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Introduction

The Legacy of Hugo Chávez

by

Daniel Hellinger and Anthony Petros Spanakos

In 1992, Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez failed to replace the beleaguered government of President Carlos Andrés Pérez but succeeded in capturing the hearts and imaginations of a broad swath of the Venezuelan population frustrated by a decade of economic crisis, shifts in the social contract, weakened institutionalized modes of representation, and the consequences of a neoliberal structural adjustment program. *El pueblo* (the people) found hope in the temerity of the coup attempt and Chávez's famous "*por ahora*" (for now).

Six years later, as a candidate for the presidency, Chávez won his first of four presidential elections. Upon coming to power, he called for the drafting of a new constitution as part of a process of radical political, economic, and social change in Venezuela. Rather than establish a new consensus, the postconstitutional period introduced half a decade of polarized politics consisting of a coup attempt, an extended oil-company lockout, and a recall referendum. Confrontations with opposition groups, particularly the failed coup and the government's successful performance in the recall referendum, allowed Chávez to consolidate leadership within the new structures of political power. After his landslide reelection in 2006, he tried to give greater shape both at home and abroad to the transformations he was heralding under the name of "twenty-first-century socialism."

Upon his death in March 2013, Chávez left behind a significant but highly contested legacy. It could hardly be any other way in polarized Venezuela. Even in the scholarly arena, discussion of Chávez too often paints him in hagiographic or villainous Manichean terms. Not surprisingly, his legacy is being contested and constructed by those who live on in Venezuela, not least by Nicolás Maduro, his designated successor, who was elected president in 2013, officials of the Chavista Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (United Socialist Party of Venezuela—PSUV), and the many Bolivarian activists within Venezuela who claim that "we are all Chávez now" [see Michelutti in this issue]. For his part, President Maduro has struggled to maintain his political footing as leader of the diverse coalition of pro-Chávez groups and to resist pressures from different groupings within the opposition. Even without the drastic decline in global oil prices, maneuvering within such a political context would have been difficult for any successor. The vulnerability of the Maduro government was on display following massive protests in 2014 and then with the opposition's achievement

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of a supermajority in the National Assembly elections of 2015. It is not just a matter of seats lost; the governing PSUV was trounced in the urban barrios from which residents had rushed down to help save Chávez from the coup of April 11, 2002. On the one hand, the result could be interpreted as a *voto castigo* (punishment vote), not as a call for dismantlement of the Bolivarian project. On the other hand, the 20 percent swing away from the PSUV toward the opposition required voters to measure defense of Bolivarian programs against frustration over economic decline and corruption. As with any election, trying to read the message of voters is fraught with difficulty. Neither side can know with certainty from the vote whether most Venezuelans would be satisfied merely with better governance or whether they want a more decisive change of direction.

The sweeping victory of the opposition in the Assembly elections left Maduro even more deeply wounded, possibly mortally. Even on the left one finds discussion of the possibility, even the desirability, of a new government. Many of the activists who supported Chávez during his presidencies believe that they, not Maduro, are his successors. There is a sense among them that they are the authentic voice and true power behind the Bolivarian movement: the informants of Cristóbal Valencia (2015) and George Ciccariello-Maher (2013) say “We are the state” and “We created Chávez.” Chavista activists at the grassroots are engaged in struggles not only with opposition protesters but also with the politicians of the PSUV and with government bureaucrats that they see as unresponsive to community priorities (see Azzellini and Hetland in this issue).

The essays in this issue do not aim at a conjunctural pronouncement about Chávez or Chavismo. Rather, they give voice to different scholars who try to make sense of what has happened in Venezuela and Latin America in recent years with a longer-term focus. We have deliberately encouraged submissions from scholars from diverse disciplines and perspectives in an attempt to evaluate the Chávez legacy dispassionately, to the extent that this is possible. The contributions herein contribute to a better understanding of the possibilities and limits not only of Bolivarianism in Venezuela but of the political projects of the Pink Tide, radical democracy, and their various initiatives for the alternative economic integration and hemispheric diplomacy that Chávez advocated.

Although there is some overlap in the subjects addressed in these articles, they have been divided into five themed sections: (1) overall perspectives on the Chávez legacy in relation to politics, history, and neoliberalism, (2) economic visions and innovations emerging from actors during the Chávez years, (3) political innovations in Bolivarian Venezuela, (4) polarization and media views of Chávez, and (5) person, legacy, and institutionalization.

