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**Article (Published version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Wilde, Matt (2017) *‘To fill yourself with goodness’: revolutionary self-making in Bolivarian Venezuela*. [Bulletin of Latin American Research](#). ISSN 0261-3050

DOI: [10.1111/blr.12631](https://doi.org/10.1111/blr.12631)

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# ‘To Fill Yourself with Goodness’: Revolutionary Self-Making in Bolivarian Venezuela

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This article explores how utopian visions are articulated by chavista activists in Venezuela through the practice of “revolutionary self-making”. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the city of Valencia between 2008 and 2012, it aims to demonstrate how close attention to the formation of new moral and spiritual selves is an integral part of the way that chavistas enact and experience political protagonism. In doing so, the article seeks to provide a ground level view of utopian visions as they are manifested discursively and practically in everyday life.

Keywords: Bolivarian revolution, ethnography, revolutionary self-making, subjectivity, utopia, Venezuela.

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

Revolutionary events are often characterised as moments in which a given social order’s hold on reality is suddenly stripped away, enabling new regimes of truth and new political subjects to emerge (Badiou, 2007). But it is also true that the attempt to construct a new social order in the wake of such events is an equally important challenge for those who prove victorious. For revolutionaries, successful insurrections are thus followed by a daunting question: how can they bring their utopian visions into being using the social materials left behind by the old order? How do they avoid reproducing the very thing they strive to overcome when they have themselves been formed by it? In Latin America, the question of how to undertake the radical transformation of people and society was addressed most famously by Che Guevara after the Cuban Revolution. In his famous treatise, *Socialism and Man in Cuba* (1969), Guevara argued that the transition to communism necessitated the creation of a vanguard of exemplary ‘New Men’ [*sic*] who would incubate historical change ‘through the revolution taking place in our hearts and minds’ (Guevara and Zimmermann, 1969: 2). These individuals, he suggested, were exemplars of those who would come to create communism through

their very being as political and moral subjects. For Guevara, the formation of a new collective subject was critical to the revolution overcoming what he termed ‘the residues of an education and an upbringing systematically oriented towards the isolation of the individual’ (Guevara and Zimmermann, 1969: 8).

In this contribution to the collection, I explore how a similar set of utopian visions are articulated by *chavista* activists in Venezuela through the practice of what I term ‘revolutionary self-making’. Like Guevara, revolutionary *chavistas* also wrestle with the challenge of embodying radical social and political change through self-conscious modes of being in everyday life. Indeed, among the activists I work with, revolutionary formation – what they call *formación* – is understood and experienced as a moral and spiritual challenge as much as a political one. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the city of Valencia between 2008 and 2012, my aim here is to demonstrate that although broad political claims around social justice, equality and national sovereignty are unquestionably central motivations for government supporters who become politically active, in practice a close attention to the formation of new moral selves is an equally important part of the way they enact and experience political protagonism. I argue that the centrality of self-making has all too often been neglected both in recent accounts of Latin America’s ‘post-neoliberal moment’ (Goodale and Postero, 2013) and in broader explorations of utopian imaginaries and projects. My intention is to highlight the ways in which *chavista* activists understand *formación* as a commitment to remaking themselves morally and spiritually, as well as to tease out some of the tensions that the challenge of becoming revolutionary subjects provokes for these individuals. In doing so, this article seeks to provide a ground-level view of utopian visions as they are manifested discursively and practically in everyday life.

In what follows, my argument unfolds in four movements. First, I stake out a brief history of the political movement that has become known as the Bolivarian Revolution and situate its ascendance as a response to Venezuela’s failed modernist utopia of the twentieth century. Second, I explore the ways in which *chavistas* understand their political protagonism as a form of moral and spiritual redemption, showing how a political ideology can draw on religious beliefs and sentiments in unpredictable ways. Third, I look at some of the anxieties and tensions that constitute revolutionary self-making by analysing my respondents’ public displays of altruism and asceticism, their concerns about the moral and ideological credentials of new recruits, and their ongoing efforts to become better and more disciplined revolutionaries. Finally, I draw these strands together to argue that revolutionary self-making constitutes an effort to reconcile the far-reaching ideals and aspirations of the Bolivarian Revolution with Venezuela’s struggle to overcome dependency and underdevelopment (Purcell, 2013; Spronk and Webber, 2014). It is this interplay between imaginative possibility and structural intransigence that frames the everyday experience of utopian visions and animates the cultivation of revolutionary selves.

