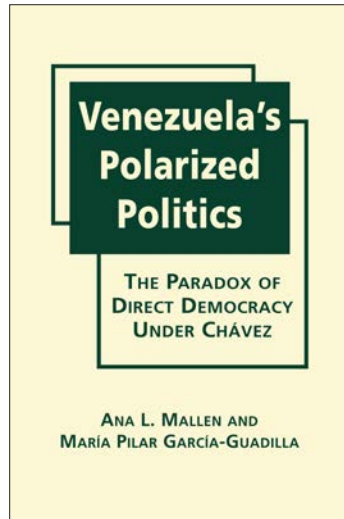# Venezuela's Polarized Politics: The Paradox of Direct Democracy Under Chavez

Ana L. Mallen and
María Pilar García-Guadilla

FIRST**FORUM**PRESS

Contents

1

Polarization and Democracy in Venezuela

Ask Venezuelans to explain the violence among ordinary citizens that took place in 2002 and 2003 and you will get multiple answers. Many speak of the conflict between supporters and detractors of Hugo Chávez as the result of a class struggle between the haves and have-nots. Others define it as an ideological struggle. Depending on their political persuasion, Venezuelans might characterize the conflict as a struggle between the people and their democratically elected government, or an oligarchy reacting to the loss of its power. Or they might explain the violence as a democratic society defending itself against an authoritarian regime. Frequently, the conflict is explained as the inevitable result of an elected demagogue who exacerbates class differences, stirs up historical resentments, and shapes reality to justify his lust for power.

In the years we have spent studying the causes and effects of polarization during the Venezuelan Bolivarian Revolution, we have found (and promoted) three recurrent explanations that account for the intense animosity that characterized relationships between ordinary citizens. The first and most popular explanation, advanced by academics aligned with the Opposition,[1] alleges that the antagonism between citizens is directly related to Hugo Chávez's divisive rhetoric (Molero de Cabeza 2002, Madriz 2000, Tarre 2005, Bolivar 2008, Castañeda and Morales 2008). On this account, Chávez is understood to have discursively manipulated divisions along class (and racial) lines in an attempt to amass greater power—by appealing to the poor, and explaining their extreme poverty as the result of the greed and avarice of the elite and the middle-class. According to critics, evidence of this strategy can be found in the "aggressive and oftentimes violence [sic] of his texts, as well as the constant appeal to irony and [the] disqualification of his adversaries" (Chumaceiro Arreaza 2003, 25). In

essence, this view posits that President Chávez's rhetoric incited class warfare, leading critics to assert, "it seems a commonsense truth that President Chávez leads a movement founded on class hatred…to the point that the country seems submerged in a state of confrontations between unknown civilians in the twenty-first century" (Madriz 2000, 70).[2]

A second explanation, more popular among supporters of the regime, posits that Chávez's rhetoric and public policies, focused on the historical exclusion of Venezuela's underclass, simply shed light on the country's inequalities. In this version, the divisions between the rich and the poor in Venezuela predate the conflict. In his exposition of his motives for aligning with the Bolivarian government, Venezuelan architect and poet Farruco Sesto articulates this position.

> There was an important sector of Venezuelan society, a great part of the middle class…that lived in Venezuela as if in a private club. Sheltered in their particular habitat by impassable walls, even if they were imaginary, with all luxuries at their disposal. They refused to admit the reality that wreaked havoc outside those walls…Misery, ignorance, desperation, [and] abandonment, spread out beyond the limits of the club. But within [the walls] that sector of the middle-class, [either] blinded or pretending not to know, enjoyed a foolish private paradise. Sheer stupidity! For one sphere and another, both parts of a single social system, were not disconnected but were strongly related. The easy riches on one side had to do with the poverty on the other. The supposed civility of those that wielded power, information and resources had to do with the calamity of the majority. Two countries coincided in time and space, but one did not want to know about the other, it did not need it emotionally and pretended it didn't exist (Sesto 2006, 9–10).

Chávez himself has claimed that "the polarization between the rich and the poor was created by capitalism and neoliberalism, not by Chávez" (cited in Oppenheimer 2005, 262).[3] Polarization, once a latent feature of Venezuelan life, manifested itself in the conflict.

A third explanation points to the exacerbation of class cleavages suffered by the Venezuelan republic in the 1980s as the source of the conflict (García-Guadilla 2003 and 2007, Ellner 2003). Generally linking Chávez's Bolivarian regime to Latin American populism, the argument recognizes the socio-economic conditions underlying the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998. This explanation understands the election of Chávez as the culmination of a series of political events catalyzed by the decline in oil revenue in the 1980s, which resulted in violent riots in 1989.[4] Political instability followed the economic

downturn: the legitimacy deficit suffered by Venezuela's democratic regime resulted in two coups d'état (Vilas 2001, Weyland 2002, Roberts 2003 and 2006, Ellner 2004, Arenas and Calcaño 2006, Hawkins 2010).

While correct in their assertions, the arguments above cannot fully explain the thoroughgoing polarization of Venezuelan society under Hugo Chávez. There is no denying that in Venezuela, as in most of Latin America, there are metaphorical and literal walls that divide the rich and the poor, distorting each group's perception of the collective wellbeing. Increased socio-economic inequalities in Venezuela resulted in the election of a new political figure whose charisma and discourse was reminiscent of twentieth century Latin American populist regimes. We cannot deny that the president's confrontational discourse, the enduring social inequalities, and the economic crisis of the 1980s contributed to polarization in the Bolivarian Republic of Hugo Chávez, but they do not explain how everyday Venezuelans were transformed into objects of polarization.

To delve further into our subject matter it is necessary to understand what is meant by polarization and an object of polarization. In this work, we define a public sphere[5] as polarized when all forms of public social interaction are interpreted through antagonistic political narratives.[6] The term objects of polarization refers to individuals or collectives who act in the public sphere in accordance with these antagonistic narratives.

The three explanations proffered above cannot fully account for a polarization so severe that the discourse and actions of individual citizens, and of organized communities, are reduced to their perceived political affiliation. A political discourse—even when disseminated through propaganda—cannot prevail as the dominant discourse in the public sphere if it does not gain currency among the general public. In addition, socio-economic inequality is not unique to Venezuela. In fact, vitriolic political discourse and pervasive socio-economic differences are found in much of Latin America and the developing world. While the increase in socio-economic inequality experienced by Venezuelans in the 1980s and 1990s certainly laid the foundation for the conflict, it would be erroneous to conclude that the polarization of Venezuelan society resulted solely from the exacerbation of class cleavages. As will be demonstrated, the antagonistic stance of pro- and anti-Chavistas did not result solely from socio-economic inequality. The gap between the rich and the poor cannot fully explain how the differences between these two groups became irreconcilable, or why each faction interpreted life under Chávez in such disparate ways.