POLITICAL HISTORY AND NEOLIBERALISM?

As with so many elements of the legacy of Hugo Chávez, his political legacy will depend not necessarily on his record but on the way others interpret and evaluate that record. Consider two of the most important enemies articulated in Chavista rhetoric: political parties as incapable substitutes for the agency of the people (often characterized as *partidocracia* or partyarchy) and “savage” neoliberalism.

In his rise to power, Chávez certainly appealed to antiparty sentiment. He articulated the widespread discontent of Venezuelans with the Punto Fijo system, a mostly two-party system in which political identity was party membership: when one's party held the presidency, one was *oficialista* (pro-government), and when the other party was in power one became *oposición* (opposition). Prior to Chávez's election as president in 1998, the Venezuelan electorate had already experienced a collapse in support for the two main political parties and was moving toward an incipient multiparty system, although the value of political parties remained in question. At first, it appeared that Chávez supported such a move, since he deliberately styled his Movimiento Quinta República (Fifth Republic Movement—MVR, with "V" as the Roman numeral five) as more of a movement than a party even as he entered into coalition with a range of political parties that had been marginal actors during much of the Punto Fijo period. Voting since 1998 has, however, been surprisingly stable and coalesced into two basic voting blocs identified as Chavista/government and opposition. Perhaps, then, very little has changed structurally; alternatively, one could argue that Chávez led a realignment in the party system, which largely reconstituted itself as a two-plus system after the collapse of Punto Fijo (Dietz and Myers, 2007; Morgan, 2012; Seawright, 2012). Moreover, the coalescence of supporters into a consistent bloc was not (entirely) accidental but became Chávez's stated preference. In other words, he who had been antiparty and anti-party-system sought to create a new party. *Plus ça change?*

Questions about just how much things have really changed in Venezuela revolve around the serious economic pressures accelerated by the precipitous decline of oil prices, beginning in mid-2014. Oil prices fell from approximately US\$120 per barrel in mid-2014 to US\$30 at the end of 2015. The ensuing period saw acceleration of the gap between official and black market exchange rates, reduction in spending (including on international revolutionary projects where Venezuela once took leadership positions), and high levels of inflation, all of which posed challenges to Bolivarian economics (which preceded Maduro) and echoed the heterodox policies of earlier eras (e.g., the 1980s). The country's economy remains critically dependent upon oil revenues (see Hellinger, Kornbliht and Dachevsky, and Seabra in this issue) and today faces a crisis that resembles in some ways that at the end of the OPEC oil boom of 1973–1981. Both Chávez late in his presidency and Maduro borrowed heavily (especially from China) to fill the gap, leveraging future production and exports, not unlike the way that Presidents Carlos Andrés Pérez (1974–1978) and Luis Herrera Campíns (1979–1983) did, paving the way for the neoliberal era.

Has nothing changed? Certainly Chávez was always critical of neoliberal economics and moved more radically over time toward greater state involvement, management, and ownership in the economy. This was a corrective to what he saw as the "savagery" of neoliberalism, and he was the first Latin American president to move toward post-neoliberal politics. But his own policies relative to neoliberalism often been ambiguous. Now the collapse of commodity prices may augur a return to a politics of austerity, especially given the stunning electoral defeat of the PSUV in the 2015 elections. What, then, can be learned about post-neoliberal politics?

The essays in the first section of this issue take aim at these apparent puzzles. Gabriel Hetland addresses the first: How did Chavistas move from being anti-party to establishing a party seeking to consolidate electoral hegemony? He argues that Chávez's antipathy toward parties waned over time because of changes in the mode of confrontation chosen by the opposition and because of complaints (from within and without) that the MVR was too much of an "electoral" project with little meaning for grassroots groups. Chávez himself more than once displayed little confidence in its ability to mobilize supporters. From such complaints a brand-new party (the PSUV) was created and seemed to be on the verge of achieving hegemony in the period between 2004 and Chávez's death. (Obviously, the 2015 elections represent an important challenge to this trend.) Hetland traces this development and assesses the state of the PSUV immediately following the death of Chávez. These issues should not be underestimated, since one of the most persistent criticisms of contemporary Venezuelan politics focuses on its lack of institutionalization (Weyland, 2013; see Spanakos, 2015).

