpse of how free people might organize themselves, and therefore what a free society might be like" (2013: 233; see also Maeckelbergh 2011). For ASOPRODenco, the importance of promoting these principles was not only an effort to create collectivities that could make successful demands on the state, but also a desire to instill a political and moral consciousness that would come to create participatory democracy as a lived reality. As Oneidys put it, "To me, the *la conciencia* [consciousness] is the most important thing and it has to go hand in hand with infrastructural developments."

When ASOPRODenco were offered the opportunity to promote and manage the pilot commune, they sought to apply these same principles to its construction. Throughout 2008 a series of public assemblies were arranged, with Rafael, Rosa and Oneidys forming part of a promotional committee that set out to galvanise local interest in the project. On the back of the now established CCs, the early response was positive, with good attendance at the assemblies and a diverse representation of communities present in the planning stages. Particularly encouraging for Rafael and Rosa was the involvement of a number of *chavista* spokespeople from CCs based in the private middle-class developments known as *urbanizaciones* that bordered El Camuruco. Many of these individuals had never been involved with *barrio* activists before, and their participation presented an opportunity to bridge some of the tensions that existed between *urbanizaciones* and *barrios* and move away from the stark social

and political polarisation that became increasingly pervasive in the Chávez era.<sup>6</sup> By early 2009 some 22 CCs in the zone surrounding El Camoruco had provisionally signed up to the commune, with plans to incorporate a further 18 communities also underway.<sup>7</sup> In total, it was thought the commune could cover a population of up to 70,000 people.

Yet as ASOPRODENCO set about what they believed to be the early stages of commune construction, another *chavista* institution, the Sala de Batalla Social (“Social Battle Centre”), was established in El Camoruco, complete with a small concrete office erected next to the community’s sports court. Funded directly by MPComunas, the Sala was headed by Norma, an employee of a state-funded revolutionary organisation called the Frente Francisco de Miranda (FFM), whose members receive specialist training in Cuba before providing practical and ideological support to the local-level bases of *chavismo*. Much like the role that ASOPRODENCO had been performing independently, the Sala was introduced to the area with the specific aim of facilitating commune construction in line with the MPComunas model.

ASOPRODENCO’s response to the arrival of the Sala and the FFM was lukewarm to say the least. No official communications from either Norma or MPComunas had been made when it was first established, and there was both confusion and resentment that local leaders with a long history of organising were effectively being overlooked by the new arrivals. The arrival of the Sala represented the “official” state model, which ASOPRODENCO had unwittingly pre-empted thanks to their connections in Caracas. The presence of two steering teams, one born from the locality and the other from the MPComunas, meant that there were effectively two groups seeking to act as the organising body for a commune that did not yet exist.

### **Prefigurative versus instrumentalist politics**

By mid-2009 Miguel Peña’s would-be commune was a highly complicated picture. ASOPRODENCO, with their history of community organising and established local networks, felt they had legitimate claims on the stewardship of the initiative. But

since the Sala was part of the government's official framework, an increasing number of spokespeople from local CCs felt that it should be the body responsible for coordinating the commune's construction. It was also the case that, although ASOPRODENCO was a well-respected organisation in the area, a number of prominent *chavista* figures resented the influence that Rafael in particular exerted over local politics. By providing an alternative source of political authority, the Sala were able to capitalise on these rivalries and establish a network of spokespeople who were keen to challenge ASOPRODENCO. As the Sala began to gather more supporters, one group of CC spokespeople formally broke off from ASOPRODENCO's proposal and began to associate themselves with Norma, effectively forming a rival faction. As the weeks wore on, it became clear that the Sala were actually proposing their own commune in opposition to ASOPRODENCO's plan. Since neither proposal could move forward without agreement from all the CCs, the two factions found themselves engaged in a contest to win the support of local community organisers.

Although both groups expressed a firm loyalty to the revolution and to the principles of popular power, ASOPRODENCO's commitment to prefigurative politics was one of the major points of contention between the two groups. Because they reasoned that the size of the commune should be decided by the communities themselves, they refused to place limits on which CC spokespeople could attend meetings or be part of the project. In response, the faction aligned to the Sala argued that because of the great social and political differences between the middle-class *urbanizaciones* and working-class *barrios*, the commune should only be comprised of poorer communities. At a public assembly held to discuss their differences, Norma put forward the Sala's view: "those [middle-class] communities don't have the same material needs as these *barrios*. They have everything [material] resolved already, so what's the point in having them in the commune? We need to focus on ourselves." Her comment made the Sala's position clear: their main focus was on obtaining state resources in order to make infrastructural improvements to the *barrios*.

