

THE LANGUAGE OF A POPULIST REVOLUTION

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In my paper, I will attempt to develop some arguments from two different perspectives, namely: the problem of revolution, its hegemonic and totalitarian logic, and the problem of discourse. If last year I put my first analytical stone on populist order and its particular logic of articulation of social subjects. I will try to delineate the main elements through which a **new** revolutionary hegemonic discourse is been constructed in Venezuela since 1999. And it seems to me very important to talk about revolutionary discourse because in nowadays in Latin America we can see a kind of resurrection of it.

Let me start with a general context. For the moment it is enough to note that there is now in there a deep, because historic, confrontation between two models, two conceptions of the world, two historical projects, two ways to understand and to practice politics. A revolutionary-militaristic and populist project and a representative-democratic project. Both of them have developed two systems of truth, irreconcilable, antagonistic.

One represented by the regime and its supporters (some urban and rural sectors allied now with a faction of the Army, and the force and capacity of the State, the Venezuelan State, I mean an oil state which is one of the main institutions of society.

The other sector is what is known as the opposition. A multi-plural forces where combine traditional elites, middle sectors, some institutions from the civil society like Church, Unions, Entrepreneurial, a faction of the Army, among others. All of them are playing into an antagonist strategy where democracy is been challenged.

In what follows, I will advance three arguments: 1) In a general sense, I would suggest that ideology supporting revolutionary-militaristic project is a melting pot of different ideological positions and groups; 2- That the Venezuelan revolution is civic-militaristic, but the transitional stage/phase is basically militaristic until the People-Army alliance will be mature; 3- That the political and social dynamic developed by the revolutionary process is hegemonic and totalitarian and is advancing/stepping forward towards the final confrontation with the enemy, internal (the oligarchy) or external (USA-imperialism).

In the first part, I will think the specificity of this kind of revolutionary process, from discursive approach. It requires starting the analysis at the ideological level trying to grasp the ideological content of discursive positions that produces structuring effects which

primarily manifest themselves at the level of the modes of representation. In determining totalitarian character of the revolutionary discourse, we could say that the regime's political practices *constitute* their own subjects. I mean, the political practice would have some kind of ontological priority over the agent. Revolutionary positions would only be the result of an articulation of social practices. In the second part of my presentation, I will treat the language of these practices

I- REPLACEMENT IDEOLOGIES AND HEROES APPROPRIATION

As I have just asserted, my starting point should be the isolation of some ideological contents and the consideration of the social logics of their articulation. I begin with the affirmation that in Latin America as in other parts of the world we live an acute ideological disorientation. The general crisis of socialism, by extending to doctrinarian Marxism, has generated a severe ideological loss. This has definitely affected the political and ideological structure that served as a basis for the great political parties in the region, that is: Social Democracy, Christian Democracy or Social Christianity and Socialism, be it reformist or radical Communism. In the context of this crisis, the conditions for the appearance of what I will call **replacement ideologies** seem wide open.

This situation is reflected in the use of political language, where such expressions as "*exhaustion of the model*", "*crisis of democracy*", "*militarism*", "*anti-politics positions*" have become common. Furthermore, concepts such as "*authoritarianism*", "*autocracy*", "*oligarchy*", "*caudillismo*", "*totalitarianism*", "*fascism*", widely used throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, have regained validity. Nowadays, when these are used in political rhetoric as well as in journalism, we seem to dispense with their true essence, using them out of their historical context and political significance.

This state of puzzlement and terminological confusion is the result of the ideological storm that swept the end of the twentieth century after the apparent downfall of socialism. The use of traditional denominations like "*left*", "*right*" and "*center*", established in relation to nineteenth century liberalism, was surpassed in the final part of the twentieth century. Even in the Latin-American case, political formulations of national reach and with ideological purposes such as "*Varguismo*" in Brazil, "*Gaitanismo*" in Colombia or "*Peronismo*" in Argentina, were based on political ideologies loaded with socialist contents, particularly in terms of social and economic rights.

Today we witness an ideological disorientation that has allowed for the conformation of what we could call REPLACEMENT IDEOLOGIES¹. This are confusing political and ideological alternatives that combine the most traditional authoritarianism with the latest forms of demagogy, filled with liberal and socialist contents, more rhetoric than sincere. One of these replacement ideologies refers to the Bolivarian-militaristic-populism, currently existing in Venezuela. I mention two of its main characteristics to illustrate its character as a replacement ideology:

¹ Carrera Damas, G., *Alternativas ideológicas en América Latina contemporánea (El caso de Venezuela: El bolivarianismo-militarismo)*, University of Florida, Gainesville, 2001.