## The Magical State and its Discontents

For several decades during the latter part of the twentieth century, Venezuela was regarded as an exceptional case among observers of Latin America (Ellner and Hellinger, 2003; McCoy and Myers, 2004). After the dictatorship of General Marcos Pérez Jiménez was overthrown in 1958, the country was heralded as a model of democratic stability for much of the 1960s and 1970s, its vast reserves of oil seeming

to promise opportunities for both foreign investors and Venezuelan citizens alike. As Fernando Coronil explains in his seminal work *The Magical State* (1997), Venezuela's future had been tied indelibly to petroleum since it was first discovered in the early twentieth century during the rule of Juan Vicente Gómez (1908–1935). Under Gómez, the modern Venezuelan state was founded on the belief that oil gave it 'the alchemic power to transmute liquid wealth into civilized life' (Coronil, 1997: 230). By the 1970s, the export of petroleum had become the predominant source of national income, transforming Venezuela's social and cultural landscape in the process (Ewell, 1996; Tinker Salas, 2009). A high exchange rate against the dollar drove down domestic production, meaning that imported North American foods, clothes, household items and cars became a marker of success for aspiring Venezuelans, supplemented by the popularity of cultural imports such as Hollywood movies and baseball (Ewell, 1996: 187–190). By the time the petroleum industry had been nationalised by President Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1976, the model 'good life' for Venezuelans was one with a strong flavour of North American consumer capitalism and libertied individualism.

Yet the hope that Venezuela's oil wealth would hold the country's long-standing racial and class-based inequities in check was dramatically dashed during the 1980s, when a series of social, economic and political crises combined to upend the fragile social contract built around petroleum. High oil prices failed to shield Venezuela from Latin America's sovereign debt crisis of 1983, when the government was forced to devalue the *bolívar* as the entire region slipped into rapid recession brought on by debts owed to creditors in the global north. Oil prices then fell rapidly in 1986, further entrenching the country in a downward economic spiral. Social spending and wages were cut significantly in the subsequent years, and by 1995 the number of Venezuelans living below the poverty line had risen from 36 percent in 1984 to 66 percent (República de Venezuela, 1995; Organización Panamericana de Salud, 1998; both cited in Roberts, 2003: 59). The incumbent political regime, an effective two-party duopoly that had governed since 1958, lost any remaining credibility when it violently suppressed a popular uprising against austerity measures in 1989, resulting in hundreds and perhaps thousands of deaths (Coronil and Skurski, 1991; Maya, 2003). In the working-class *barrios* (shantytowns) that suffered the most during this period, the urban poor sought to find their own solutions to the crisis by organising neighbourhood assemblies from the early 1990s onwards. These assemblies were grounded in a commitment to horizontal modes of organising (Ciccariello-Maher, 2013a: 18–20; Ramírez Rojas, 1998), but also drew on a diverse array of political traditions that ranged from close clientelist ties with political parties to doggedly anti-establishment mobilisations around amenities and public services (Peattie, 1968; Ray, 1969; Karst, 1973; Fernandes, 2010; Velasco, 2011). Hugo Chávez, then a radical army colonel, emerged amid this growing popular militancy when he attempted to overthrow the establishment through an armed uprising in 1992. Although the coup failed and he was jailed for two years, on his release Chávez spent much of the 1990s assembling a broad leftist coalition that drew on emerging *barrio* social movements, eventually becoming known as the Fifth Republic Movement (Movimiento Quinta República, MVR). In 1998, channelling long-standing anger against a political elite that had presided over two decades of rising inequality and the brutal subjugation of popular resistance, Chávez was elected as Venezuela's first leftist president.

In power, Chávez soon became notorious for his vocal opposition to the United States' imperial presence in Latin America. Likening his own struggle to Simón Bolívar's war of independence, he survived an attempted coup in 2002 (see Golinger, 2005)

and responded by overseeing a steady radicalisation of his government's policies over the course of the next decade. Chávez's government reasserted control over Venezuela's state oil company in 2003 (Schiller, 2011: 199), and set about using the state's petro-dollars to launch a series of social missions (*misiones sociales*) providing subsidised food, local healthcare and free education to millions of previously excluded Venezuelans (Wilpert, 2007: 127; Ellner, 2008: 122). This 'petro-socialism' (Uzcátegui, 2010: 76) helped to solidify the government's support among the country's poor, and Chávez embarked on a more radical set of reforms after renaming his project as '21st century socialism' at the World Social Forum in 2005 (Coronil, 2011). Central to this second phase in office was the promotion of local-level participatory democracy through neighbourhood councils and regional communes, which responded to calls for a more profound transformation of Venezuelan society by seeking to supplant the existing liberal state with what Chávez termed a 'communal state' (Azzellini, 2013).