Divisions along class, gender, and race, discursive antagonism, and social segregation can be found in virtually all societies. And barriers to

equality and justice can be found at equally alarming levels in other Latin American countries. If we equated polarization with inequality, we would find similar antagonistic forms of social interaction throughout the region and in different historical periods. Polarization in Venezuela describes a state of heightened tension between citizens, whose very subjectivity is subsumed under their perceived political affiliation.

How then are we to understand the transformation of subjects into objects of polarization in Venezuela?

It is difficult to grasp the magnitude of social forces at play in a polarization process, for they must occlude the diversity of subjects in a public sphere and transform multiple narratives and actors into simple polarities. After all, the public is the sphere of the commons, of the collective good. It is a point of intersection where individuals share both unique and common experiences (Arendt [1958] 1973). It is the space where we reveal ourselves to others as social beings (Goffman [1956] 1959). Societies are constituted by a plurality of actors that interact in different social milieu, undergo diverse experiences, and react to them in different ways. Sociologically speaking, polarization does not do away with the diversity inherent in a society, but it colors the way a society interprets social interactions, giving way to the transformation of subjects into polarized objects.

To explain the polarization of the public, it is important to understand the role of communication and how multiple publics unfix discourse to allow diverse interpretations of a message. Within political discourse, individuals speak with the direct intent to inform and persuade others. Political discourse attempts to provide a specific interpretation of events. However, despite the intent of the speaker to deliver a specific account of events, receptors of political discourse can and do interpret their message in multiple ways. As Habermas (2000) reminds us in his *Theory of Communicative Action*, interpretation is colored by individual experience. The plurality of experience within the human condition gives way to different narratives within the public sphere. Using these narratives, receivers decide on the validity of claims and structure their interpretations. Narratives, as Ricoeur (1986) reminds us, are specific interpretations of a discourse or event that exclude all other possible interpretations, thereby providing cogency to the complexity of social reality. While narratives may exclude alternate versions of social reality, they themselves are fixed neither in content nor in time. The result is a vibrant public sphere wherein diverse publics compete to disseminate and make hegemonic (however temporarily) their specific narrative of social reality.

Within a polarized public sphere, two antagonistic groups or publics compete to make their narrative of social reality hegemonic. While a multiplicity of narratives may coexist alongside the two dominant publics, the latter limit the possibility that any alternate narrative can prevail, or even appear, within the public sphere. As we will discuss in this work, in the case of Venezuela, the inability of any alternate public to compete with and prevail over each dominant antagonistic public of supporters and detractors of the Bolivarian Revolution transformed individuals into objects of polarization. Regardless of the plurality at the level of subjective experience, within the Venezuelan social imaginary, social actors and their public discourse were evaluated based on the narratives of each dominant public. This resulted in the understanding of individual traits as objects of polarization, that would be associated with a specific political affiliation and/or constituency.

Can the polarization process explain the violent confrontations between ordinary citizens in Venezuela? In her speech for the Center of Latin American Studies in 2002, at the height of the political conflict in Venezuela, prominent Venezuelan social psychologist Mireya Lozada explained that at the center of the polarization process was the understanding that the Other was in fact the enemy. In her speech, Lozada listed a number of characteristics of Venezuela's polarization that included: the prevalence of stereotyped perceptions; a strong emotional charge; a personal investment in the conflict; a breakdown in common sense; the forceful affiliation of diverse groups within a political faction; exclusion, intolerance and confrontation within groups or institutions; increased solidarity within groups as a result of confrontation with others; mutual negative perceptions; hostile or non-existent interactions; and latent or manifest conflict (Lozada 2002).

In other words, the process of polarization requires that societies replace pragmatic politics, calculated risks, rational behavior, tolerance and plurality with a Schmittian-styled existential struggle where "the specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy."[7] Within this conception of politics, the antithesis between friend and enemy can take multiple forms. An enemy may be perceived as "morally evil, aesthetically ugly or economically damaging"—but in each case the actions of "the enemy" must be judged to determine whether "he intends to negate his opponent's way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought in order to preserve one's own existence" (Schmitt [1927] 1996, 26–27).

We will argue that the election of Hugo Chávez ushered in a new understanding of politics in Venezuela, wherein the citizenry viewed the

survival of democracy, of their future, and of their way of life to be at stake in political victory or defeat.

Polarization in the Time of Hugo Chávez

When Hugo Chávez entered the public sphere as a presidential candidate in 1998, he promised to institutionalize a political demand for regime change that had emerged in the 1970s, and which called for increased citizen participation in the political decision-making process. Once elected, Chávez set out to transform Venezuela's representative democracy into a "participatory-protagonist democracy."[8] In 1999, he convened a National Constitutional Assembly to enshrine the rights of citizens to participate in politics without the mediation of their elected representatives. The Bolivarian Constitution of 1999 enacted a series of plebiscitary measures aimed at exerting citizen control over different branches of government, including the executive.[9] The changes in the institutional structures informally but effectively created a "popular" branch able to hold governments accountable to the will of the people.[10]

The transformation from a representative to a participatory democracy based on direct forms of citizen participation in the political sphere was the culmination of the decades-long effort by Venezuelan civil society to reform the country's democratic regime.

This ended decades of political stability. Venezuela's pre-Bolivarian democracy had been established after a civil-military coup ousted Dictator Marcos Pérez Jimenez from power in 1958. The foundation of that fledgling democracy was the *Pact of Punto Fijo*, a political agreement that safeguarded the interests of political parties, the economic elite, the military, and the church.[11] From this pact, meant to ensure peaceful coexistence, Venezuela's founding fathers established a constitutional government that implemented a democratic system based on the ideals of representative democracy, the separation of powers, and checks and balances. Financed through the royalties the state received from petroleum, and intended to maintain political stability between powerful economic interests in the country, the resulting democracy was characterized by a loyal opposition, and a corporatist system of economic redistribution (Neuhouser 1992, Romero 1997).

This carefully crafted pact between Venezuela's political elites eventually entered a state of crisis. By the mid-1970s, the *Puntofijista* regime suffered a breakdown as the price of oil worldwide decreased, hampering the ability of the Venezuelan state to continue its informal redistributive practices, and prompting organized citizens to demand the decentralization of state power. By the 1980s, the economic crisis, and

the political leadership's inability to understand civil society's demand for greater political power, further fueled the demand for reforms. In the 1980s and throughout the 1990s, local neighborhood organizations were joined by feminist organizations, human rights NGOs, business associations, popular organizations, and networks of liberal democratic groups seeking to *democratize* Venezuelan democracy (Gomez Calcaño 1987, García-Guadilla and Roa 1997, García-Guadilla and Silva 1999, García-Guadilla 2005).