- 1- Two of the components of the formula (Bolivarian and militaristic) are traditional, belong to the nineteenth century. There is nothing new about them. In spite of this, the movement that sustains this formula is called a “revolution”, and its regime is called “revolutionary”. The resurrection and second coming of Bolívar is a daily event in the life of the nation. The appropriation of the HEROE –I mean the figure of Bolívar-- has been nothing but a resource for social control. In the case of the Bolivarian-militaristic model, there is a resurrection of the historical hero, promoted by populist forces to get the power and maintain himself there. Even more important is the resurrection of the Army and a certain redeeming role of it as an emancipator force.

Let's stop here, because this is an important statement of the revolutionary discourse.

The redemptory role of the National Armed Forces, according to which they do not exist to fulfill the role of guardians assigned to them by the previous democratic governments, but to renew the redemptory deeds of the times of fighting for the country's independence. Taking the role of Bolivar in his struggle against Spain, Chavez once again redeems the Venezuelan society, whether by force or not, using the redeeming power of the Armed Forces. In 1980, he wrote, in one of the few things he has ever written: *“the absence of values that is presently jarring the entire world, and Venezuela in particular, has spread through all the sectors and levels of national life. The Armed Forces cannot (...) escape from these social problems because they are a part of Venezuelan society”*. In this situation, he would not hesitate to follow the example and the words of Bolivar, and added: *“I pursue the glorious career of arms to attain the honor they give, to free my country and to earn the blessings of the people”*²¹. What can be seen in this discourse is the announcement of a war of liberation that would be similar to a second struggle –now at the beginning of the twenty first century-- for national independence.

- 2- The second point concerning the replacement ideology character is that this Bolivarian-militaristic-populism doesn't represent a solid ideology. On the contrary, its formulation is confusing, a mixture of minor ideologies. A testimony of one of the leaders of the process is significant. One of the ex-guerrilla fighters, now leader of the revolutionary process says:

*“An important element is that the presence of other sectors (...) incorporates new interests. These sectors incorporated themselves given the fact that their projects have similarities and differences with our project. It's because of these differences that there has been no development of a solid ideology that coincides fully with the original project of the Bolivarian revolution”*³.

Any objective demonstration that such resources are more rhetorical than ideological, and that they lack organic formulation or systematic application, does not deny its effectiveness in the disorientation of the people. Thus causing an estrangement between the later and the ever difficult exercise of democracy. The Venezuelan militaristic-bolivarianism is formed

² Chavez F., Hugo, “Profesionalismo del oficial Venezolano”, in *El Brazalete Tricolor*, Vadell Editores, Caracas, 1992, pp. 79-81.

³ Garrido, A., *La historia secreta de la revolución bolivariana*, Mérida, Karol, 2002, p. 69. My translation.

by no more than strongly rooted beliefs –ideas assumed as true, not subjected to critical confirmation- that create a favorable environment for the emergence of messianic social and political positions.

This conjunction of factors can mobilize the contained force inside the collective subconscious, as demonstrated by the messianic movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The individual sheds his critic capacity, being subjugated to myths and collective hopes, something quite usual in Venezuela today. It is now rather familiar to listen to such expressions as “*Chávez is the People*”, “*The Bolivarian revolution is the hope*”, “*Christ is Bolivarian*” or “*Christ is with the revolution*”, in the official discourse.

THE DISORIENTATION OF REPLACEMENT IDEOLOGIES

In these conditions of personalism and semantic confusion, ideological disorientation is inherent to militaristic-bolivarianism times. It is precisely this ambiguous context the fertile terrain for the messianic and fundamentalist character of the Bolivarian regime. But let me tell you that disorientation is not only collective but individual as well.

In the first case – collective disorientation- the procedures that reveal disorientation are not only pertinent to the government and its followers, but also to the so-called opposition. In many of the struggles to overthrow the regime there were clear appeals to chaos more than the resort to systematic action with clearly defined goals, (the general strike and the oil stoppage of December 2002 are clear examples). It seemed that the strike had become an end in itself, a form of complete resistance against the goals of the Bolivarian-militaristic revolution. To some observers the most outstanding aspect in the opposition’s activities and at the same time, the explanation for its lack of efficiency to overthrow the regime, can be found in the absence of ideological and programmatic contents that help build an alternative vision of the country, as opposed to that of the Bolivarian-militaristic project. This opposition extremely short term activism turns anarchic by exhibiting an absence of ideological goals, goals that cannot be provided even by the old political parties part of that opposition. All this suggests the existence of a primary search for new ideological bearings, even in the midst of traditional political parties.