This was a huge point of contention for ASOPRODENCO, who were immensely proud of the fact that they had crossed social divides and built a network of diverse individuals and communities. Rafael firmly defended their policy of inclusion. He reminded people that middle-class residents from Los Mangos – an *urbanización* that bordered El Camoruco – used to be afraid to cross into the *barrio*,

whereas now these same people were working as community leaders alongside *barrio* activists. In an impassioned response, he spoke of a broader vision of cross-class unity and emphasised the need to tackle the endemic social and political polarisation in Venezuelan society. “To me, the strongest element in our proposal is our integration of different communities,” he said. “This is about human sensitivity to others, no matter where you’re living – Chávez always says this. This commune is for everyone. It’s not about how much you have, but about your participation.”

But this call for political and social inclusivity was firmly rejected by the Sala. Norma reminded those present of the material changes the Chávez government had delivered to *barrio* residents, and warned that further prevarication over projects like the commune would endanger the revolution itself. “If we want this revolution to continue, we have to *dar la respuesta* [give the response or meet the needs] right now,” she said. This refusal to cede ground on the question of middle-class inclusion seemed to be premised less on local issues, and much more on the survival of the *chavista* electoral project at the national level. As various scholars have documented (Ellner and Hellinger 2003; Ellner 2008; Samet 2013; Spanakos 2008), Venezuela became steadily more polarised between supporters and opponents of the government throughout the 2000s, with flashpoints occurring during a brief coup against Chávez in 2002 and an opposition-led recall referendum in 2004. These tensions arose again in 2008 when government supporters voted to lift the constitutional limit on presidential terms, and there were genuine fears among local *chavistas* that the opposition was gaining ground on the government. By presenting their proposal as a cornerstone of the overarching *chavista* project, the Sala could play on these fears and portray themselves as a means for residents to safeguard the material gains they had already won. In contrast to ASOPRODENCO’s long-term and open-ended conception of the commune, theirs was a much more short-term and instrumentalist approach that ran in tandem with the national electoral strategy of securing working-class support.

In the view of ASOPRODENCO’s activists, however, the Sala’s search for state funding had blinded them to a more far-reaching vision of self-government that focused on the making of new political and moral persons as its first principle. Time and time again, ASOPRODENCO activists would return to the question of consciousness, arguing that the Sala’s refusal to cooperate with their proposal revealed the persistence of capitalist values in their opponents. Oneidys typified this view:

I'm worried that [the Sala] are trying to keep the power for themselves, not necessarily because they're corrupt but because they don't understand popular power... It isn't us [the community leaders] who decide what happens, it's the people... I've never trusted the institutions because these things always come from above and it's always about power.

Much like their emphasis on prefigurative politics, this position privileged the process itself as critical to the political form. As Graeber (2004) observes, such principles of democratic consensus are “typical of societies where there would be no way to compel a minority to agree with a majority decision – either because there is no state with a monopoly of coercive force, or because the state has nothing to do with local decision-making” (2004: 89). Yet critics of consensus contend that it is unsuitable for large groupings, highly inefficient and open to manipulation.<sup>8</sup> In his analysis of Occupy London, for example, Jason Hickel (2012) argues that a dogmatic reliance on consensus rested on a problematic liberal ethic that, in its desire to promote inclusiveness, openness and tolerance, undermined the dynamic of antagonism that is often central to the formulation of political claims (2012: 6). This was precisely the criticism that ASOPRODENCO faced from the Sala, who regarded their open-ended approach as time-consuming, inefficient and politically naïve. As one CC spokesperson remarked after another long meeting, “a lot of people are tired of all these meetings where nothing happens. Come on, let's get moving and do something!”

As such, differing conceptions of how community organisations should relate to “the people” – and indeed how this *people* itself was imagined – were central to the emergence of this intra-*chavista* factionalism. While the Sala envisioned the commune chiefly as a conduit for the distribution of state resources – implying a model of service delivery *for* the people – ASOPRODENCO viewed it as a project that would work *on* the people in political and moral terms. The key distinction was between one political imaginary that viewed “the people” as an electoral base requiring maintenance, and another that prioritised the subjective and relational transformation of that same “people” as a project in itself. Overall, since the conflicting political temporalities that underpinned these rival *chavista* factions were

forced to cohabit the same space, the presence of each necessarily prevented the other from realising its aims.