Given that he was the most vocal critic of neoliberalism and the first and arguably most radical voice within the Pink Tide, Hugo Chávez's ideas and policies offer fertile terrain for an investigation of the term "post-neoliberal." Spanakos and Pantoulas are clear that their investigation does not aim to be normative (Chávez *should* have done X, was *right* to do Y) or evaluative from a policy perspective (this was an *effective* form of addressing the problem of Z). Rather, they create a typology that pulls together the different aspects of post-neoliberalism exhibited by the Chávez governments. "Post-neoliberalism" refers to the following phenomena: policies that immediately follow neoliberalism and generally aim to correct some of its excesses or omissions; policies aimed at broadening citizen participation in politics and the market; policies aimed at creating a new political world; and, finally, the continuation of politics and policies associated with neoliberalism. The presence of and the overlap and contradiction between these characteristics of neoliberalism have contributed to the puzzles identifying Chávez's contributions in economics while also providing a framework for analyzing other post-neoliberal governments in the Americas. Thus, rather than thinking in terms of a radical left and a moderate left (Castañeda, 2006), scholars may think of how certain presidents, parties, and policies adhere to different forms of post-neoliberalism.

ECONOMIC VISIONS AND INNOVATIONS

Hugo Chávez would undoubtedly have liked to be remembered as having moved the idea of "twenty-first-century socialism" from the realm of academic theorizing (see especially Dieterich, 2006) to implementation through his own version of "sowing the oil." The latter phrase was popularized by the Venezuelan intellectual Arturo Uslar Pietri (1936). Following the death of the dictator Juan Vicente Gómez, Uslar Pietri emerged as a leading voice for the aspirations of the small but rapidly growing middle class and urban bourgeoisie, nurtured by the country's first oil boom (1922–1931). The key idea in Uslar Pietri's work was that, because the oil was exhaustible, it was essential for the

Venezuelan state to “sow” the income realized in a project of development. In those years, virtually all Venezuelan political economists were focused on capitalizing agriculture, a sector in severe crisis in the face of the twin threats of the global depression and the impact of the ever-strengthening bolivar, the national currency.

Over the next 70 years, Venezuela passed through various regimes (liberal reformist, populist democratic, populist dictatorship, social democratic), but all accepted Uslar Pietri’s assumption about the imminent disappearance of “the devil’s excrement” and the need to use oil revenues to capitalize economic development. This vision of economic development began to change in the late Punto Fijo era as executives of *Petróleos de Venezuela S.A. (PDVSA)*, the state oil company, sought to undo the restrictions in the organic law of 1975 that created the company and “reserved” to it all basic operations in oil. They moved into the political vacuum created by the twin economic and representation crises to seize oil policy from the state in order to advance the *apertura petrolera* (oil opening), a reopening of Venezuela’s oil reserves to foreign capital on terms more favorable than those of the pre-nationalization era. The executives sold the opening to the public and desperate politicians as necessary to convert PDVSA into an integrated transnational company that would be an engine of growth. The project’s nationalist critics, politically marginalized, saw the opening as a thinly disguised project to privatize PDVSA and to deepen the country’s dependency on foreign investment and technology. It is this nationalist perspective that informed Chávez’s oil policy and motivated the executives’ bold attempt to overthrow the Chávez government. But Hellinger (in this issue) argues that, as prices have fallen and the company today struggles to maintain production, one cannot rule out a return to opening policies, even under a Bolivarian government.

The verification that Venezuela’s proven reserves approximate 300 billion barrels, the most in the world (exceeding even those of Saudi Arabia), with perhaps another 600 billion yet to be verified, has put an end to the idea that Venezuelan oil will be exhausted any time soon. As for Uslar Pietri’s formula, Chávez and his successor through 2014 continued to “sow the oil,” taking advantage of the nation’s third major oil bonanza since 1922 (the second was the OPEC boom of the 1970s), which provided plenty of resources to capitalize its plans. But these plans were bolder, more controversial, and innovative. They are captured by the phrase “endogenous development,” an attempt not merely to foment growth but to forge an alternative to the verticalist system of highly centralized planning associated with the socialism of the twentieth century. The phrase has fallen into disuse in recent years, but there is still a need to evaluate the durability both of Chávez’s oil nationalism and of his attempt to attempt to “sow” the extraordinary profits (rents) in endogenous development. The latter assessment is especially important for drawing lessons about the future of twenty-first-century socialism.