Concerning the individual disorientation, an example can be found in the very same Chávez’ ideological positions. In the course of an interview during his presidential campaign (1998), Chávez affirmed the following: “*There is an argument about the end of history, the end of ideologies. That doesn’t mean that communism does not have a scientific foundation as an idea, as a method. We are not saying that it is useless. But we are convinced that communism is not the ideology through which the Venezuelan future will be built (...) I can’t not embrace Marxist thought and declare myself as such because I don’t know it (...) ¿Am I a Christian? No, I don’t know Christian theory nor do I practice it*”⁴. Three years later, in a dispute with the Catholic Church, he would declare himself Christian and Evangelic. This generated the protest of the Evangelic Church since he had never been a member of their congregation.

⁴ Blanco Muñoz, A., *Habla el comandante Hugo Chávez Frías*, Caracas, 1998, pp. 69-70. Translation is ours.

When asked about his ideological position, his answer concerning the question, “¿What is your political position? In the right or in the left”, WAS, “I don’t know, I don’t have any. I refuse to position myself, to limit myself to a sector that isn’t well defined, which is left and which is right (...) By now I don’t belong to any sector” (p.74). In an earlier text (1992), he vindicates ideologies by saying, “ideologies are a navigational tool to navigate through the times and spaces, giving a precise course to societies and nations”. However, he stresses the fact that not all ideologies are valid but only “autochthonous ideological models, rooted in the deepest bottom of our origins and in the subconscious of the national being”⁵.

Consequently, he goes on to enunciate his picturesque formula, known as “*The tree of the three roots*”/ *THE THREE ROOTS TREE*, doctrinarian platform of military bolivarianism. We find in it three figures, Bolívar (the leader), Rodríguez (the ideologist) and Zamora (the people’s warrior) that encourage the action of Venezuelan revolutionaries today. But everything is relative in the language of this leader with messianic characteristics. The following statement is meaningful, “*we could expand this and not have three but five hundred sources, and truly when we say three (...) we talk about three roots, three figures. Because we have to drink from Marxism, from liberalism, from structuralism we have to drink (...), from christianism, we have to drink from the classical thinkers of antiquity (...)*” CHAVEZ DIXIT, (pp. 74-75). Hence, Venezuelan revolutionaries have to drink everything to get drunk and also disorient the popular conscience. To end this sort of ideological ritual, the oath to fight for the Venezuelan people is sworn with a totemic perception under a three where Bolívar supposedly rested after a battle. If Bolívar put himself under its shadow, so his faithful inheritors, revolutionaries with five hundred ideological sources would do the same.

The importance of all this is the lively relation with Bolívar/ THE HEROE, which would enforce the patriotic significance of the action and would purge it of any suspicion of ill purposes. This symbolism is highly effective on the Venezuelan mentality since Bolívar is the Father of the nation and the founder of the Republic. The most lethal effects of this falsification of history and the justification of its political ends over the conscience of Venezuelans have come from the invocation of Bolívar’s name.

This ideological puzzlement -as has been shown- takes place in a collective and individual level, but it can also appear simultaneously in various and diverse individuals. It can even reach levels of high risk when trying to develop an educational model. That is the case of a delirious government collaborator, coordinator of the National Educational Project, who asserted to have Bolívar, Marx and Gramsci as the inspiration of the project. This illustrated Bolivarian and revolutionary declared himself to be “*gramscian from the philosophical point of view and my ideas are a compendium of liberation theology, Marxism, bolivarianism, Indian nature and cimarronerism*” (*slaves getting away from their masters*)⁶.

I believe that all the aforementioned facts are significant examples of the disorientation inherent to replacement ideologies, but at the same time show the high degree of appeal and

⁵ Chávez F., H., *Libro azul. El árbol de las tres raíces*. See Garrido, A., *Documentos de la revolución bolivariana*, Karol, Mérida, 2002. Our translation.

⁶ *El Nacional*, Caracas, August 27, 2000, p. A-4.

articulating efficiency of the popular subject. The people remain sleepy but particularly confused when confronted with the actions proposed as a path to follow by this process of nationalization of the Venezuelan revolutionary thought. Political understandings are mediated through symbols, and if we understand ritual as a potent form of symbolic representation, one can conclude that the “tree of the three roots”⁷ THE THREE ROOTS TREE --as an ideological construct-- is of a ritualistic nature, very typical of thinking processes of reactionary military sectors, of considerable symbolic effectiveness. It is a valuable tool in the popular construction of political reality.