For Chávez, this drive to create a new kind of state in which Venezuelan citizens would play an active role also necessitated the creation of a new kind of political and moral subject. In the election campaign of 1998, his campaign slogan was a passage from the Bible that called for a spiritual awakening: 'Let he who has eyes, see. Let he who has ears, hear' [*El que tenga ojos, que vea. El que tenga oídos, que oiga*] (Smilde, 2004: 84). He repeatedly emphasised the linkages between revolution and Christianity, likening the revolution to an eschatological shift occurring at the dawn of a new century. As Pedro Zúquete (2008) argues, this discourse went beyond secular populism and into the realms of a 'political religion'. It offered, says Zúquete, 'a comprehensive view of the world; it claims to have the answers for ultimate questions, such as the purpose of life; and it aims to shape and purify the collective consciousness, thus bringing about a new society and a new humanity here on earth' (Zúquete, 2008: 96). Chávez's deployment of theological language was clearly designed to strike a chord with a religious population (see Smilde, 2004, 2007). But it also echoed Guevara's contention that individuals needed to transform themselves morally in order for a new society to be built. Imploring the creation of 'a new man, a new society, a new ethics' (Zúquete, 2008: 114), Chávez became an exemplar for the revolution and its desired utopia, providing a model of duty and sacrifice that *chavista* activists seek to emulate.

## Activist Trajectories in El Camoruco

When I first arrived in El Camoruco, a self-built *barrio* of around 4000 inhabitants located in Valencia's poor south, local *chavista* activists were busying themselves with the implementation of the government's recent launch of neighbourhood councils and regional communes. While some of these individuals had only become politically active since the emergence of Chávez, others had been involved in neighbourhood organising for many years, having cut their teeth in the community's neighbourhood association (*asociación de vecinos*, AV), which mobilised successfully for material improvements to the *barrio* during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Most of these individuals from the AV went on to become central actors in pro-Chávez bodies such as the *Círculos Bolivarianos* (CBs, Bolivarian Circles) and Electoral Battle Units (*Unidades de Batalla Electoral*, UBEs), which campaigned in support of Chávez during the 1998 and 2006 elections and 2004 recall referendum. When the neighbourhood council initiative was launched in 2006, the old neighbourhood association was replaced with four new communal councils (*consejos comunales*, CCs). In these bodies, long-standing activists were

joined by newer recruits, many of whom were elected to committee positions in the CCs. As the government rolled out its new social missions from 2003 onwards, a small number of activists became teachers and volunteers, while others found work as functionaries in the local municipality, which fell under *chavista* control after local elections in late 2008.

The vast majority of *chavistas* in El Camorcuo self-identified as religious. Most adhered to a kind of popular Catholicism (see Salas, 1987), with church attendance varying according to different individuals. Some were involved in cults of spirit possession alongside their Catholicism (see Briceño, 1970; Martín, 1983; Salas, 1987; Taussig, 1997; Placido, 1998; Ferrándiz, 2004), while others were converts to Evangelicalism or Pentecostalism, echoing a trend that has become common across Latin America (Stoll, 1990; Smilde, 2007). Although these different strands of Christianity were effectively competing for people's devotion in religious terms, most *chavistas* in El Camorcuo seemed to regard the shared emphasis on cultivating oneself as a moral actor as eclipsing the differences in religious doctrine. Indeed, many talked proudly about their ability to incorporate people of different denominations within their political organisations.

Rafael and Yulmi, whose home I lived in for fifteen months between 2009 and 2010, both came from families with strong Catholic mothers at the heart of the household. They described how the values they were taught at home played a central role in their political *formación*. As teenagers, the couple met one another through the Young Catholic Workers (Juventud Obrera Católica), known locally as *La Joc*, which ran outreach programmes for young people in many of the poorest parts of Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s. Grounded in the teachings of liberation theology, *La Joc* preached the Gospel as a call to end poverty, fight social injustice and democratise religious leadership (see Gutiérrez, 1974; Lancaster, 1988; Levine, 1992; Burdick, 1993; Montoya, 1995). As Rafael explained, the group's radical interpretation of Catholicism had a profound impact. He recounted how the local pastor from the group had inspired with his earthy spirituality and respect for the poor.