There seems little doubt that since the death of Chávez and the decline of oil prices the Bolivarian government has deemphasized endogenous development in favor of more conventional development policies, such as “special economic zones” that prioritize production for market over support for experiments in worker democracy. The move in that direction was punctuated by the firing

of the planning minister, Jorge Giordani, a Marxist known for his simple lifestyle and support for more radical change. Giordani was forced from his post in 2014 and lost little time asserting that Maduro had abandoned the achievements of the Chávez era (see Fuentes, 2014; Giordani, 2014).

Taken together, the five articles in this section are less than optimistic about the durability of the Chávez legacy in economic experimentation and policy, even with regard to the reassertion of state sovereignty over oil policy. The articles by Hellinger and by Kornblihtt and Dachevsky emphasize the value of utilizing a Marxist approach to ground rent for an understanding of both oil policy and the development changes facing petrostates. The authors of these two articles pose uncomfortable issues for those who hold that unequal exchange lay at the heart of dependency and underdevelopment. In the 1990s the Venezuelan state had virtually retreated to the pre-World War II era in its relationship to oil companies. Hellinger's contribution demonstrates that Chávez's policies did not reverse the return of foreign capital to the Venezuelan subsoil but it did change the terms of foreign investment, maximizing capture of rents. At the same time, it left foreign capital with at least an average rate of profit. The main resistance to his natural resource nationalism came from within, from PDVSA.

Politically there is little doubt that if Chávez was to radically revise the generous terms offered foreign capital by the opening, he had to defeat the executives of PDVSA, a transnationalized elite that embraced the notion that it was truly a meritocracy. Chávez challenged their power by leading a revitalization of OPEC, insisting on genuine majority ownership of partnerships for the Venezuela state, and revising the fiscal framework (royalties and taxation). Hellinger argues that this important legacy is threatened today because, as in so many other areas, the new policy was not adequately institutionalized in the state. Some of the same factors that paved the way for the opening have reappeared: falling oil prices, increasing debt, slowly deteriorating productive capacity, overreliance on foreign technology and investment, public disillusionment with government, etc.

Kornblihtt and Dachevsky arrive at similar conclusions but also go deeply into the allocation of rents. While the Venezuelan left has identified corruption and the right profligate social spending as the cause of the economic crisis, these contributors argue that the overvaluation of the bolivar was the most important mechanism for channeling profits to foreign investors and the domestic bourgeoisie. The exchange rate, in contrast to actual spending by the government and PDVSA, has been *ex ante* the key to subsidizing capitalist sectors, a very serious challenge for any attempt at twenty-first-century socialism.

Dittmer's contribution on the Venezuelan experience with communal currencies—local currencies issued within community markets as part of an effort to create alternatives to an economy driven by the state oil company—adds to the skepticism. Dittmer finds that plans to increase Venezuela's role as a "major world energy power" cannot be reconciled with "building and promoting the ecosocialist productive economic model." He draws this conclusion after an examination of futile attempts to capitalize agricultural cooperatives/comunes that were intended to enter into exchange relations through a semibarter system consistent with the promotion of horizontal relations of production

and exchange. Ultimately, the system could not adapt to the need to interact with the conventional macro-economy, for example, paying for transportation of goods to other units of production. Dittmer found in his field research that all of the 14 initial barter systems based on communal currencies were stagnant or in decline.

Raphael Seabra, a Brazilian sociologist, is ultimately pessimistic about macro-level economic policies, even though he credits Chavista economic policy with successfully redistributing oil income. A key mechanism for this process has been funding of communal councils through special funds (one controlled by PDVSA, the other by the executive branch of government). The councils are grassroots neighborhood organizations in which the missions operate and are intended to carry projects and set priorities for spending independently of elected local officials. But Seabra (with Kornblihtt and Dachevsky) argues that “the redistributive policies continue indirectly fortifying the commercial and banking/financial fractions of the bourgeoisie.” Beyond this, Bolivarian policies have encouraged the emergence of a new fraction of the bourgeoisie very close to the government itself. He recognizes that at the same time the communal council movement has created a grassroots dynamic in conflict with this tendency, but he argues that Bolivarianism lacks a coherent vision of this dynamic that will lead to a transition to socialism. Innovations in the system of property and plans to aggregate communal councils into *comunes* are positive legacies of the Chávez era, but they are not accompanied by a well-articulated counterhegemonic project. Despite the continued existence, even expansion, of a parasitic bourgeoisie, the Bolivarian rhetoric of the Chávez era and the early Maduro era constantly refers to the consolidation of socialism, whereas there are many open questions and problems still to be resolved.