REPLACEMENT IDEOLOGIES AND POLITICAL FUNDAMENTALISM

On the other hand, it seems possible to link ideological disorientation and political fundamentalism in its several versions. The later (*political fundamentalism*) is seen as a last resort to respond to the need to solve the problems of the people, even in a symbolic manner. The Bolivarian fundamentalism that rules militaristic bolivarianism can be seen as an evasion towards the past which appears to be more and more attractive as the present becomes more questionable. It is worthwhile to explore the argument through which the present Venezuelan regime pretends to become a Latin American fundamentalism by way of the exploitation of Bolívar’s myth, particularly by associating itself with traditional militarism and recruiting the survivors of autocratic socialism of Stalinist inspiration.

The ruling coalition of forces in Venezuela includes the old communist party and other sectors of the autocratic and totalitarian left. The Venezuelan regime is supported, as is well known, by the military Cuban tyranny whose only ideological orientation is anti-Americanism, not anti-imperialism, since Castro does not resent European influence.

With this fundamentalist positions it has been possible to prepare the terrain –with Venezuela as the bridge- for the establishment of a symbiosis between traditional militarism and the shipwrecked of autocratic socialism, under the command of bolivarianism. In the regime’s vocabulary the words of Neruda are clearly inscribed, “*It’s Bolívar that awakes every hundred years. He awakes every hundred years when the peoples awake*”. It is an excellent image in the field of poetic metaphors, but a risky statement when broadcasted by a man that comes to power to change the reality of these peoples, whose change plows through pure demagoguery.

But to Chávez the terminal fracture does not occur exclusively in Venezuela, it expands to the rest of the planet. And Bolívar can contribute considerably in that fracture. In 2002, while addressing a crowd, he attempts to implant the ritual among foreigners and launches the slogan:

”Beware, beware, beware, Bolívar’s sword walks on
through Latin America. Free Bolívar, the struggle goes on”⁷.

From this statement, we can see the attempt to export the Bolivarian revolution by familiarizing the world with the HERO, even though there is no further need for analysis

⁷ “Encuentro de solidaridad con la revolución bolivariana. Foro bolivariano de Las Américas”, *Ultimas Noticias*, Caracas, April 12, 2003.

since it is a matter of dogma, a fundamentalist position of difficult assimilation. But its exporting effects are beneficial, so beneficial that even the President insists in using same statement on May 11, 2003 when he says:

“Youngsters in Africa are thinking about the creation of Bolivarian circles. The message of the revolution is reaching as far as Africa, because the voice of the Father works for them too. We will be there with them, for the good of the oppressed peoples”.
(Aló Presidente, television broadcast, May 11 of 2003).

In spite of such outlandish proposition, it found an echo among the regime’s high supporters. With great emotion, one of the historians at the service of the new official history, willing to harness the sympathy of the chief of state told him, “*President Chávez, the sword of Bolívar tours the world, so we won’t be a great Latin American power, we will be a great Bolivarian world power*” (*Ultimas Noticias*, op. cit.).

Thus the regime’s discourse established its HEROIC and MESSIANIC nature. The political fundamentalism of the Bolivarian revolution was then undeniable. The will to apply the Venezuelan formula to Latin America and beyond can be found in the spirit of his words, so much so that one might think that one day the sword of Bolívar could rise, bringing its gifts to African lands.

That is how the conditions for the emergence of the wildest messianic postures, Salvationist preaching, and even xenophobic outbreaks under the shadow of traditional bolivarianism are being set up. Let me write, to conclude this part with, that the winds of a dictatorship, corrective of democracy vices, can sweep these political postures to save society from greater harm. The only problem is that in politics it’s necessary to be aware of soul saviors.

II.- THE LANGUAGE OF THE REVOLUTION

In this part, I attempt to show the relationship between language and power, as well as on the new discursive structure on which the present regime in Venezuela is based on the language of duplicity, cynicism, ambiguity, of the social lie converted into official truth⁸.

