

The Missionary Politics of Hugo Chávez

José Pedro Zúquete

ABSTRACT

Through the application of an analytical model categorized as “missionary,” this article examines the cultural and political-religious frames that sustain the leadership of Hugo Chávez. It demonstrates that missionary politics is a forceful presence in today’s Venezuela, and should be understood as a form of political religion characterized by a dynamic relationship between a charismatic leader and a moral community that is invested with a mission of salvation against conspiratorial enemies. The leader’s verbal and nonverbal discourses play an essential role in the development of such a missionary mode of politics, which seeks to provide the alienated mass of underprivileged citizens with an identity and a sense of active participation in national affairs. This study argues that purely utilitarian and materialistic explanations of Chávez’s leadership fail to capture these soteriological dynamics in his movement.

Latin America has long been seen as a fertile ground for the emergence of “charismatic” populist leaders. The leadership of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez has been portrayed as a prominent example of this tendency. Kurt Weyland observes that before Chávez’s ascent to power, “many Venezuelans had become ‘charisma hungry’: They eagerly believed in populist promises without performing a thorough reality check” (2003, 843). Chávez has been called “perhaps the most controversial ‘populist’” in contemporary Latin America (Weisbrot 2006). He has been described triumphantly as “a particularly astute, charismatic and visionary leader” (Collins 2005, 367), with “his charisma deeply penetrating the feelings of the people, who have no doubts about the leader’s convictions” (Domínguez 1999, 131) and, conversely, has been viewed as a tragic “step backward to the violent, personalized rule of the charismatic leader on horseback” (Maxwell 2000, 122).

Though the existing literature has labeled his leadership “charismatic” and has characterized his discourse as “populist,” to the best of the author’s knowledge there has not been an empirical, systematic analysis of the running themes, inner dynamics, and internal coherence and meaning of the discourse of the man who is seen by a number of supporters as the “second Bolívar” for whom Venezuela has waited so long. Furthermore, the dearth of analytical studies of his discourse has meant that, in the author’s view, an important “political religion” dimension has been barely noticed by academic interpretations of the Bolivarian movement. The focus here is therefore not on traditional religion but

on secular religion, understood in a Durkheimian sense as eminently a social and collective force, uniting individuals in communal celebration of their identification with the nation (Durkheim 2001 [1912], 46).

This study is grounded in an extensive analysis of the oral and symbolic discourse of Hugo Chávez.¹ Using methodological contributions from different academic disciplines, it places his leadership within a model for orienting action that is categorized as missionary. This model not only brings to the fore populist and charismatic frames, but also attempts to go further by identifying, systematizing, and connecting the dynamics of the sacralization of politics embedded in Chávez's discourse.

In the spirit of heuristic analysis, this study follows Max Weber's methodology of establishing typical elements and showing their relationships, with the goal of illustrating the existence of unified action orientation. Missionary politics is a characteristic form of political religion that has at its center a charismatic leader who leads a chosen people gathered into a moral community struggling against all-powerful and conspiratorial enemies, and engaged in a mission toward redemption and salvation. This article illustrates how the leadership of Hugo Chávez fits in with and is representative of this ideal-typical model of political action. Before proceeding with an analysis of Chávez's missionary politics, important preliminary observations—related to the theoretical contribution of missionary politics—are in order.

THE VALUE-ADDED OF MISSIONARY POLITICS

The emergence of populist and personalistic movements has often been tied to developments in both socioeconomic and institutional structures. In my view, this emphasis has led to a devaluation of the concept of populism and the importance of ideas, which are often perceived as little more than offshoots of material conditions (Canovan 1981, 11–12). For some time, populism has been joined with socioeconomic developments and cycles. From modernization theories that typically described populism as a stage in the transition of traditional to industrial societies (Germani 1969) to theories of import substitution industrialization that established a link between trade and economic policies and a “populist era” in Latin America (Adelman 1994), much scholarly emphasis was placed on the “manipulation” of the marginalized and unsophisticated masses by “demagogic” leaders. Populism—and its reliance on dominant leaders—was essentially seen as a transitional stage toward modernity that would endure as long as the structural conditions that created it. A more recent argument posits that populism has emerged anew as neopopulism, a defining feature being the advocacy of neoliberal economic policies and programs, rather than the economic-nationalist policies of the “old” populism (Weyland 1999; Leaman 2004).