It may well be that the pessimistic tone of these articles is a result of the particular topics and perspectives of their authors. More optimistic viewpoints exist. Ellner (2014), for example, is confident about the capacity and willingness of the Chavista government to maintain its multiclass character and ideologically diverse base, and Frederic Mills (2015) still thinks that the economic and political institutions of endogenous development can learn, evolve, and succeed. And despite the drumbeat of polls echoing the dismal approval rating of the government, the evident economic problems, and the indications of some degree of disillusionment at the base, more than 3.2 million voters participated in the PSUV primaries of June 28, 2015. What all four of these articles suggest is that the construction of twenty-first-century socialism requires considerably more attention to how that project can be reconciled with the country’s incorporation into the global capitalist economy as a landlord state possessed of more hydrocarbon reserves than any other place on earth.

Azzellini’s study of workers’ councils and worker control gives perhaps the most reason for optimism about the future of horizontal and participatory economics. One reason for his more positive assessment can be found in his recounting of numerous cases in which councils were formed in reaction to inefficient and/or corrupt management. Workers involved in councils have assembled and exchanged experiences. While acknowledging some problems that, as in the case of the alternative currency movement, are rooted in the workers’ own inadequacies, it seems that the obstacles they have faced—not

only in the private sector but in state enterprises as well—have strengthened their resolve to persevere in the struggle for economic democracy. His article also reminds us that the “legacy” of Chávez cannot be understood strictly as a product of Chávez’s individual leadership. Without the encouragement of Chávez and his support for workers’ overcoming resistance to council formation, the movement might have been thwarted from the start. However, as with oil policy, the future of the workers’ councils is in doubt because of insufficient institutionalization (especially, lack of legislation) and because President Maduro, coming from a union background, seems less committed to the movement than was his predecessor.

POLITICAL INNOVATIONS

One of the most important laws passed during Chávez presidencies, particularly since 2005, is the 2006 law of the communal councils, which created a legal framework for urban and rural subparochial political spaces for the management of community activities. This has legalized existing structures and provided legal and financial support for the creation of a new spatial formation for participation. To be sure, it has been controversial. For many supporters of the government, it is both a validation of *poder popular* (people’s power) and a weapon to be aimed at local-government and/or bureaucratic intransigence. Chávez was famous for waving his little blue copy of the constitution to signal “We are here, and you cannot send us back home,” and activist accounts suggest a similar attitude toward the law of the communal councils (see Valencia, 2015). At the same time, there is concern that the communal councils have been partisanized—that even where the communal council has the support of its people and the central government, power dynamics and inefficiencies prevail (García-Guadilla, 2011).

Wilde’s ethnographic study of a working-class barrio in Valencia examines challenges facing communal councils. Rather than being unambiguous spaces of democracy, he posits they are better understood as “contested spaces.” Actors engage with the communal council and its *voceros* (spokespeople) in a variety of ways—ranging from indifference and suspicion not only to support but leadership and willingness to sacrifice to pursue the interests of others. Older women are especially involved in leadership roles, leading to a curious combination of empowerment and reproduction of gender inequality. The communal councils, he argues, demonstrate broader ambiguities and tensions within the Bolivarian project, where participation differs in intensity, amount, and sincerity (consider this assessment of the broad phenomenon against Hetland’s similar discussion of the diverse currents of the PSUV).

In addition to concerns about partisanship and the effectiveness and tenor of participation among members of the communal councils, a third critical issue is the interaction between the communal council and the state. This takes place primarily through the *promotores integrales* (holistic advocates). Strønen’s contribution examines these lower-level state employees, whose function is to assist the communal councils. They are representative of the

complexities suggested by Wilde in that they are proponents of political change, aim to facilitate the expression of the voice of communal councils, and serve communities in negotiations with state employees. This places them at ground zero for the contestation between radical and representative modes of democracy and the nexus of a new form of cultural politics. As does Wilde, Strønen finds that despite rhetoric and a climate of polarization that might incline toward simple dichotomies, the political struggles of these new actors and spaces are richly complicated.