### **The state, leadership and political rivalry**

Discussions about the relationship between the grassroots bases of *chavismo* and the state have been a constant during the movement's political ascendancy (Denis 2011; Ellner 2013; Spronk et al. 2011). While some view the establishment of new state-managed channels of political participation as a sign of grassroots social movements successfully pulling the state in a more radical direction (Azzellini 2010, 2013; Ciccariello-Maher 2013a, 2013b), others warn that increasing centralisation will inhibit the autonomy and vibrancy of community organisations (García-Guadilla 2008; García-Guadilla 2011; Smilde 2009; Uzcátegui 2010). These debates about the role of the state have a particular quality in Venezuela, where the oil-rich “magical state” (Coronil 1997) has often struggled to deliver on its promise to provide prosperity for the majority of the population. Indeed, as Naomi Schiller (2013) points out, while oil wealth appears to imbue the state with a potent power “beyond the reach of human agency” (2013: 543), it often appears in incoherent, mundane or violent ways in everyday life (see also Abrams 1988; Das and Poole 2004; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Fuller and Bénéï 2001; Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Navaro-Yashin 2002).

For the would-be *comuneros* in Miguel Peña, it was precisely the diverse and conflicting ways in which the state could appear that produced a second disjuncture around questions of leadership and democratic accountability. This particular issue was exemplified by a long-running dispute between Rafael and Ernesto, a recently elected CC spokesperson from El Camoruco who had aligned himself with the Sala faction and become a central figure in the power struggle between the two groups.

A few days after the assembly, I spoke to Ernesto in the hope of finding out more about his opposition to Rafael and ASOPRODENCO. Although acknowledging his counterpart's historic contribution to the community, Ernesto argued that Rafael had no legal right to coordinate the commune, whereas spokespeople from the CCs like himself had been elected to constitutionally sanctioned bodies. “A communal

council is something concrete, something official with laws,” he told me. “What is their commune? How big should it be? We still don’t know.” Because he had been elected to a state-sanctioned organ, Ernesto claimed that it was “the laws” – that is, the legal conference of legitimacy the state had given to the CCs – that gave spokespeople such as him the right to manage any proposed commune.

Yet while he invoked law and officialdom to advocate for the Sala’s claims on the commune, Ernesto also raised concerns about what he regarded as self-interested careerism on Rafael’s part. Although Rafael’s contact with government officials had been the original starting point for the commune, Ernesto queried his underlying intentions:

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

These criticisms of Rafael were undoubtedly personal as well as political. Ernesto was an individual who had long been in Rafael’s shadow in the local *chavista* milieu, and the emergence of the Sala gave him access to an alternative source of authority that he could use to challenge his rival. As Sian Lazar (2008) notes, accusations of corruption and self-interest can be used to “highlight the moral integrity of the accuser, as well as throw some mud (not always undeserved) at the accused” (2008: 76). In this instance, by mentioning Rafael’s “connections” in Caracas, Ernesto could present his own faction as an embattled bastion of the authentic *chavista* bases struggling against the Machiavellian manoeuvrings of a *politiquero*. The insinuation that ASOPRODENCO’s proposal was merely a vehicle for Rafael’s personal ambitions allowed Ernesto to style himself as a more trustworthy political leader. Thus, while the state could be invoked as a necessary source of accountability for community leaders and organisations on the one hand, it could also be portrayed as a potential source of malevolent or corrupting forces on the other. Selectively, Ernesto presented two different manifestations of the same state: a legal and infrastructural state that assured accountability and gave him authority, versus a self-interested and

clientelistic state – embodied in this instance by Rafael and his “connections” – that threatened to undermine the power of new community leaders.

These wranglings over leadership and accountability demonstrated that, far from creating a singular model of popular democracy, the move towards state-managed community organisations was multiplying and fragmenting the sources of authority that local leaders could call on to strengthen their positions, as new political institutions began to compete and overlap with older ones in a “duplication of bureaucracies” (Ellner 2008: 135). In their different ways, both Rafael’s long-standing informal authority and the more formalised power of elected CC spokespeople like Ernesto had been won through popular mandates. But since one group had to defeat the other in order for the commune to go ahead, these differing configurations of political power inevitably led to conflicts over who possessed the right to define nascent democratic institutions in the locality. They also gave aspiring political leaders new tools with which to chip away at the authority of their rivals.