He was very close to God and to us, the poor. He was religious, and it was like he transmitted a message from God, but it was a message for the people. He was different from other Fathers. He was warm, and all his work was about *muchachos* [young people]. He was like us – he played football, he went to the cinema and he said rude things like *coño e' madre* [a common Venezuelan curse].

*La Joc's* efforts to develop class consciousness and empower young people radicalised Rafael and Yulmi, the group's focus on popular participation, social engagement and community-mindedness fostering values and techniques of community leadership that the couple were still using when I carried out fieldwork. As Yulmi recalled, 'What we learned in *La Joc* were certain values. It was about solidarity, about finding to solutions to problems and working together'.

Other local activists associated the election of Chávez with periods of personal upheaval and transformation. Often, the decision to become an activist had occurred at moments that were retrospectively regarded as personal ruptures. Ernesto, another Catholic, described how he had identified with socialism since his teens, when he heard the music of the revolutionary folk singer Ali Primera for the first time. But through the course of his working life he felt he had lost his way and become greedy and selfish. He explained how he had owned a successful business before the emergence of the former president:

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

Since this revelation, Ernesto had become one of the most active *chavistas* in the community. Describing his previous relationship with money, women and consumption as a kind of false consciousness, he was now concerned with cultivating a different set of values in the *barrio's* young population. He understood his own experiences with materialism as a lesson he could impart to others, and often stressed the value of making sacrifices for the collective through voluntary community work. As he stressed to one neighbour during a community meeting, 'this isn't my *job*. My *job* is with a private company. I do *this* voluntarily'. Such sentiments evoked the equation between individualism and sin often found in the moral pronouncements of liberation theology. As Roger Lancaster (1988) describes in his study of Sandinismo in Nicaragua, 'revolution augurs the re-establishment of the traditional image of social order – real or mythical – lost when sin divided the community and capitalism stratified the society' (Lancaster, 1988: 85).

But it was not only Catholic *chavistas* who understood their political activism in spiritual terms. Miguel was an Evangelical who separated from his wife and returned to Valencia from the Andean city of Mérida around the time of Chávez's election. He too had identified with socialism from a young age, and found himself campaigning for the government as he attempted to rebuild his life in Valencia:

When Chávez came to power, I was already a socialist. I became a socialist when I was 20, 21 years old. I was living with friends and at that time we shared everything: soap, toothpaste, talcum powder, sometimes clothes! So what I learned was the importance of sharing with others. Then, when I discovered Christianity, I learned to treat everyone as equals, that no-one is better than anyone else. So when the revolution began, I was already ready for it.

Miguel suggested that he had been prepared for revolutionary activity thanks to his grounding in both socialism and Christianity. Importantly, he felt these were both active processes of self-making that he had already undertaken, giving him a strong belief in his capacity to be a good revolutionary. His emphasis on sharing and equality pointed to a socialism grounded in altruism and Christian decency, underlining the desire for a retrieval of what he perceived to be core values: self-sacrifice, community-mindedness and kindness.

One individual who began to consider herself a socialist after the arrival of Chávez was Rosa, who had worked as a manager in a private company for some twenty years before retiring to focus on community and political work a few years before I arrived in El Camoruco. She described how she had undergone a transformation when Chávez arrived, undertaking a reassessment of her core values as she was gradually drawn to political work:

Before, I was a capitalist, an individualist. I had the good job at the private company, the good car: all that. I was only interested in my make-up and private schools for my girls. I had a nice car and was totally individualistic. I

wasn't against [the left], but I didn't involve myself. I'd always been involved in community things, but not in a political way.