Angosto's contribution addresses another simplistic dichotomy often found in analyses of Venezuela during the Chávez years—whether indigenous group inclusion should be considered bottom-up and independent of the state or co-optation by the state. For Angosto, indigenous politics in Venezuela is characterized by an impetus from the state, collaboration between state and indigenous groups, and sometimes indigenous challenges of government activities. Recognition of this complexity is important because indigenous people have had little success in getting government recognition for territorial autonomy, a critical issue for indigenous groups elsewhere, but have enjoyed considerable socioeconomic and political enfranchisement. Viewed in terms of a dichotomy between independence and co-optation, this may appear to be the latter, but Angosto insists that this is not the most appropriate way of understanding indigenous politics and, indeed, that “part of the legacy of Chávez's governments is the creation of synergies between party politics, state organs, and a large variety of popular actors.”

POLARIZATION AND MEDIA IMAGE

Polarization seems to be most clearly visible in representations of political identities and strategies in the media. Indeed, Chávez and Maduro have argued that polarization is created by, not simply reflected in or encouraged by the private media. Not surprisingly, then, Chavistas see the media not as having clear autonomous agency but as a proxy for “the oligarchs.” These accusations are made not only against the national private media (which may have reason to be opposed to a revolutionary government) but against the international media as well (see Lupien, 2013; Young, 2013). Such accusations, coupled with new laws and changes in licenses for television and radio, have led opposition groups to see the Chávez governments as restricting freedom of speech. Critics contend that the government has engineered sales of some major media. Globovisión, a right-wing cable news operation, has shifted program directors and noticeably shifted news coverage; the Capriles chain, the largest private media conglomerate in the country, was purchased by a British investment bank. A visit to the web sites of these media outlets shows, however, that they hardly become government mouthpieces. The two major newspapers of record in the country, *El Universal* and *El Nacional*, continued to feature stories and editorials sharply critical of the government, and all sorts of blogs and social media provided ample flows of both reflective commentary and vitriolic rhetoric (on both sides) as the country entered what promised to be a tumultuous 2016.

The divergent explanations of polarization may, as is often the case, be the consequence of different ideological and ethical positions—one more liberal, one more radical. Tackling the critical question of freedom of expression, Sapiezynska shows that there are actually two legacies in this regard, because there are two different audiences with different perspectives. She argues that the Chávez government promoted the rights to be “seen and heard,” a form of empowerment characteristic not of an antiliberal regime but of a “postliberal” one that strengthens the role of community media that had been severely weakened in the neoliberal era. She finds Chavista policy not inconsistent with liberal views of the media that promote the importance of ensuring a “multitude of voices,” but liberal critics usually fail to distinguish community media from state media, the former being an important legacy in encouraging pluralism (see Schiller, 2013).

While the media within Venezuela demonstrate liberal, postliberal, and in-between tendencies, the international media are more clearly liberal. Burges, Chodor, and Emerson examine the English-speaking media’s coverage of Chávez’s final electoral campaign in 2012. Their investigation begins with a sense of wonder: Why did readers of international newspapers expect that the 2012 presidential election would be closer than it was? These contributors attribute this to the distorted and biased coverage well diagnosed in the “propaganda model” of Herman and Chomsky (1988). Their article suggests that the classical liberal wall of separation between news and editorial desks is more porous than admitted, a finding that brings back the question of the differences between liberal and postliberal media identified by Sapiezynska.

PERSON, LEGACY, AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION

One of the chief struggles between liberal and radical visions is in the area of institutionalization (Spanakos, 2015), and even admirers of Hugo Chávez mostly regard his larger-than-life figure as having posed serious challenges to institutionalization. The problem for many liberal critics is the transformation of Chávez’s charisma into personalist modes of politics that strip away the constraining aspects of political institutions. Scholarly concerns about legitimacy, charisma, and populism find a chief source in Max Weber, who was clear that charisma, properly understood in a sense of mystical gifts (Zúquete, 2008), could be neither transferred nor institutionalized. Certainly, many critics of the Chávez governments warned of a collapse, an implosion, without him (Weyland, 2013). Guillermoprieto (2013) places this in bold terms, saying that he was “all,” suggesting that his absence leaves nothing, a vacuum. The essays in this issue, while critically assessing the Chávez experience, suggest otherwise. Those in this particular section problematize questions of personalism and charisma directly in somewhat unexpected places.