### **The problem of loyalty**

Given that the Venezuelan state can appear as both paternal and malevolent to *barrio* residents, the discursive and symbolic role played by Chávez has been central to the Bolivarian project retaining the view that it is a popular movement. The late president created a powerful emotive tie with supporters that gave grassroots activists a sense of popular ownership over government initiatives – indeed, the project of popular power can itself be understood as reformulation of the “magic performances” (Coronil 1997: 389) long practised by the petro-state. But for *chavistas*, Chávez was also regarded as an exception to the usual “dirty river” (Harriss 2005) of politics, and for many was considered to be a moral exemplar – an earthy champion of *el pueblo* who was guided by a search for social justice and prepared to take on the establishment from the inside (Michelutti 2013; Zúquete 2008). Chávez’s great feat was thus in becoming the “master-signifier” (Žižek 1989: 93) of a political movement at the same time as being head of the “magical state” (see Coronil 1997).

Yet while this symbolic role proved effective at winning elections and maintaining popular support, it produced a further disjuncture for local-level *chavista*



activists, who found themselves torn between showing loyalty to the president – and therefore to his policies – and articulating their own views of how the revolution should take shape. Midway through 2010, after over a year of arguments, backbiting and several unsuccessful attempts at dialogue, Rafael announced that he would no longer be involved in the commune project. Because of his key position as one of ASOPRODENCO's leaders, this decision effectively handed control of the commune project to the Sala. Those ASOPRODENCO activists who chose to stay on faced the prospect of participating in a different model of the commune from the one they had envisioned. Several of their members, including Rosa, chose to join Rafael in disassociating from the project as a whole.

To my surprise, one of those who chose to remain with the Sala at the helm was Oneidys, who had always been one of their strongest critics within ASOPRODENCO. Most surprising of all was the explanation she gave for her decision. "It's to do with the *lineamiento* [guidelines or regulations]," she told me. "It's the Salas who are supposed to be managing the construction of the communes, and that comes directly from Chávez. *That's how the lines go* [my emphasis]." Having always maintained a suspicion of the involvement of state bodies in local affairs, Oneidys was now versing the same arguments about officialdom that ASOPRODENCO had fought for so long. She even referred to governmental regulations – *lineamiento* – and a hierarchical chain of command in justification of her decision.

Yet while this shift might seem contradictory given Oneidys's previous position, it is worth considering the insights of Miriam Shakow (2011), who observes that in practice political actors often combine actions and ideals that they declare to be distinct in theory (2011: 316). Although those who self-identify as revolutionaries seek a transcendent politics, they are invariably met with an inability to unshackle their projects from the historical and material exigencies in which they are situated. They are forced to make compromises that contradict their visions, shifting their conceptual frameworks retrospectively as new imperatives channel their practice in particular directions. In the case of Oneidys, while she strove for a far-reaching vision of a self-governing commune built *desde abajo* (from below), in the end she seemed willing to accept a more contingent reality and work with a situation that fell some way short of her ideals. She was evidently torn between the radical, prefigurative form of democracy advocated by ASOPRODENCO and her broader loyalty to

Chávez and the revolution, which ultimately entailed working with the Sala and their more instrumental, short-termist approach. As Shakow points out, the recent re-emergence of revolutionary aspirations in Latin America has not erased pragmatic calculations among political actors. Instead, these aspirations have “added to, rather than replaced” (2011: 317) more pragmatic approaches that accept contingent alliances when necessary.

Seen in this light, Oneidys’s eventual acquiescence to the Sala’s proposal underlines the point that participation in Bolivarian initiatives such as the commune is often highly confused and disjunctive. In this instance, while grassroots *chavistas* were encouraged to be the principal protagonists in the construction of a new popular democracy, they were also under tacit pressure to comply with state-led objectives in ways that consolidated the power of the government and its electoral project. As a result, the actors involved found themselves in the disorientating position of having their utopian aspirations simultaneously nurtured and corralled by the *chavista* state.

## **Conclusion**

In the final paper published before his death, Fernando Coronil (2011) considered a strange paradox among the contemporary Latin American left. Although in recent years there has been, he wrote, “a proliferation of political activities inspired by socialist or communitarian ideals,” there is also a “pervasive uncertainty with respect to the specific form of the ideal future” (2011: 234). Contemporary political actors, he suggested, are thus caught between an “agitated present” and a “spectral future”, in which

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

The ethnographic material presented in this article sheds further light on the predicament described by Coronil as it appears in the Venezuelan context. In particular, it shows that this disjunctive relationship between the future and the

present stems from the contradictory ways in which the *chavista* electoral project both rhetorically promotes democratic experiments and institutionally reshapes them into formations that meets its own ends. In the case of the would-be commune, grassroots actors were subjected to imperatives that came from outside their communities and encouraged to participate in institutional channels that were not of their making, meaning they became caught between differing political timeframes and imaginative horizons. Since some individuals were more willing than others to embrace the demands that came with the communal state model, conflicts inevitably emerged as activists attempted to reconcile distinct democratic ideals with their communities' pressing material needs.