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

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

Rosa's observation that the shift in her attire symbolised a move to a different kind of subjectivity echoed Judith Butler (1995: 14), who argues that subject formation is a process of 'submission as mastery' in which individuals create themselves as political subjects by submitting to an ideological doctrine and mastering its content through ritualised practice. This account of a processual, ritualised construction of a new self also evokes Foucault's (1986, 1988) formulation of 'technologies of the self', which has often provided a theoretical framework for anthropological work on religious subjectivity (Laidlaw, 2002; Cook, 2010; Mahmood, 2012). Yet as Sian Lazar (2013) notes, Foucaultian approaches have tended to focus on the practical dialogue between the individual subject and their respective doctrine, rather than on the ways in which subject formation might occur collectively (Lazar, 2013: 115). In line with this observation, Rosa's case highlights the relational and collectivist nature of self-making for *chavistas*.

These cases also underline the unpredictability of the ways in which religious faith and political ideology can interlock. Building on Max Weber's (1976) seminal work on the connections between Protestantism and the spread of capitalism, recent studies have shown that religious doctrines of various hues can both oil the wheels of capitalist expansion (Kendall, 1996; Freeman, 2012; Muehlebach, 2013) and engender radical critique and resistance (Taussig, 1980; Nash, 1993; Ong, 2010). As Lazar (2008) notes in her study of indigenous trade unionists in Bolivia, while it is often assumed that the Evangelical focus on the individual soul means it necessarily promotes individualism, in practice the reality is far more complex. Although Evangelicals regard spiritual experience as a private affair, they also place great emphasis on the construction of community. As she argues, 'their concept of self is prior to the collectivity and shaped by it, rather than created in dialectical relation to other selves within that collectivity' (Lazar, 2008: 170). For *chavistas* in El Camoruco, the different approaches that Catholics and Evangelicals took to their religious beliefs did not preclude a shared understanding of revolution as a process of spiritual work on the self. What is particularly striking in the accounts above is that activists who adhered to opposing Christian doctrines reached very similar conclusions about the need to serve the community, sacrifice oneself and forego individual desires. Revolution, as a utopian vision that promises transcendence, imbues activist experiences of political rebirth with a heightened ethical significance grounded in a sense of duty towards the collective.



## Asceticism and Doubt

During my research period, I often accompanied Miguel on his visits to nearby communities, where he would remind new activists that becoming a revolutionary required an ongoing commitment to guarding oneself against capitalist attitudes and behaviours. In one speech he made to community activists who were organising a new neighbourhood council, he produced an empty plastic bottle, which he then filled with water and held in front of him. 'This is what you can have', he told those gathered as he gestured at the water. 'Your life full of goodness. And if you fill yourselves with goodness and love, what comes out? Goodness and love. And you give that to others'. He then paused, before pouring the water on the floor and holding the empty bottle in front of him again. 'Now, here's the other bottle. If you leave yourself open to the world without the right *formación*, what will fill up inside of you? All the vices, the badness, the negativity from the world outside. And what will come out, what will you give to others? That same badness, that dirty water'.

Such statements epitomised the concerns that *chavistas* had about the capacity of themselves and their comrades to rid themselves of what Alpa Shah terms 'the muck of the past' (Shah, 2014: 347). A common trend among *chavistas* in El Camoruco was that activists who had been politically active for some time often expressed doubts about the commitment or authenticity of newer comrades. The following exchange, which took place before a large public meeting of *chavistas*, exemplified such uncertainties. Its chief protagonist was a young man named Jaime, who was a recent graduate of Valencia's military academy:

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

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

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

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

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

In this instance, Jaime embarrassed himself by attempting to establish criteria for ascertaining who a 'real' revolutionary was, only to fail his own credibility test. The second man, an older activist, was able to assert his own authority with a subtle put-down that provided a quiet warning concerning denigrating talk about others. Yet beyond the verbal sparring that was taking place, the exchange showed how demands to become particular kinds of revolutionary subjects can produce a culture of doubt and suspicion. Cultivating oneself as a revolutionary is a complex and challenging process in which attempts to mimic the discursive style of an 'authentic' revolutionary can leave one open to mockery or chastisement.

## To Fill Yourself with Goodness

In light of such doubts, long-standing activists such as Rafael and Yulmi positioned themselves as guardians within the local *chavista* milieu, assessing the relative merits of new activists and categorising them according to their political and moral credentials. Yulmi described the complexities they encountered in this process:

In many ways this is a beautiful community, but there are a lot of internal conflicts. It's a problem with the 'chavistas'. We have *chavistas*, low *chavistas*, medium *chavistas*, high *chavistas* and 'light' *chavistas* – and us, the revolutionaries, of whom there are very few. The problem is that many of these *chavistas* don't have the ideological orientation to help the revolution [...] There are too many people who enter without understanding things, who only want things for themselves. These people don't have the *formación*.