Lucia Michelutti’s article draws on the quasi-religious veneration of Hugo Chávez in Caracas and rural Venezuela as a way of meditating on the question of whether and how charisma can be “embodied” and whether it can “circulate.” Zúquete’s (2008) insistence on considering the charisma of Chávez in semireligious terms is validated in Michelutti’s concept of divine kinship,

which demonstrates that charisma creates kinship in a seemingly otherworldly manner among otherwise diverse peoples. This is not a classic Laclau (2005)-inspired populism in which a “people” is formed by groups who reduce their immediate and specific claims as they recognize that they share more proximate and abstract claims (Ferrero, 2015). It is not victimization but a sense of relation (in a familial-kin sense) that is what binds this new community. But does Chávez’s death transform Maduro into the new connection, or does it transmit Chávez’s charisma? If the latter, what does that mean for Maduro?

The departure of Chávez offers important moments to reflect on the ability of charisma to remain—the impact of the death of *the* person in a political system characterized by one very powerful personality. Even prior to the death of Chávez, pundits and scholars wondered about the possibility and viability of a Chavismo without Chávez; perhaps none of them have pondered the departure of María Egilda Castellano. Through an analytical profile of Castellano, vice minister of education (1999–2002) and rector of the Bolivarian University (2003–2004), Ivancheva examines “continuities and ruptures in the higher-education reform of the Bolivarian government,” the role of personalism, and the possibility of establishing a new revolutionary regime. In Castellano’s personal efforts—and the reactions within the Bolivarian University—Ivancheva sees a microcosm of the tensions of the Bolivarian project more broadly. Constant turnover while creating parallel institutions (in this case, to traditional universities) created challenges in establishing alternative types and methods for teaching and knowledge in a sustainable format. Ivancheva finds that these tensions have contributed to the Bolivarian University’s relegation to the status of a second-class higher-education alternative, providing both fertile ground for and stumbling blocks to a truly revolutionary program. More broadly, the experience reflects the ways in which personal charisma, ad-hoc institution building, and inconsistent staffing have opened spaces for innovation while also creating obstacles for long-term institutional development.

CONCLUSION

The collapse of petroleum prices since 2014 has made revitalizing the Bolivarian project more difficult. More generally, the Maduro era has seen greater challenges to the sustainability of the various projects associated with the period since 1999 in Venezuela. How much the system is vulnerable is an open question; the new political and economic system may be more institutionalized than expected (Spanakos, 2015). Not only does the political future of President Maduro seem in doubt at this writing, but so too does the hegemony of the PSUV. Just nine years after Chávez won the 2006 presidential election in a landslide, on December 6, 2015, the opposition coalition won a supermajority in the National Assembly, giving it wide-ranging formal powers. Depending on how conflict over three seats is resolved, the opposition may have the ability to call a constituent assembly, remove Supreme Court justices, and initiate a recall referendum against Maduro. The electoral results at the very least demonstrate that the electoral arena has become far more competitive and the

Maduro government will find the path to twenty-first-century socialism more difficult.

Whatever the case, the Chávez and post-Chávez governments witnessed and fomented a phenomenal amount of political experimentation, much of it centered round the figure, ideas, and policies of Hugo Chávez. This journal issue is necessarily an incomplete assessment of the Chávez legacy; there are many critical areas that have not received attention, and there are many other voices pronouncing on the issues covered herein. Given that Chávez constantly invoked history, including his and the people's place within it—a practice followed, with different lenses and details, by supporters, opposition, and the understudied *ní-nís* (neither government nor opposition)—it is not surprising that a collection on the legacy of Chávez should conclude by noting that that legacy is plural, dependent on whom one asks, what type of questions one asks, and what analytical lenses frame them. We do not pretend to have included all voices and insist that the current analysis—even with scholarly and temporal distance—remains inconclusive. These are assessments *por ahora*.

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