After five years of “Bolivarian”-militaristic government in Venezuela, some of the most conspicuous characteristics of this language can be outlined:

The language of Chavez introduces and magnifies political personalism through a mechanism that defames */difeimes/* political parties and the role that they have played in the democratic history of the country. This language, used in his principal speeches, has idealized the possibility of minimizing, if not suppressing, the parties as mediators between the State and society. And at least two elements should be emphasized: **first**, the criticism of the political parties carried out in the discourse of power is opportunistic and ideologically self-interested: on the one hand, in the specific case of Venezuela, it puts aside the importance that the party system had in maintaining democracy; and on the other

⁸ Vaclav Havel, “Speech given Monday, September 23, 2002, at Florida International University”. See Leal Curiel, C., *El lenguaje charlatan*, Mimeo, Caracas, January 2004.

hand, criticism is focused on pointing to the parties as the only ones responsible for the deterioration of and the crisis in the Venezuelan political system. In this manner, the disparaging /dis'pereging/ expression "*particracy*" – eventually connected to terms such as "*politickers*", "*the rotten cupolas*" or "*politicking as a vice*", meaning a government "*not only of the parties, but for the parties*". Without failing to recognize the specific responsibilities the political parties have had in the crisis in Venezuelan democracy, other factors were also responsible for it⁹. **Second**, the reductionist criticism coming from the government sector discourse wherein the parties are considered to be an evil and the only ones responsible for the crisis in the country would require the evaluation of the responsibility of the media in the building up and reinforcement of Hugo Chavez with his contempt for the democracy of parties. This generated "anti-party thought" which presumes, in one of its versions, the eventual substitution of the parties as mediators between the State and society "*with non-party personalities who, acting as charismatic leaders, are capable of establishing direct contact with the people*".

The language of power in Venezuela promotes a personality cult. How does this cult express itself and how is it related to anti-party language? It must be pointed out that the association of Chavez's followers with politics is not an ideology or an organic group as a political party might be, but loyalty to a person who personifies "the project", no matter what it may be and much less whether the lack of a project is reduced merely to adhesion to a person who embodies his own personal project. All the campaigns and government sector propaganda make Chavez the subject: "*With Chavez, the people rule*"; the slogan against the opposition that says "*Chavez has them crazy*"; the many expressions of government sector spokesmen who never fail to point out in all their presentations: *as President Chavez said*", "*as President Chavez proposed*"; or also the manner in which the personality cult is expressed in a three-level scene that is displayed in all the acts of the government sector masses (besides the red military beret, the three levels of political dramatization are: Chavez above, the chosen ones on the middle stand and the masses below). This personality cult and its relationship with the exaltation of a Messianic leader originates in the crisis of republican beliefs that sustained the idea and the practice of politics, whose worst expressions are: 1) Disdainful thought with respect to representative democracy..., (which) tells us that it is necessary to reinvent a democracy directly from the masses – direct and protagonist democracy. (...) And thus, from a lawn bowling green or a domino table, in some cockfighting pit, ..., without the intervention of the State or the political parties, each member of the civil society will decide on his own and obtain what is best for all the Venezuelans. The battle cry of this prophecy is simple: the nation belongs to whoever may want to embody it. 2) The other trend was that of irresponsible virginal freshness, which postulated at that singular moment of the republic that "lack of experience, inexperience or the inability to have experience have been transformed into attributes of 'freshness' in order to take hold of the executive and attempt to exercise the difficult art of governing"¹⁰. With the new constitution, the revolutionary institutional framework in Venezuela since 1999 has been reduced to creating the legality necessary for the exercise of the will of arbitrary and personal power. Besides personalism, the government sector language is totalitarian. And when I say political personalism, I understand it as the personal exercise of power, whether

⁹ Rey, Juan Carlos, *Annual José Gil Fortoul Conference*, Academia Nacional de la Historia, October 2003.

¹⁰ Castro Leiva, L, *El 23 de enero de 1958*, José Agustín Catalá Ed., El Centauro Ediciones, Caracas 2002.