While the demand for political reform, aimed at increasing government accountability and giving the citizenry a larger role in municipal decision-making, began primarily as a middle-class demand, the economic downturn pushed political reform to the forefront of the national agenda.

The economic downturn in the 1980s began with the dramatic devaluation of Venezuela's currency on Black Friday (February 18, 1983), and reached a low point in 1989 when president Carlos Andrés Pérez, under the tutelage of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, announced he would implement a series of neoliberal economic reforms aimed at limiting state control over the economy. Riots resulted provoking a decade of political turmoil that culminated with the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998.

On December 6, 1998, Hugo Chávez Frías was elected president of Venezuela with 56 percent of the popular vote. Capitalizing on his popularity, Chávez embarked on the task of transforming Venezuela's democracy. Consonant with the demands of civil society, he promoted citizen participation in the government's decision-making process. By employing concepts such as "co-responsibility" and "co-governance," Chávez preached plebiscitary measures as a way of complementing political representation.

From 1998–1999 Chávez's confrontational style and his radical policies generated high levels of popularity and support among the citizenry.[12] What Chávez offered was exactly what the previous regime had denied Venezuela's population. This attested to his willingness to support the demands for regime change and participatory democracy that Venezuela's civil society and citizenry had pursued. With high approval ratings, despite institutional constraints, and a strong political opposition able to contravene his decisions, in the eyes of many, "Chávez displayed greater respect for democracy than many other leaders who have cultivated a charismatic relationship with the disenfranchised" (Ellner and Hellinger 2004, 218).

Critics of his government (rightly) argued that the president's Bolivarian Revolution established a more conflict-ridden and divisive

form of doing politics, and derided his government for refusing to compromise on its political-ideological program.[13] The tendency to embrace or co-opt dissenting opinions that prevailed under the *Puntofijista* regime gave way to Chávez's readiness to delegitimize and/or eliminate all objections to his program by isolating reform-minded Opposition leaders and classifying them as hardliners. As Chávez struggled to construct his new democratic regime, he upset the balance of power among different political and economic interests and did little to assuage the tensions that arose from his actions. Forging ahead with his Bolivarian Revolution, he remained faithful to his ideological program, refusing to compromise in exchange for political stability. Leaders of the old regime went on the offensive, attempting to regain control of the country.

In December of 1999, Venezuela's participatory democracy, enshrined in the Bolivarian Constitution, was ratified through a popular referendum. "Participatory-protagonist" democracy officially replaced *Puntofijismo´s* representative democracy. Having won the presidency through a landslide victory, Chávez was symbolically mandated by the electorate, but the road to Venezuela's new democratic regime was fraught with controversy.

Chávez's controversial style led to a string of political conflicts that began as soon as he took office. In January 1999, during his inauguration, Chávez swore on the 1961 *Puntofijista* Constitution to enact "necessary democratic transformations," and announced he would sign a decree for a referendum to seat a Constitutional Assembly. Chávez capitalized on his electoral victory and utilized his presidential prerogatives to ensure his coalition, the Patriotic Front, obtained a considerable majority within the new Constitutional Assembly (Maingón et al. 2000, García-Guadilla and Hurtado 2000).[14] Ratified on December 15, 1999, the Bolivarian Constitution was approved with 71 percent of the votes cast (and a 54 percent abstention rate). The president parlayed his popularity into another resounding victory during the 2000 "mega-elections." After the ratification of the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution, on July 30, 2000, a new general election of all constituted powers was held to re-elect authorities at the national, regional, and local levels. Only two years after being elected, in 2000, Chávez won his first re-election with 56 percent of votes cast, and his coalition the Patriotic Front (*Polo Patriótico*) won close to 70 percent of the seats in the National Assembly (*Consejo Nacional Electoral* 2000, 2000a). The president´s coalition won seventeen of twenty-three governorships as well as the mayoralty of the city of Caracas (*Consejo Nacional Electoral* 2000b, 2000c).

With considerable control over different levels of government, Chávez embarked upon the task of drafting laws to institutionalize the Bolivarian Constitution. A string of controversies ensued as politicians and civil society Opposition leaders began to contest his interpretation of the charter.

First, a debate emerged over the ratification of appointed high-level government officials. In November 2000, the National Assembly proposed that an oversight committee to ratify non-elected authorities be comprised of 15 National Assembly representatives and 6 civil society representatives. Leaders of Venezuela's civil society alleged the proposed composition violated the spirit of plural representation outlined in the constitution and asked the Supreme Court to impugn this proposition (*Tribunal Supremo de Justicia* 2000). In early 2001, a second controversy emerged as a Chávez-dominated National Assembly introduced several bills to reform Venezuela's education laws to include a definition of education that extended beyond traditional instruction in math and science to include "a humanistic and cooperative perspective" to promote "citizen participation and social solidarity and foment intercultural dialogue and ethnic diversity" (*Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deportes* 1999, 39). Liberal groups within civil society interpreted the move as an attempt to imbue the education law with a specific leftist ideology, and incited middle-class protests against the government numbering in the tens of thousands (Mallen 2003). That struggle set the precedent for the conflict that would follow. The *Movimiento 2001* (2001 Movement) to "defend" Venezuela's educational system strengthened coalitions between political and civil society Opposition leaders, and gave the latter a leading role in the public sphere; it positioned the conflict as an ideological struggle; and it generated the belief that the national government was willing to interfere in the private sphere of citizens. In sum, the movement acted as the backdrop against which the narrative of the Opposition was constructed.[15]

The Opposition protests gained momentum after the National Assembly passed the *Ley Habilitante* (Enabling Law) in November of 2000. The measure granted Chávez the power to decree a series of laws that would regulate economic and institutional affairs (*Gaceta Oficial de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela* 2000). The decree resulted in 49 laws that implemented a new legal order in line with Chávez's Bolivarian program. Two new laws garnered the most attention: the *Ley Orgánica de Hidrocarburos* (Law of Hydrocarbons) and the *Ley de Tierras y Desarrollo Agrario* (Land and Agrarian Development Law). Both of these measures affected important economic interests within

Venezuela, stirring them against Chávez.[16] The Enabling Law resulted in the first Opposition-organized national strike against the government on December 10, 2001. The hostilities between the Opposition and groups sympathetic to Chávez's government (or *Chavistas*) escalated, resulting in the April 2002 coup d'état and the 2002–2003 national strike, which revealed the degree of polarization within Venezuela.