Concerns such as these underlined a paradoxical problem for established community leaders. On the one hand, they were eager to politicise more people and strengthen their community's ability to be a political force, which entailed bringing new individuals into the fold. But on the other hand, they worried about the capacity of new converts to achieve what they regarded as the necessary ideological formation. This meant showing a lasting commitment to the revolution by regularly attending meetings and social events, mobilising others and being present in moments of need.

As well as being suspicious of others, activists also expressed concerns about the extent to which they could trust themselves to live up to the required moral standards for revolutionaries. 'It's really tough [*arrecho*]', Rafael told me on one occasion. 'For years we were injected with all these negative values [*antivalores*]: selfishness, machismo, consumerism ... and they don't just go away because we want them to. We have to have real cultural change if we want to build a new civilisation'. For Rafael, a successful local leader who was gradually climbing the ladder in the local PSUV hierarchy, the utopianism expressed in such statements clashed with material temptations that provoked ethical dilemmas. On one occasion, he chose to turn down a free Blackberry mobile phone that the local mayor offered him in return for a project he was undertaking. He recognised the usefulness of having a new phone, and was particularly attracted to the year's free credit that would come with it, but was quite clear about why he could not accept it:

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

For Rafael, the Blackberry represented a visible excess or advantage that was not shared by his fellow activists and *barrio* residents – a moral impossibility, as he saw it, for someone with his standing in the community. As a revolutionary leader whose political career and public reputation relied on being a boy from the neighbourhood (*chamo del barrio*), he could not be seen to be elevating himself above his comrades or friends. There was thus a fine line for activists to tread, in which relatively successful individuals must carefully regulate their consumption habits in order to retain revolutionary credibility through 'performances' of morality (Zigon, 2008: 263).

By sacrificing his own pleasure and opportunities for material gain, Rafael took himself closer to Guevara's model New Man. His fears about his capacity to be a good revolutionary thus resulted in a shift in practice as he sought to live up to a utopian ideal; self-doubt acted as a tool for moral action. As Mathijs Pelkmans (2013) argues, doubt is inherently intertwined with belief, often producing agency through a subject's desire to erase or overcome uncertainty. Conviction can emerge from a perceived incompleteness within a given belief or ideology, or it can be dialogically produced through interactions with 'non-believers' (Pelkmans 2012: 29). For an individual like Rafael, the ability to turn doubts into a productive action was critical to his success as a political leader.

## Grappling with the Abstract

While the Bolivarian government in Venezuela made major strides away from the neoliberal model that preceded it, and while it also took significant steps forward in terms of poverty reduction, social welfare, local healthcare provision, participatory governance and racial equality, it is also true that the country's underlying political economy remains largely unchanged. As in the boom years of the 1970s and the crisis years of the 1980s and 1990s, Venezuela is still heavily dependent on the export of petroleum to the global marketplace. It also struggles to diversify its economy due to an overvalued currency that makes many imports significantly cheaper than domestically produced goods. According to Nicolas Grinberg (2010), although the accumulation of ground rents from petroleum exports enables the government to redistribute some wealth among the population, a large portion of these rents is still appropriated by both domestic and foreign elites (Grinberg, 2010: 194). Thomas Purcell (2013) concludes similarly, suggesting that the model of petro-redistribution adopted by *chavismo* inhibits the development of a socialist economy because it reproduces a form of rentier capital accumulation that cannot ultimately compete with the existing power of national capitalism (Purcell, 2013: 149, 163). Comparable trends are visible across the recent 'leftwards turn' in Latin America, in which many governments have undertaken significant progressive reforms while at the same time remaining beholden to the demands and logics of global commodity markets (Goodale and Postero, 2013: 15).

At the level of everyday experience, it is often difficult for individuals to connect these abstract macro forces to the frustrations they feel with the revolution. For example, when problems such as the slow completion of public works by state institutions emerge, it is often individual conduct that is blamed. Similarly, a regular source of complaint among activists is low attendance at political meetings. When organisers do not achieve the numbers they hope for, murmurings soon begin about selfishness, false revolutionaries and the need to counter self-interested tendencies. The talk then turns to the need for more education and better ideological training. But these concerns overlook the fact that, for many working-class *barrio* residents, everyday life is bound up with burdens that make sustained political engagement highly challenging. Most people are not in secure employment, and many balance several precarious jobs – seasonal construction work, taxi-driving, part-time retail work, street vending – with caring for children and the elderly. Far from being a sign of individualism, such struggles stem from people's existing obligations and their embeddedness within vital networks of care and mutual dependency.