this is the expression of a pure will for power subject only to the discretion of whoever rules, which is directly related to the institutional fragility of a nation or to the confusion between personalities and institutions¹¹. Confusing the State with concrete persons implies “personalizing” the State. The State cannot be confused with the people from whom it arises or with the government that gives life to it or much less with the ruler who owes it recognition and respect because he is subordinate to it¹². When I say totalitarian, I refer to a language that does not accept dissidence, a unique language that does not accept intermediaries. A language that is singularly dangerous, singularly impregnated with real effects and spoken strictly to a populist political system of a military and totalitarian type. Today, the power of the State is sequestered by Hugo Chavez, who, by means of a revolutionary fetish, exercises totalitarian control not only of the executive power, but also of all the other powers. The most common expressions sustaining this argument are: “*All that is against Chavez is against the people*”, “*Revolutionary power is the power of the people*”. On the occasion of the beginning of the collection of signatures to revoke his mandate, the President threatened the signers /sainers/ in the following manner: “*Those who sign against Chavez, in reality are not signing against Chavez (...) They are signing against their country, against the future and they will go down recorded in History because they are going to have to place their names, their surnames, their signatures, their identification card numbers and their fingerprints*”¹³ (on the signature collection forms). Menacing words that show nothing other than nervousness in the face of the possibility of being separated from power; words bearing a totalitarian meaning, which, at the same time, establish identification of the leader with the country, with history, with the future. We are in the presence of what, from the perspective of analytical philosophy of language (Austin), sustains that words are action; these are called “*performing acts*”, that is, “those who say what I say allow the effective realization of the action that I am mentioning”¹⁴. Among the so-called performing acts, we find promises, oaths and menaces from the position of power. Totalitarianism, without going into greater philosophical details, is all thought and political practice that disregards others or seeks to submit them and crush them until they are completely annihilated. Totalitarianism is all excluding political practice. Totalitarianism is the political philosophy based on the dilemma between one or the other, white or black, God or the devil, which Manichean parameters have been upheld by the present revolutionary discourse since its beginning. Democracy, on the other hand, is all political thought that recognizes others as an indispensable complement and sees the aggregate of social good in the combination of contradictory interests. Political negotiation, even in a milieu of confrontation, is the basic rule of all democratic practice. The language of power responds to logic that simplifies complexities; it is a language of confrontation. The majority of those present here belong to the world of knowledge; it is

¹¹ Graciela Soriano de García Pelayo, *El personalismo político hispanoamericano del siglo XIX: criterios y proposiciones metodológicas para su estudio*, Ed. Monte Avila, Caracas, 1996. Rule by a caudillo, the author points out, constitutes one of the American versions of the phenomenon of political personalism, but not the only one. Rule by a caudillo must be understood as the American answer to the disarticulation of the Spanish empire; it is based on the prestige of the leader, on the force of arms (as a condition for obtaining and keeping power), and it can emerge in situations in which institutions are weak and where there is general technical backwardness, from political techniques up to military techniques.

¹² Graciela Soriano de García Pelayo, *VENEZUELA Y CHÁVEZ Frente al Pacto Fundacional*, Instituto de Filosofía de la Universidad Central de Venezuela, Caracas, October 2003.

¹³ Words spoken on October 16, 2003, *El Nacional*, Caracas, October 17, 2003.

¹⁴ Austin, J.L., *How to do things with words*, Oxford University Press, 2nd Edition, 1962.

natural for us to accept complex ideas. However, we cannot fail to recognize the force of the simplifying logic of totalitarian language, mainly its attractiveness to the popular sectors. And that simplification became commonplace, partially founded on “*True lies*”, that is, “*the truths of common sense*”, sustained by prejudices and certain perceptions that have culminated in the creation of myths that are decisive for the political culture¹⁵. This language is linked to a type of “mono-causal” explanation, or that of corruption before 1998 as the source of all the evils of public life, the eventual cleaning of which will regenerate us into a state of original purity, the “refoundation” of the Republic, as the government sector discourse would say. But nothing is said of the immense amount of corruption that has invaded the revolutionary State, its individual supporters and its institutions, principally the Armed Forces. We hear now begin to talk about the “new rich”, the official “Nomenklatura”. Examples of simplification of the government sector language abound, for instance, the request, without a project or any financial evaluation, for a billion dollars from the Central Bank to invest in agriculture, threatening to intervene the Central Bank if they do not consent to this demand. But beyond the many examples, the problem of simplification is that it leads to well-aimed constructions that annihilate the possibility of thinking. These activate faith in the regime and its leader based on true lies. Complementing the foregoing, perhaps it is important to reflect on the eventual relationship that could exist – if indeed it does – between the deterioration of language in the Venezuelan society and the force that simplifying logic has gained, since without language, it is impossible to think and its impoverishment increases the risk of servitude in the face of professional swindlers and liars¹⁶.