There is a propensity among academics to view populism either as a reflection of or in conjunction with social and economic structures and trends. A relatively common explanation for the rise of Chávez, for instance, draws on developments in the Venezuelan party system. The decline of support for mainstream parties and the deinstitutionalization of the party system (according to this theory) created, in turn, an opening for an anti-establishment candidate (Molina 2004). In this context of the party system's "demise" and the erosion of the social basis of political representation, the electorate "turned on the political establishment with a vengeance, placing its trust in an insurgent populist" (Roberts 2003, 53).

Concomitantly, the predominant approaches used to explain the success of the leader have been instrumentalist, focusing on both grievance (seizing on economic factors and anti-establishment feelings and exploiting them) and resource mobilization (in terms of clientelism and patronage; for a typical example see McCoy 2004). The unraveling of the Venezuelan party system, the economic crisis the country faced, and the demands of important constituencies (such as the vast mass of the urban poor; Canache 2004) are crucial to understanding Chávez's hold on power in Venezuela. As the Chávez government has invested heavily in social programs targeting the poor—subsidizing food, health care, and education, for example—these material dimensions have certainly spurred popular support, as opinion polls demonstrate (Castañeda 2006; *Latinobarómetro* 2006, 34–54).

The approach in this study differs in its focus on the discursive and ideational components of populism. By analyzing Hugo Chávez's leadership through the concept of missionary politics, this study attempts to reverse the imbalance between structure and agency and to reclaim more autonomy for the leadership dimension, particularly by focusing on leadership as a narrative in which the leader conveys (and personifies) stories of collective national identity (Gardner 1996, 43). A one-sided focus on structural and institutional conditions—which views populist charismatic leaders as "products" of these structures and institutions—may obfuscate the role of agency through discourse, for example, in mobilization, formation of collective identities, and heightening a sense that the time for change has arrived (in this way the leader aggravates the crisis and is not just a "consequence" of it). Furthermore, an emphasis on the material conditions that propel a populist rejection of the status quo downplays the importance of grand narratives of identity and belonging within many of these movements. Most important, such an emphasis neglects the nonmaterial and religious dimensions—the sacralization of politics—that this study integrates into the missionary concept. Although a "full analysis" of populism certainly requires attention to both discursive and structural dimensions (Cammack 1995),

the specific, independent, and nonmaterial dimensions of populist discourse have been overshadowed in the process of “covering it all.”

Other scholars have obviously paid close attention to the discursive dimension of populism. Laclau’s work reclaims the autonomy of the concept of populism, rejects the deterministic link with modernization and capitalism, and focuses on the actual discourse of leaders. Though Shils before him denounced the dangerous dynamics of populism as “an ideology of popular resentment” against the “ruling class” (1956, 103), Laclau asserted in a systematic manner his main thesis: the antagonism between the people and the oligarchy, or elites, is the distinguishing feature of populism (Laclau 1977, 195–96). Although he fine-tuned his discursive approach (by emphasizing that the way of articulating themes, regardless of content, was essential to the concept of populism; Laclau 2005, 43–49), and his thesis has been subject to continuous criticism (Žižek 2006), the bulk of Laclau’s contribution to the literature on populism—the centrality of an antagonistic logic and an “us versus them” dynamic—remains (Mudde 2002, 216; Panizza 2005, 16). Thus, an antisystem dimension is a constitutive feature of populist discourses (Torres Ballesteros 1987, 173; Panizza 2005, 3). “Honest” people, positioned at one end of the spectrum, confront the “corrupt” elites at the other (Mény and Surel 2002, 12). From this perspective, politics becomes a “moral and ethical struggle between *el pueblo* and the oligarchy” (De la Torre 2000, 4).