Thus, while I share Schiller's (2013) view that the Chávez era has enabled previously excluded sectors of the population to approach the state as an "unfolding project" (2013: 543) in which they can play a central role, I also contend that the Venezuelan government's new vehicles for political participation are highly constraining – both structurally and imaginatively – for grassroots community organisations.<sup>9</sup> For the actors involved in projects such as the commune, the political imaginary produced by these contradictory forces is one characterised by disjuncture and frustration as much as by hope and aspiration. The everyday experience of the Bolivarian Revolution is one intimately shaped by the tense co-existence between possibility and futility, motion and inertia.

In a wider sense, the Venezuelan case provides valuable insights into anthropological concerns with the varied ways in which democratic aspirations can take form. While it is now well established that democracy has hugely diverse origins and expressions, the evidence presented here suggests that attempts to bring together contrasting democratic formations can result in a mismatch between different political temporalities. The incorporation of experimental popular democracies into hierarchical electoral projects puts particular pressures on the former, who must weigh the acquisition of much-needed resources against the imposition of institutional structures and timeframes that may contradict – or least complicate – their political ideals. Put simply, direct or participatory democracies that aim to eventually supersede representative politics are ultimately incommensurable with the demands of electoralism, and in the long run something is likely to give. Yet while there is a strong argument that groups who aim to pursue more radical forms of democracy should therefore seek greater autonomy (Paley 2008b), in situations where the state

monopolises resources, there is an equally strong case that historically excluded communities should make such contingent alliances in order to reap the material, social and symbolic benefits that they can provide.

If Wolfgang Streeck (2014) is right to claim that democratic capitalism's current crisis is not cyclical but secular – “a continuous process of gradual decay, protracted but apparently all the more inexorable” (2014: 38) – then it is likely that the extra-parliamentary movements that have emerged since 2008 in Europe and North America will encounter similar dilemmas should they choose to form coalitions with a re-emergent electoral left. Given that democracy, in all of its normative and vernacular guises, looks set to be a central battleground in struggles over the shape of the future, further critical attention to the relationship between the political and the temporal may be essential to our understanding of the possibilities that lie before us.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the term *barrio* means “neighbourhood”, in Venezuela the word is used to refer to the low-income, self-built communities that comprise a large part of the country's cities.

<sup>2</sup> Official records cite 277 deaths, but unofficial estimates – and what is held in popular memory – range into the thousands (Coronil and Skurski 1991: 311).

<sup>3</sup> See Wilde (Forthcoming) for a more detailed analysis of the CCs.

<sup>4</sup> Central to these plans was the proposed development of “socially productive enterprises” (*empresas de producción social*, EPSs), which were designed to give communal territories the capacity to employ local people and generate economic resources from within their own communities (Añez et al. 2011; Purcell 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Other than high profile political figures, all names of communities and individuals in this article have been changed.

<sup>6</sup> Although divides along lines of class had long existed in Venezuela, these became notably more politicised in the Chávez era, with the country becoming highly polarised around election times in particular. While there is a danger in oversimplifying people's political affiliations, in general middle-

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class Venezuelans are more likely to support the political opposition, while poorer citizens are more likely to support the government (see Ellner and Hellinger 2003; Spanakos 2008).

<sup>7</sup> These communities were those that were yet to sign up to the proposal or those who were still in the early stages of establishing their own CCs.

<sup>8</sup> Harry Walker (2012), for example, suggests that in Amazonia, decisions that may appear to be taken by consensus are in actual fact constructed through covert alliances cultivated over long periods of time. The “consensus” on display in public meetings, he suggests, is often a public spectacle designed to ensure social harmony rather than a genuine process of decision-making. In Rasza and Kurnik’s (2012) study of Occupy in Slovenia, meanwhile, participants favoured small-scale autonomous workshops to large-scale majoritarian consensus precisely because of these problems.

<sup>9</sup> Schiller argues that grassroots participants in the Bolivarian Revolution understand the *chavista* state as “processual”, that is, “as a diffuse and unfolding ensemble of ideas, practices, individuals, and representations that has the potential to improve the lives of the poor and expand their access to meaningful participation in media production and broader politics” (2013: 541).