How Direct Citizen Participation Resulted in Polarization Within the Bolivarian Regime

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas (2000) reminds us that the shape of the public sphere in nineteenth century European countries stemmed in part from political, economic and social transformations as well as innovations in communication that accompanied the transition from monarchical to democratic governments. We argue that the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution-making process had a similar effect on the Venezuelan public sphere. Throughout the formal transition from a representative to a participatory government, and in the subsequent process of consolidating and institutionalizing the new regime, political actors competed to prove that they alone enjoyed legitimacy.[17] As will be discussed in Chapter 2, the constitution-making process not only redefined the rules of the game but, through its emphasis on citizen participation, it provided political actors and citizenry alike the opportunity to claim that their faction and public sector most faithfully represented the will of the people.

The Constitution of 1999 effectively buttressed two visions of democracy: the representative and the participatory-protagonist (García-Guadilla 2003a, García-Guadilla and Mallen 2013). This was made possible through the support that both Opposition and Bolivarian political actors lent to the notion of increased citizen participation in the decision-making process. Though Opposition political actors and public prioritized liberal democratic values such as freedom of expression and private property, among others, the Bolivarian government and its public prioritized the values of social democracy, social and economic equality However, both publics sometimes espoused similar principles. For example, both agreed, believed in, and disseminated the notion that increased citizen participation was a legitimate means of resolving conflict, and that the legitimacy of governmental authorities and programs hinged on political participation.

An unintended result of the model of participatory democracy was the emergence of a dynamic of symbolic action where each public mobilized massively to demonstrate its power and socio-political

legitimacy, and express its degree of satisfaction or discontent towards government. In the Venezuelan context, citizen participation was not limited to formal processes but depended on public performances within public spaces. Both government sympathizers and detractors took to the streets between 2000 and 2003 and staged marches and countermarches in an attempt to persuade the other of their strength and numeric superiority.[18]

The legitimacy assigned to citizen participation by the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution, in combination with traditional political parties being weakened by the legitimacy crisis of the *Puntofijista* regime, prompted alternative socio-political actors to take up the banner of political Opposition and challenge the executive's assertion that Chavismo represented the will of the people. Consequently, in the Bolivarian Republic, the primary challenges to the legitimacy of Chávez's government stemmed not only from political parties but also civil society organizations that embraced the Opposition narrative[19]— including trade unions, business organizations, and NGOs.[20] Their strategies for ousting Chávez from power did not follow the rules of the game laid forth in the constitutional doctrine.

As the conflict evolved, both factions interpreted the struggle through narratives of radical transformation as opposed to a matter of choice or change. A loss implied more than a mere deficit of power, a change of party, a redistribution of resources, or even a change in political systems of organization; for Venezuelan citizens it signaled the end of a way of life or the possibility of an alternate future. Throughout the conflict, the narratives utilized to interpret this existential struggle assumed diverse form: people vs. oligarchy, proletariat vs. bourgeoisie, and later socialism vs. capitalism. While the discourse changed, the narrative of a zero-sum struggle remained.

In the case of Venezuela's existential struggle, the political conflict acted as a centrifuge that bound citizens into two antagonistic publics that stifled expression within their own groups, and the pluralism of Venezuelan society at large.[21] Rival publics were characterized as enemies and each faction demanded absolute loyalty and disdain for the Other. The will of the people came to be understood as the will of those in the group. In a conflict where publics were perceived as bent on destroying the Other, the struggle for self-preservation replaced the defense of plurality as the guiding principle of democratic life.

Any lingering doubts as to the nature of the conflict were dissipated in April 2002 when a civil-military coalition deposed President Hugo Chávez for forty-eight hours. The events leading to the coup originated in February 2002 when Chávez appointed a new president and

governing board to the state oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela* (PDVSA). On February 25, senior executives within the company released a statement titled "Let's Save PDVSA," wherein they alleged the political appointments violated the liberal-meritocratic principles of the company. On April 7, 2002, Chávez responded by firing seven executives on the air during his weekly television show, *Aló Presidente* (Chávez 2002). A coalition between the national worker union, the national chamber of commerce, rival political parties, and non-governmental organizations called a national strike on April 9, 2002. A series of failed negotiations ensued. Venezuela's military-civil coalition staged a coup d'état after Opposition protesters and Chavistas died in violent confrontations during a protest march.

In many ways, the April 11, 2002 coup d'état consolidated and gave credence to the representation of the conflict as an existential struggle. Both supporters and detractors of Chávez understood the preservation of democratic rule to depend on their ability to demonstrate their numeric majority over their opponent, and both occupied the streets claiming to represent the sovereign. In what became a common feature of political strife, sympathizers and detractors of the regime convened marches and countermarches to demonstrate the numeric superiority of each group.[22] Popular protests turned violent as the social polarization intensified, and the political Opposition promoted non-legal or democratic solutions.

The heightened need to defend the political, economic and social existence of each faction repressed the expression of plurality in Venezuelan society. As Venezuelan citizens of various political persuasions began to align (or as Lozada (2002) argues were *forced* to align) themselves to the image presented by their respective faction, the plurality of Venezuelan society, once understood as essential to a functioning democracy, was condemned as contradictory to it. Individuals participating in the public sphere embraced (or were forced to embrace) the rhetoric, policies and agenda of their political faction while fully denouncing the discourse of their opponent. When the polarization process was well underway, those who publicly or privately strayed from their faction's platform were publicly chastised.

The conflict between sympathizers of Hugo Chávez and supporters of his Opposition was exacerbated to the point of influencing the everyday interaction of Venezuelan citizens.

In all societies, individual actions convey a social or political meaning that can be analyzed or interpreted, but in polarized societies, the multiple possible interpretations of a single act are subsumed by the political context in which they develop. As the conflict extended beyond the political sphere, everyday social interaction between citizens in

Venezuela produced cultural objects, symbols and meanings that demonstrated the saliency of polarization in Venezuelan society. The decision, for example, to wear a red t-shirt no longer represented a simple color preference, but indicated unequivocal support for President Chávez. The color red acquired such significance that an active participant and ardent follower of the Bolivarian Revolution came to be referred to as a *rojo-rojito* (a red-red or very red). To wear a red t-shirt in polarized Venezuela was to demonstrate unequivocal support for the Bolivarian Revolution.