The missionary politics approach in this study, however, aims at overcoming the two crucial shortcomings of the populist (discursive) framework. First, though populism is a contested concept (Roxborough 1984, 14), most of the literature on it centers on the concept of “the people.” It defines a populist ideology as one that perceives “the people” as a homogenous entity in opposition to the elites, reducing politics to an unmediated and direct expression of the “popular will.” This has meant that social scientists tend to perceive appeals to the people in an instrumental way, as a technique defined primarily in terms of “style” (Knight 1998, 223) or “strategy” (Weyland 2001, 18). It is therefore not surprising that populism is often defined as an “empty shell,” available to all politicians and aimed at mobilizing popular support.

The related emphasis on antagonistic discourse and antisystem dynamics has the consequence of overstressing the negative attributes of populist movements (what they stand against, their grievances) while often viewing their positive attributes (what they stand for, their worldviews) as secondary to the emergence and development of a populist discourse (Torres Ballesteros 1987, 173–74). This instrumental approach—common in literature on populism in Latin America, but also prevalent in that focusing on Europe (see, for example, Jagers and Walgrave 2007)—repeats the same errors of structural-institutional

approaches by committing a similar devaluation of populism, and thereby downplaying the role of content and ideas to the detriment of mechanical variables of political strategies, gains, and benefits.

The second shortcoming of the discursive approach is that myriad scholars in populist literature have made occasional reference to “religious” notions in the discourse and dynamics of populist movements. They have made these references despite a general reluctance by academics to apply, at least systematically, concepts originating in the social-scientific study of religion (such as charisma) to the study of contemporary politics. Max Weber originally lifted the term *charisma* from its biblical background (1 Corinthians 12:27–31) and applied it both to the political domain and to the study of power and leadership. Religious connotations surrounded his definition of charismatic domination: the charismatic “is evaluated as being gifted with supernatural or superhuman or at least specifically out of the ordinary powers not accessible to everybody, and hence as a ‘leader’” (1978 [1922], 241). This definition has made social scientists hesitant to apply the concept of charismatic leadership in “disenchanted times” supposedly dominated by “secular” and “rational” liberal democratic environments. The application of charisma in “more complicated cases than those of medicine men, warrior chieftains, and religious prophets” (Schlesinger 1960, 7; Friedrich 1961, 23; Spinrad 1991, 310) has often been understood as “useless.”

It is no surprise that the use of the label of charismatic leadership has usually been confined to such critical and dramatic events as wars or to revolutionary, authoritarian, or totalitarian movements and regimes of the past (Willner 1984; Van Dooren 1994). When charisma is employed today, it is more often than not associated with a general “likability” and “attraction” (particularly suitable to a media-driven political culture) rather than used to reveal deeper religious meanings. Yet many authors note a “quasi-religious dimension” of populist movements (Taggart 2000, 101; Panizza 2005, 23; Canovan 2005, 122–23). The bond between leaders and followers has been often characterized as “mystical” (Worsley 1969, 240; Torres Ballesteros 1987, 176), and there has been regular reference to the self-perception of populist leaders as “saviors of the nation” (Arditi 2005, 74) of messianic charismatic proportions (Ellner 2001, 7). A few studies have paid more detailed attention to the charismatic and political-religious dynamics of Latin American populisms; for example, Stein’s work on populism in Peru (1980) and De la Torre’s research on Ecuadorian populists (2000). As far as ascertainable, however, there has not been an exclusive study of the sacralization of the political. Analyses have been devoid of a systematic attempt to connect the different manifestations of religious dynamics in the study of populist discourse, teasing out an underlying coherent sacred narrative in the leader’s discourses. When the “religious” has been invoked, it has,

with few exceptions, been done in a mostly fragmentary or desultory fashion.

By taking the discourse of Hugo Chávez as the case for examination, this study draws particular attention to these religious features and shows their interconnectedness. They reveal an internal coherence, a totality; and they are connected with “final goals,” with “totalizing visions” in the form of a quest for redemption from and transcendence of increased globalized disruption and materialism. Missionary politics aims to spotlight the unifying narrative theme of salvation that informs and holds together a populist discourse. Thus, both populist (antagonism between the “people and the masses,” anti-status quo dynamics) and charismatic (the leader as a mythic figure, the attachment to a redemptive mission, the presence of narratives of “faith” and “sacrifice”) features are present in this form of politics.