The precarious nature of life in Venezuela's *barrios* can ultimately be traced to the country's dependent position in the global economy and the embedded forms of

exploitation that this entails. Yet since it is not immediately obvious how everyday struggles connect to the complexities of Venezuela's position in the global economy, activists often return to notions of selfishness and individualism in their search for answers. Indeed, it is often the very existence of oil wealth that is seen to be a corrupting force. As Rafael explained on one occasion:

This is a problem we've got here, and it's a problem connected to the huge wealth this country has. If you give all the money to institutions you make them too powerful. And then people expect them to do everything. You try and get people, for example, to clean their own streets and they say, 'No, City Hall [la Alcaldía] should be doing that'. If you don't pay people here, they won't do anything.

Such comments show how attention to everyday conduct offers activists an apparent solution to problems that often seem distant and abstract. Infrastructural or operational weaknesses can be reinterpreted as a need for further effort on the part of individuals. But while these understandings clearly generate moral agency, they also run a risk: by focusing so much energy on individual conduct, activists can underestimate the broader asymmetries of power in which their political projects are situated. As Rosario Montoya's (2007) study of Sandinismo shows, revolutionary socialist projects have a tendency to rely on discourses that demand 'moral exemplarity' (Anagnost, 1997: 115) in their desire for a radical break with the past. Individuals undertake such projects of self-making precisely because notions of change and renewal are attractive, offering the chance for personal redemption alongside a number of more specific political demands. Yet the price for accepting this challenge is that subjects must wrestle with their own perceived capacity to live up to these ideals. Montoya observes that a multiplicity of macro-structural problems in such movements can be reduced to a 'matter of consciousness' (Montoya, 2007: 80) for each individual to contend with.

For *chavistas* in El Camoruco, the danger that arguably lurks amid efforts to create revolutionary selves is that if subjectivity is the predominant sphere in which political critique takes place, it can downplay attention to the larger political and economic forces that may constrain utopian visions far more than the conduct of one's comrades or neighbours. When translated into a message about social transformation, the repeated claim that self-making is the solution to any issue can work to elide broader structural challenges. As a result, grassroots activists seeking to better themselves as moral actors risk taking the blame for problems that were never ultimately of their making.

## Conclusion

The contemporary situation in Venezuela offers some valuable insights into the ways in which utopian visions are discursively cultivated and practically crafted in everyday life. I have argued that the Bolivarian Revolution appeals to many working-class Venezuelans not only for its emphasis on social justice and equality, but also because it provides a sense of moral and spiritual duty that is profoundly transformative at the level of subjectivity. By making radical transformations tangible and immediate, revolutionary self-making allows individuals to connect everyday protagonism to a broader political theology that offers redemption and ethical meaning.

Yet if there is a danger that characterises a highly moralised attention to the consciousness and conduct of subjects, it is that a dogged focus on self-making means that activists

may overlook broader power asymmetries that constrain their pursuit of utopian change. The predominant attention to the formation of particular kinds of subjects potentially constructs an 'ontological firewall' (Holbraad, 2014: 7) that shields the powerful from challenges by continually deflecting critiques back to the self. In their discussion of post-neoliberalism in Latin America, Goodale and Postero assert that: 'as new models of subject making that are based in an ethics of social responsibility are promoted, they come into conflict with subjectivities associated with broader – and earlier – regimes of exclusion' (2013: 16). But the problem for contemporary *chavista* activists may be less that they really are 'neoliberal subjects' in need of salvation, and rather more the *perception* that they are. The flipside to the moral agency produced through revolutionary self-making is that activists may repeatedly discipline themselves and their comrades for problems that are not ultimately of their making.

These findings suggest that more attention should be paid to the ways in which utopian movements produce transformative work on the self in their efforts to build new societies. For *chavista* activists, political participation constitutes far more than allegiance to a political party; it is a long-term process of self-making and a tool for enacting moral agency. Utopias, then, are not only to be found in the grand transformations that befall nation-states, but also in the intricate narratives of individuals seeking to make better and more meaningful lives for themselves.

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