Moreover, in Venezuela's polarized society, culture acquired a deeply political meaning. Unlike simple everyday choices, one's use or consumption of culture—books, movies, gallery exhibitions, even food—encodes or expresses more information about one's social subjectivity. But just as with rote everyday acts, those cultural choices can be interpreted in various ways. In non-polarized societies, the information provided by an individual's use of cultural symbols may be limited, but all possible interpretations are not necessarily funneled into a single explanation. In Venezuela's polarized society, cultural objects became directly correlated with a particular political affiliation. The political meaning assigned to cultural expressions molded citizens' social interactions. In the days leading to the attempted coup d'état against Hugo Chávez in April 2002, a Venezuelan citizen writing in a pro-Chávez internet site, described his experience as he confronted both an Opposition and a pro-government march.

> I head towards Altamira [an upper-middle-class residential neighborhood] to rent a movie. And I see the Chavista caravan, the problem is that I am out of luck today, I look like a madman, but not like a Chavista madman. They scream, "Repent! Repent!" at me and at Altamira. Of course, anyone who has the Danish Dogme [film] "Mifune" in his hand is discarded as a squalid-adeco[traditional political party]-petite-bourgeoisie-at-the-service-of-the-contras. "Repent! Repent!"...A few hours later we head towards Los Chaguaramos… head[ing] west past the [Opposition] concentration in favor of the chic-pdvsa [PDVSA state oil company]-meritocracy. "[Chávez] will leave. He'll leave" [shouts the Opposition]. I stop at the light. I stop in front of well-dressed girls and men in ties. And what is worse, I am in my distressed 1970 VW Bug…and I look like a madman, of course…They eye me intensely, and they do not ask, no, they scream: "Die Chávez! And who are you with! Define Yourself! Define Yourself! A bug has to be defined; a distressed bug is suspicious, especially in Altamira (Antiescualidos.com 2002).

Political affiliations were also easily deduced from the terms citizens used to describe the events of April 11, 2002—either as a "political coup" or as a "civic action resulting from a power vacuum." Likewise, one's ideological affiliation could be identified depending on whether one referred to the general strike staged by the Opposition from December 2002 to January 2003 as a "national civic strike" or as an "insurrectional strike," or whether one described the closing of private, commercial television station RCTV as an "arbitrary shut-down" or as a "government media concession that was not renovated."

The more polarized a society, the more likely these cultural and linguistic clues will be lumped together with other characteristics to construct a social imaginary of the Other. What results are fixed narratives that gain currency in everyday discourse. In the above example, the anonymous author described how supporters of Hugo Chávez described Opposition members as "squalid-Adeco-petite-bourgeoisie-at-the-service-of-the-contras." Chavistas' construction of the social imaginary of the Other were based on what they perceived were the relationships between Opposition members and their consumption of elite culture, their support for pro-American forces in Latin America, and their corrupt political parties (*Adeco*).[23] These perceived ideological tendencies, relationships with centers of power, and cultural preferences were reinforced by the social representation of their way of life.

In contrast, Chavistas demonstrated their loyalty to the leader and his populist project by approving the precepts and implementation of state-run programs. Chavistas aligned themselves with community and state media, the sovereign poor, and the Third World. To be a Chavista was to exercise citizenship through popular movements. And finally, to be a Chavista was to dispute the Opposition.

Though everyday acts and cultural consumption can often be politicized in exceptional political moments—such as a presidential election, a referendum on a controversial issue, or a political scandal—Venezuela's polarization reached a pathological degree when the individual's political affiliation subsumed all other attributes and became the primary variable in the establishment of social relationships. From 2002 to 2003, sustaining relationships with people outside of one's own political affiliation became increasingly problematic in Venezuelan society.

The centrifugal force of Venezuela's polarized society created unspoken social norms condemning fraternization between political factions. In 2006, a journalist for the Opposition media outlet Globovisión, Andrés Fernando Schmucke, wrote a book entitled, *Me*

Enamoré de una Chavista (I fell in love with a Chavista). The title is a confession of sorts. It suggests that to fall in love with someone of a different political affiliation violates the norms of Venezuelan society. The title highlights the obstacles of consorting with someone outside of one's own political position and the effect that the polarization process had on individuals' lives.

The polarization of Venezuelan society impacted the allocation of "space"—both geographical and metaphorical.[24] In Venezuela, like in most of Latin America, resources, and access to basic services, are unequally distributed between the haves and have-nots. Metropolises like the city of Caracas have exponentially increased the number of interactions between fellow citizens, but the inequalities between Venezuela's citizens manifest themselves in the distribution of urban space. While the rich on the east side of Caracas live in plush neighborhoods or *urbanizaciones*, the poor live on the west side in shantytowns disparagingly called *cerros* (García-Guadilla 2013). Undoubtedly, the unequal distribution of wealth between Venezuela's social classes structures the interaction between them, resulting in what García-Canclini (2007) has aptly described as "different, unequal and disconnected" citizens.

The national strike of 2002–2003 is best understood against this backdrop. After the April 11, 2002 coup d'état, a coalition of organizations united to form the *Coordinadora Democrática* (CD), a political hodgepodge that lumped together radical and moderate leftist parties and organizations, business and labor interests, and liberal non-governmental organizations. Under the leadership of the president of the national chamber of commerce (FEDECAMARAS) and the president of the national labor union CTV, the CD called for a national strike against the government of Hugo Chávez. The objective of the strike was to force Chávez out of office. Initially the strike had limited impact. While the affluent east side shut down, in the center and west of the city, Venezuelans went about their business. The strike gained strength when oil tankers successfully blocked a crucial navigation channel in Lake Maracaibo and joined PDVSA management in a work stoppage that successfully paralyzed oil production. The resulting decrease in oil production led to a decline in oil supply. As Venezuela struggled to meet its international oil supply obligations, drivers queued up at gas stations, flights were cancelled, banks operated half days, private (and some public) schools cancelled classes, and shops closed their doors at the peak of the Christmas shopping season (López Maya 2004).

If the 2002 coup provided proof that each public interpreted the conflict as an existential struggle, the 2002–2003 national strike

demonstrated that the division of space, when subject to a process of polarization, generated antagonistic interpretations of the same lived experience. With quotidian life at a standstill, networks dedicated 24-hour programming to coverage of the strike. Rumors circulated among Venezuela's middle-class that Chavista hordes would descend on their homes and attack their properties. High rises in middle-class neighborhoods barricaded their doors and windows and prepared themselves for violent confrontation. Meanwhile, in poor neighborhoods, workers enjoyed paid "vacations."

Chavistas and rival groups both partook in protests, marches and events staged by the national government and the Opposition. The increased mobilization of each Chavista and Opposition public occasionally resulted in violence between sympathizers, leaders and even media (PROVEA 2003). For nearly two months, the country awaited the outcome of the showdown between supporters of Chavismo and the Opposition.