The fifth characteristic of the language of the revolution, and related to the foregoing, is the force of its symbolic and non-symbolic language. In Venezuela the revolution is more symbolic than real. This vocabulary, like certain aesthetics and symbology, puts imagery in motion for the government sector, and it revolves around an excluding logic, that of “Bolivarianity” and of the person who embodies it, that is, the maximum leader of the revolution: **Chavez, the one**. The politics of the revolution have become very effectively filled with linguistic and non-linguistic symbols of a personalistic nature. “Bolivarianity” goes through a spectrum, both material and spiritual, that is characteristic of a new political identity, which is at the same time inclusive/exclusive: the country is composed of patriots and anti-patriots, Bolivarians and anti-Bolivarians, friends and enemies of the process, or it stoops to the distinctive use of military parachutist berets or the color red as a sign of the inclusive identity of Bolivarianism. The simplification of the qualifiers of that inclusive/exclusive political identity and the vocabulary that gives life to that language is analogous to the previously mentioned trait of the revolutionary language. It is simplistic and binary /*bainari*/ (good/bad, friends/enemies, patriots/anti-patriots, supporters of Chavez/opposition, with the process/against the process, nationalists/imperialists) and in its mechanism of inclusion/exclusion reinforces the certainty of assumption of the world. Totalitarian mechanisms are used to reinforce this language-vocabulary-vision of the world, such as: the required broadcasting by all the radio and television stations of the President’s speeches and those of other members of the government, the Sunday program “Hello, Mr.

¹⁵ Ezio Serrano, *Ultimas Noticias*, Suplemento Literario, Caracas, 2000.

¹⁶ *En torno al lenguaje*, Ediciones de la Universidad Central de Venezuela, Caracas, 1989.

President”, which lasts an average of four hours, and finally, the placing of the State TV channel at the exclusive service of the regime 24 hours a day. For example, during 45 days in 2003 – January 1st-February 26th – there were 37 broadcasts required of all the radio and TV stations, that is, almost one a day. Chavez appeared on 22 of these and the different ministers on 15. They lasted a total of 60 hours: 58 hours in which the President spoke and two hours in which the others spoke¹⁷. Furthermore, between 1999 and April of 2003, Chávez spoke in special radio and television transmissions for 12.580 minutes. Not counting the hundreds of public speeches during several electoral campaigns. (*El Universal*, Caracas, May 1, 2003). This represents a veritable wealth of information about what could well be called the “Bolivarian language”. Its discourse, meaning the sense created by its affirmations and denials, will be a subject of analysis further on.

But returning to symbolic language, images coming from popular painting are seen, such as portrait-murals in which the body of Bolivar is dressed in the uniform of general-in-chief of the republican armies – with the face of Chavez (!) and his sword is replaced by a machete with a shining edge. During Chavez’s first address to the nation as president, when he was sworn in on February 2, 1999, he used and abused five different moments in the life of Bolivar; in this discursive sequence, it could be seen how Bolivar was transformed into Chavez and Chavez into Bolivar.

Through this language of power, a narrative is built that is characterized by denial – once again the logic of simplification and the logic of inclusion/exclusion take effect – of the accomplishments and successes during the 40 years of democracy in Venezuela prior to Chavez. But, on the other hand, a conception of the political practice consubstantial with the idea of denying what is inherent in the domain of politics is put into practice: establish agreements, institutional agreements favoring the purpose itself of politics, which is nothing more than having a good life in common. The logic of political practice is the logic of confrontation: there are only friends and enemies, revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries.

One of the most serious aspects of this confrontation is found in the massive and rapid acceptance of the division in Venezuelan society. The generation of hate on the part of the opposition has been added to the generation of hate on the part of the government sector, since confrontation as a policy has become part of the strategy of the opposition sectors. The acceptance and use of this friend-enemy relationship, as well as the lack of an unrestrained counterbalance to oppose the fallacious narrative of the government sector, in virtue of that use, have ended up legitimating the new national vocabulary with the connotations I have pointed out. The language of duplicity, of lies and cynicism has taken control of the Venezuelan political arena. And, by way of illustration, you should bear in mind the recurrent argument that is heard from persons opposing the present regime when they are obligated to justify their political position. They usually make statements such as: *“I never belonged to the fourth republic (BEFORE CHAVEZ) because I was not in agreement with ‘particracy’ or with corruption, but I do not like what it happening in the fifth republic” (WITH CHAVEZ)*. I doubt that there is a better way than this to express the collective division, the defeat of democratic language and the loss of free political thought.

¹⁷ *El Nacional*, Caracas, March 30, 2003.

In brief, I would like to point out that the language of revolutionary personalism is that which denies the possibility of free thought and if one loses that possibility, then freedom is condemned, because any demagogue or liar could submit us to his servitude.