The 2002–2003 national strike ultimately favored the government, for it created the pretext for a purging of Opposition sympathizers from public spaces vital to the regime. The strike, led primarily by professionals in the national oil industry, generated the perception within Chavista publics that the revolutionary project would be held hostage by the Opposition until government supporters took over executive positions in national industries (Trómpiz 2007). The 2002–2003 general strike resulted in the expulsion of more than 30,000 professionals in the oil industry, leaving a vacuum to be filled by national government supporters. Additionally, after the failed 2004 recall referendum against Hugo Chávez, the *Lista de Tascón* (Tascón list) published the names of every citizen who had signed on in favor of the recall, eventually resulting in a purge of state employees who purportedly supported the Opposition (Guardia and Prieto Rodríguez 2007, Hsieh et al. 2009).

After the events of 2002–2003, the national government embarked on the task of building institutions that could help it consolidate its claim to represent the Venezuelan sovereign or the majority will. Instead of negotiating or reaching agreements with existing institutions and their rival political and civil leaders, the government of Hugo Chávez created parallel institutions to carry out the reforms demanded by the Bolivarian Republic. Chávez set out to organize his own civil society, one capable of promoting and defending the revolutionary project. Bolivarian unions arose to challenge official unions, and students sympathetic to the government organized alternative student associations for supporters of the revolutionary project. Eventually the government would build the

Bolivarian University. Numerous broadcasting licenses were granted to alternative and community media. Television and radio stations popped up in state hospitals and in Venezuelan barrios (Forero 2004). Websites appeared with the aim of defending the Bolivarian Revolution (Gonzalo 2004). Local community and alternative media challenged the dominant private-commercial media, whose editorial lines sided with the Opposition. In the end, the creation of alternative institutions became the hallmark of progress and change in the Bolivarian Republic.

In their zeal to carry out the sovereign people's will, the Bolivarian government and the Opposition each attempted to bring solutions to common problems through distinct organizations and institutions. As a result, a divisive matrix was institutionalized in spaces occupied by the citizenry. Not only did politicians belong to different parties, citizens worked in parallel organizations with parallel functions. Supporters of the ruling party enrolled in *Círculos Bolivarianos* (Bolivarian Circles), *Comités de Tierra Urbana* (Urban Land Committees), *Consejos Comunales* (Communal Councils), *Mesas Técnicas del Agua* (Technical Water Committees) and *Misiones* (Misions), and others organizations established by the government as venues for citizen participation which either had direct links to the government apparatus (*Círculos Bolivarianos*), satisfied basic necessities, such as education, health care and affordable food (*Misiones*), or operated as governmental decision-making bodies at the community and local level (García-Guadilla 2008 and 2011, Goldfrank 2011).

In contrast, the Opposition sought participation in pre-existing civil society organizations (*Asamblea de Educación*, neighborhood associations) or in organizations formed during the political conflict (*Asamblea de Ciudadanos*, *Mujeres por la Libertad*, *Gente de Petróleo*) (García-Guadilla 2005b).

This division of space intensified the polarizing dynamic by legitimizing the existence of spaces solely occupied by one political faction or another.[25]

The most visible division of space took place within the media. At the height of the conflict, private-commercial media outlets transformed into political actors and ceded their screens, broadcasts and pages to the Opposition. They dedicated 24-hour news coverage to the strike. Private-commercial newspapers published headlines claiming Venezuela was on the brink of a civil war (Blanco Muñoz 2004) and from 2002 to 2004 the discourse of both Chavismo and the Opposition became increasingly belligerent.

The government accused the private-commercial media of conspiring with the leaders of the 2002 coup, imposing a media blackout

to impede Chávez's return to power, participating in the Opposition's calls for a national strike, helping coordinate the actions of rival political organizations, and engaging in biased reporting. Among Chavistas, private-commercial media was seen as having distorted facts to alarm the population. By disseminating rumors, manipulating facts, and making insinuations, these media created an alternative reality for sectors of the middle class, generating "fear, agitating, manipulating, terrorizing and inciting them [the middle class] to commit acts of violence" (Rodríguez Miérez 2005, 26).

The government responded to what it considered media bias in the same way it responded to Opposition-dominated institutions: it created parallel ones. A national policy aimed at creating new media outlets for Chavista publics resulted in an explosion of alternative and community media funded by the national government. The "media war" resulted as the Opposition and Chavista public struggled to dominate local and national media.

The polarization of Venezuelan society under the leadership of Hugo Chávez was consolidated in three ways: the transformation of a representative democracy into a participatory-protagonist democracy resulted in the need for political actors to establish their legitimacy through competing citizen mobilizations. The media became politicized by taking on the role of purveying the legitimacy of either supporters or detractors of the regime. And the division of public space resulted in violent confrontations between supporters and detractors of the Bolivarian regime.

Entrenched in the everyday interactions of Venezuelan citizens, the polarization of Venezuelan society during the Bolivarian regime promoted by Hugo Chávez effectively stifled plurality within the country, including among both supporters and detractors of the regime.

Chapter Descriptions

As we embarked on the task of understanding the dynamics of polarization in the case of Venezuela under Chávez, we quickly surmised an interdisciplinary approach would be required to paint a more complete picture of its most relevant aspects. Only through this approach could we possibly begin to better understand the connections between its diverse dimensions and the manner in which it insidiously permeated everyday life. We drew from sociology, media studies, psychology, political science, cultural anthropolgy, human geography and ecology in an attempt to reveal how the promise of a more inclusive democratic system evolved into a social order that pitted citizens against

one another, unleashing a series of violent incidents reminiscent of a war zone.

In Chapter 2, we explain how the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution laid the foundation for a new regime whose discourse, values, structures, and processes differed radically from those of the previous *Puntofijista* democratic system. But the 1999 constituent process, shrouded in the language of citizen participation, "protagonist democracy" and human rights, deterred discussions surrounding the interpretation and social impact of the principles of the new regime. The lack of clearly articulated and consensually agreed upon foundational principles led to a series of confrontations between political parties and civil society that erupted as Chávez's government began to define, implement, and institutionalize the tenets of the 1999 Constitution.

Chapter 3 discusses the exclusionary territorial expression of participatory democracy resulting from increasing social and political polarization. It analyzes the imagery of the Other when understood as the enemy, and the citizenry of fear that led to a segregated and highly conflictual spatial pattern in the besieged capital city of Caracas, contributing to the emergence of ghettos, or highly segregated/exclusionary spaces.

In Chapter 4, we argue that the definitions of participatory democracy and of the sovereign that resulted from the deliberations of the Constitutional National Assembly (*Asamblea Nacional Constituyente*) exacerbated the role of the media as a political actor in the conflict. The need to visually demonstrate public support for each political faction to substantiate their claim of representing the sovereign, combined with the importance each public attributed to media as transmitters of information, resulted in a "war of numbers" between the national government and private-commercial media. As will be demonstrated, the "media war" radically altered the media landscape, increasing citizen participation in the production of media while curtailing the legal rights of the Venezuelan press.

This process set the stage for the construction of two public spheres of comparable resources and power that sought to influence the country's future. In Chapter 5, we describe the construction of two antagonistic public spheres, and how the media—private-commercial, public, alternative, and community—exacerbated their mutual exclusion and division until it became increasingly difficult to create networks of communication. As a result, national, private, alternative media, *and* mediums (internet, television, newspapers) disseminated information, which the two antagonistic social groups selectively absorbed,

interpreted, and evaluated. Two public discourses emerged that framed the conflict as an existential struggle.

In Venezuela, the impossibility of competing with or prevailing over the two dominant antagonistic publics (supporters and detractors of the Bolivarian Revolution) resulted in the understanding of individuals as objects of polarization. As the experience of *Students for Freedom* shows in Chapter 6, regardless of the diversity of subjective experience, within the Venezuelan social imaginary, social actors and their public discourse were entirely evaluated on the basis of the narratives of the dominant antagonism.

We conclude our work by summarizing our findings, in the hope that other scholars will draw from the Venezuelan experience to further develop our understanding of polarization and its impacts on pluralist democracies. We end with a brief overview of polarization in Venezuela after the death of Hugo Chávez.

Notes

[1] In this work, we will use the terms *Chavista* and *Chavismo* to refer to the publics that supported the narrative of the conflict articulated by the national government and actively participated in the construction of the narrative whether through militancy in the government's party, protesting in marches, leaving comments on websites, or participating in government programs. The term Opposition (with a capital O) will be used to refer to the public that supported the narrative of diverse groups that made up the opposition to the national government. The Opposition, like Chavistas, encompasses a broad swath of actors from politicians, to opinion makers, and everyday citizens who participated in marches or publicly propagated the narrative through public performances.

[2] The use of discourse to explain the polarization of Venezuelan society is similar in scope to Arendt's (1951) description of the sway of the leader over the masses in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Like Arendt's description, the arguments are premised on the notion of masses vulnerable to propaganda.

[3] The full quote reads as follows: "The polarization between the rich and the poor was created by capitalism and neoliberalism, not by Chávez… It was created by a system of enslavement that has lasted more than five centuries. Five centuries of exploitation, especially in the twentieth century when the capitalist system was imposed, and at the end of the century, when the neoliberal era was imposed, which is the most unvarnished stage of savage capitalism. This system created difficult conditions that led to a social explosion. In 1989, I was an officer in the army and I saw the country had erupted like a volcano. Then there were two military maneuvers. I participated in one of them alongside thousands of military comrades and civilians" (cited in Oppenheimer 2005, 262).

[4] In recent Venezuelan history, the 1989 riots represent the breakdown of the democratic system established in 1959. Known as the *Caracazo* the 1989 riots resulted from an announcement by then President Carlos Andrés Pérez, he would implement a series of austerity measures in line with International Monetary Fund and World Bank guidelines. Citizens rioted and the military was called in to quell the violence. The government officially reported 276 dead, though others have estimated a toll of up to 400. The military repression and human right abuses perpetrated by the military shattered the illusion of stability that had characterized Venezuela's democratic system, and unleashed a period of political upheaval that would result in the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998. For more on the Caracazo see, Coronil and Skurski's (1991) "Dismembering and Remembering the Nation," and López Maya's (2003) "The Venezuelan *Caracazo* of 1989."

[5] For critics of modernity, the public sphere is a space corrupted by the interests of a few who wield hegemonic control over the means of communication, their message, and their discursive styles (Horkheimer and Adorno [1944] 2002, Habermas, 2000). In this work we adopt the definition of other authors who describe the public as a sphere fractioned by multiple actors and actions (Anderson 1983, Fraser 1992, Warner 2005). We adopt Warner's poignant observation that though an interpretation may prevail in the public, we should not infer this signifies the hegemony of one particular public over another.

[6] In this work, we define discourse as the text emitted by a messenger and interpreted by multiple receivers. Unlike discourse, the narrative contains references that structure understanding in an act and therefore require receivers exclude other possible interpretations in order to create a totality through which the receiver can logically eradicate contradictions within a social reality (Ricouer 1986).

[7] Theoretically, a Schmittian existential struggle is at odds with traits commonly attributed to modern democracies such as pluralism and tolerance. At the heart of Schmitt's argument lays the assumption that a pluralism of interests if allowed to prevail in the political sphere jeopardizes citizens' political unity. Schmitt proposed political conflict should act as a binding agent, where citizens could find common ground on similar political positions and actions.

[8] The Bolivarian Revolution aimed of transform the country's two-party representative democracy into a more participatory model that placed individual participation at the center of the political decision-making process. Participatory-protagonist democracy was the term given to this model.

[9] Among the plebiscitary measures established by the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution to increase citizen checks on the exercise of power is Article 72 that allows 20 percent of the electorate to convene a recall referendum for any publicly elected official. Plebiscitary power over international treaties is provided the electorate through Article 73 of the constitution. Laws passed by the legislature or decreed by the executive can also be submitted to popular referendums if so deemed by the electorate. In addition, Article 204.7 allows 0.1 percent of the electorate to initiate laws. Article 184 of the constitution requires municipalities collaborate with communities and neighborhood groups, and allow them to participate in drafting budgets, and in the establishment of economic enterprises such as cooperatives, among other rights listed. Article

296 allows civil society to elect three of the five members of the National Electoral Council.

[10] As will be further explained in Chapter 2, although new institutional measures gave citizens a greater voice in governmental affairs, the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution diminished the citizen's power through representation in the legislative branch by creating a unicameral legislature based on proportional representation. The 1999 Bolivarian Constitution stripped the government apparatus of basic mechanisms that guaranteed the rights of political minorities through representation, even as it explicitly recognized the civil rights of historically excluded groups, such as Venezuela's indigenous population. Although the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution created greater venues for citizen participation, the changes in the state's institutional structure weakened the representation of political minorities in the legislature while leaving the office of the presidency intact. The arrangement resulted in the exacerbation of presidential powers as the office of the presidency directly elected by the people could claim to embody the indivisible will of the people.

[11] For an excellent review of the compromises and concessions made by different political parties to diverse interests in Venezuelan society through the Pact of Punto Fijo, see López et al. (1989) *De Punto Fijo al Pacto Social*.