In five years of revolutionary activity, public life has become banal and we have all contributed to its trivialization. We have naturalized – which is the worst form of servile acceptance – the violence that the government sector language has exercised over us as one more of so many types of violence. We have converted it into front page headlines, into jokes, into “*did you hear what Chavez said? How horrible!*”. The government sector language of aggression and simplification appears even in theatrical works. Let me say a word about the refoundation discourse.

Then, as a result of his redemptory role both as a member of the Armed Forces and a leader of a revolution, Chavez arrives at his favorite discursive proposal: “REFOUNDATION”. Because nothing of the preceding has been any good, everything must be redone: institutions, the role of the Executive, international relations, the interpretation of the world and its challenges, ties with Latin America and the United States, links with neighboring subversive movements, ideas about continental integration, the manner in which democracy and justice are conceived, the distribution of wealth, republican values, the role of the people, the role of the Armed Forces, the participation of the Church, the management of the oil industry, rural property control, the ways in which land is cultivated, the work of the media, the influence of businessmen and the universities. His “refounding” zeal is so great that he even goes to the extreme of proposing new forms of entertainment for society. His words reflect this zeal:

“Today the Fourth Republic dies and the Bolivarian Republic rises. This revolution comes from the Father of the Nation; it comes from centuries back (...) from 1830 (...). Under the aegis of the revolution perspectives and paths were reborn and in that rebirth we now have a people: hopes and paths fell like rain and the people came back to life because, in essence, they had vanished (...)”¹⁸.

Hence, Chavez’s interpretation of Venezuelan reality consists in making the history of the country an immense trash heap to then invent a “refoundation” without ties to the black hole that the 20th Century meant to society. The alternative of inventing, of “refounding” always becomes the alternative of returning to the heroic century 19th Century, where he would be called upon to play a stellar role. Since the discourse of this leader found acceptance and he won the democratic elections in 1998, there has been no lack of disillusioned people or sycophants who, in this new scene, have transformed themselves into players of the role of heroic redemptory priests.

¹⁸ Speech before the National Constituent Assembly (August 5, 1999), on the occasion of the presentation of the proposed “Bolivarian” Constitution, in *Documentos fundamentales de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela*, Ediciones de la Presidencia de la República, Caracas, 2000, pp. 10 and 26.

C O D A

What we are presently seeing – and living – in Venezuela is not simply another drawing of a political and social map: the movement of certain political boundaries related to a dispute concerning new interests, or the sketching of a picturesque populist language, or new forms of social articulation accompanied by new social and political practices. What is happening involves a profound change in the very principles for drawing this map. It does not involve making a stand in favor of or against the present regime, supporting or denying the practices of the drawing of this map, but of adopting new methods of interpretation constructed under in the heat of the great historical changes that are in progress. What we are seeing – and living – at this time in Venezuela is a force that is not at all flowing, plural decentralized.

ADDENDUM CONCERNING TOTALITARIANISM

The president of the republic has always ended up imposing his will and controlling all the powers of the State in an absolute manner. This is called DESPOTISM in the classical political theory. Such enormous despotic and totalitarian will has not been seen in any other Venezuelan president, not even Gomez who used to rule the country for 27 years. How can one doubt the autocratic and totalitarian demeanor of someone who wants to run the country like a ranch and pick the opposition leaders as though they were its foremen? No sign, no gesture, no message of inclusion toward the opposition can be seen in the revolutionary political discourse; it shows only contempt, derision, discredit, disrespect and sarcasm. The opposition is a “pack of ‘squalid’ people; the attempt to collect signatures to revoke his mandate is a ‘mega-fraud’”. The day after the collection of signatures, instead of the country finding a statesman who showed prudence, equilibrium and respect for a large number of fellow citizens deeply involved in a complex and difficult electoral process, this Goebbels-like device was put into action by the president of the republic and his cohorts. Only stupefied masses or fanatical militants could join in such an obviously false, unscrupulous and immoral opinion as this one that was thrust with the greatest brazenness and total impunity upon Venezuela and the world. How could a head of state call an entire process fraudulent on the first day it was being carried out and without a single document to prove this allegation? These are the sinister symptoms of totalitarianism.

We are in the presence of a thunderous Jupiter who decides what is good and what is bad, fair or unfair, right or wrong, without paying attention to the National Constitution of the country or any of the State institutions, of which he is only their representative and not their absolute owner. Has more conclusive proof of totalitarianism in the use of language and in the practice of politics ever been seen?

Essex, May 2004.