[12] In a nationwide survey conducted by the Venezuelan-polling agency, *Instituto Venezolano de Análisis de Datos* (IVAD) in 1999, 78.6 percent of respondents held a negative view of the situation of the country, but 66 percent believed the country was poised to get better.

[13] Arguing the Bolivarian government was attempting to ingrain its political-ideological platform in the new constitution, as early as May 1999, a debate ensued as to the nature and extent of the content of the Bolivarian Constitution. Rival political candidates to the National Constitutional Assembly (ANC) accused the government of introducing specific political content that conditioned the sphere of action of future governments. In response to reports ANC government candidates wanted to constitutionally apportion GNP to productive sectors, Opposition business leader Aurelio Concheso (1999) quipped, "Can you imagine what would have happened if Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin had insisted on including in the US constitution the patterns of economic activity at the end of this century?" Along the same lines sociologist Trino Márquez (1999) opined, "Chavismo has been responsible for hiding very well [the fact] a constitution must only force the existence of certain conditions so a society can be more productive and efficient but should never become a program for government action."

[14] ANC representatives were chosen individually not through party affiliation. However, candidates aligned with the president's party were identified through a list commonly referred to as Chávez's lottery. The long list of candidates disseminated votes for those aligned with the Opposition while Chávez's lottery allowed Chavismo to obtain enough votes to beat Opposition and independents; in fact, "the opposition obtained 34.5 percent of the votes but only 4.7 percent of the positions in the ANC. Conversely, the Patriotic Front (*Polo Patriótico*) obtained 62.1 percent of the votes but 94.5 percent of the seats" (García-Guadilla and Hurtado 2000, 21–22).

[15] During the 2001 protests middle-class residents offered the following as explanations for their participation in the protest: "we do not want them to impose education, we want it free of ideologies"…"[government appointed

educational] supervisors is a direct intervention in the decisions of parent associations"..."they want to impose Cuban educators that will give us guidelines"..."I don't want my grandchildren to speak like Cuban children" and "this is the government's way of locking us up" (cited in Mallen 2003, 25).

[16] The agricultural statute outlined the executive's plans for broad land reform. It limited the number of idle acres an individual or the state could possess and it set the procedures for distributing *ejidos* (properties given to farmers by the state that cannot be sold but can be inherited) to the country's rural population. The Law of Hydrocarbons expanded the executive's control over the country's national oil industry while simultaneously limiting the privatization of the nation's oil company.

[17] We use Kis' definition of social legitimacy described as "the existence of a *de facto* authority…marked by the fact that at least a significant part of the political community believes that people ought to obey official rules because this is their duty vis-a-vis the State. It follows that we can say that *de facto* legitimacy is shaken when some of the following (not easily measureable but quite salient) symptoms are present: pervasiveness of blatant, defiant disobedience on the part of the subjects; a sharpening of controversies concerning legitimation between elites; and, in extreme cases, the formation of new centers of power claiming legitimacy for themselves and challenging the legitimacy of old authorities" (Kis 1995, 405–406).

[18] Between 1989 and 1999, Venezuela averaged 736 protests annually. This number doubled after Hugo Chávez came to power. Between 1999 and 2007, the country averaged 1,395 protests a year (Acosta 2007). According to the 2008–2009 Annual Report of the human rights organization PROVEA, the number of protests that year increased from 1,763 to 2,893 (PROVEA 2009).

[19] The term civil society normally understood to describe organizations that claim and defend the rights of the citizenry, was narrowly defined in the Bolivarian Republic. Following the logic of polarization, the term civil society was utilized to describe upper middle-class organizations that sided with the Opposition. In contrast terms such as "communities," would be utilized by Chavistas to describe organized citizenries.

[20] In October 2002, the *Coordinadora Democrática* (Democratic Coordinator or CD) was created by the Opposition as a means of counterbalancing the claim of the government to represent the sovereign. The CD included a variety of heterogeneous political and social actors: rival political parties, the Venezuelan workers union, the chamber of Commerce federation, private-commercial media, the Institutional Military Front (an organization of dissident military officers), and numerous non-governmental organizations of liberal persuasion.

[21] The stifling of plurality within the different publics was especially acute in the Opposition that grouped organizations with divergent interests such as the Venezuelan workers union, and the national chamber of commerce (FEDECAMARAS). Right of center parties such as COPEI and *Primero Justicia* coalesced with left of center *Acción Democrática*, *Movimiento hacia el Socialismo* (MAS) and *Bandera Roja* (BR) within the *Coordinadora Democrática*. Aligned with the socio-political organization were public opinion makers and media owners such as Teodoro Petkoff—a former guerrilla and editor of the national daily *Tal Cual* and Alberto Federico Ravell—owner of the

24-hour news channel *Globovisión* and former communications strategist for politicians of *Acción Democrática*.

[22] In their work, "Venezuela: Protesta Popular y Lucha Hegemónica Reciente," Venezuelan scholars Edgardo Lander and Margarita López Maya (2008) have described this process as a form of street politics that results from a Gramscian struggle between social classes to impose a hegemonic worldview. While similar in scope with the approach taken in this work, the description of the conflict as a Gramscian struggle focuses on class as the determinant variable for the establishment of political-cultural affinities in the conflict. As López Maya (2008) herself and Noam Lupu (2010) demonstrate within different periods of the Venezuelan conflict class cannot explain the at times contradictory results of electoral contests.

[23] Adeco is the term given to sympathizers of the political party *Acción Democrática* (AD).

[24] In this work, "space" is broadly defined to include geographical locations, as well as institutions, and individual bodies.

[25] The segmentation of space and the characterization of organizations as pro- or anti-Chavista, undermined the ability of domestic groups to negotiate solutions. By 2004, when pro- and anti-Chávez forces decided to find a democratic solution to the crisis by going forth with a presidential recall referendum, the Carter Center had to intervene to assure its transparency (Dietz and McCoy 2012, Martínez Meucci 2012). In the process, international figures themselves came under attack. Prior to the recall referendum, Chávez's supporters claimed Jennifer McCoy, a senior election observer for the Carter Center, was partial towards the Opposition because she had publicly criticized Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution (Delacour and Barahona 2004). When Chávez was declared the victor, Chavistas quickly changed their tune, praising both McCoy and the Carter Center for their efforts and performance. Having previously considered them impartial to their cause, McCoy and the Carter Center subsequently became targets of the Opposition (O'Grady 2004, Tantillo and Myers 2004). With Chávez's presidency acting as the centrifugal force within society, the threat of violence increasingly overshadowed attempts to assuage the differences between the two factions. In line with a Schmittian-inspired existential struggle, wherein war is neither the aim nor the purpose of the struggle but lingers throughout, the threat of violence became a persistent characteristic of the relationship between the two publics.