This analysis links the discussion of charismatic authority to its original Weberian context by grounding it in wider salvationist, symbolic, and narrative fields (Smith 2000, 102). Yet the concept of popular sovereignty, which in this study becomes the “chosen people,” is not the driving force of the missionary framework (as it is in populist literature), insofar as it constitutes part of a larger framework of a political religion that integrates other such constitutive elements as the charismatic leader, continuous ritualization and symbolism, evil and conspiratorial enemies, and apocalyptic and millenarian dynamics. In this manner, politics goes beyond a mere identification with the “sovereign people.” It offers a comprehensive view of the world; it claims to have the answers for ultimate questions, such as the purpose of life; and it aims to shape and purify the collective consciousness, thus bringing about a new society and a new humanity here on earth. All of these elements are present in the politics of the president of Venezuela. There is a strong hypothesis that the missionary dimension illuminated in this case study (and in others; see Zúquete 2007) is present in other contemporary populisms and charismatic leaderships. This, of course, can be ascertained only through further research.

This argument leads directly to the question of why it is important to take account of the transcendent vision and quest for the sacredness that apparently shapes the discourse of the leader. The literature on social movements has pointed to the centrality of nonmaterial forces in the development of collective identities. Aminzade and Perry, for example, have decried the lack of research into the ways that “the cultural dimensions of religion inform secular claims making, including the role of the sacred in shaping oppositional identities, emotion rules, temporal orientations, logics of action, and perceptions of threat, opportunity, and success” (2001, 158). They could well have added “the quest for salvation and issues of purity, sacrality, profanity and pollution” (Smith

2000, 105) to the list of cultural frames that remain generally underresearched in populist movements and, more specifically, in regard to Chávez's leadership.

Approaching the subject matter of this article through one prism (the missionary dimension) in no way claims or even implies that this is the only relevant prism. The main point is that the literature on populism, and especially on Chávez, has almost completely overlooked this dimension. The missionary dimension of Chávez's leadership coexists with other dimensions.

A related issue regards the weight that Chávez's missionary form of politics carries among the population and the extent to which missionary politics provides an explanatory value for the follower's attachment to the leader. The assumption here is that it probably plays an important role. Why else would the leader make such an effort to present himself in this manner? But an empirical test of this hypothesis is outside the scope of this article, for such a test would require significant research with a heavy emphasis not only on opinion polls but, more important, on focus groups and detailed, in-depth interviews with Chávez's supporters (particularly relevant for assessing the affective and emotional dimensions; see Weyland 2003). The aim here is to provide the material that would permit such tests in the future. Before discovering how effective missionary political rhetoric actually is, we need to define its properties and implications.

That said, it must be added that a rigid either-or distinction between rational and emotional appeals seems to be unrealistic and reductive of human nature, as recent research in neurobiology, for example, demonstrates (Damásio 1994). Both missionary and materialistic appeals may exist together or may have a joint impact on the same individual. Social science should be careful to avoid treating human beings as robots, and should be amenable to an informed approach to such nonmaterial factors as emotions (Lutz and White 1986, 431), to symbolism and the sacralization of power (Kertzer 1988, 2–3), and, at a fundamental level, to discourses that zealously appeal to ultimate ends and to the transcendent. The quest for redemption and for the absolute is not exclusive to "primitive" tribes, but is a trait of "civilized" nation-states as well (Alvarez Junco 1987, 226; Lindholm 1990).

THE LEADER'S CHARISMATIC DIMENSION

Weber's groundbreaking work on leadership illuminates how a leader figure's proclamation of a "mission" plays an important part in generating a charismatic relationship between a leader and followers. The charismatic leader is driven by a sense of mission or calling: "[D]evotion to the charisma of the prophet, or the leader in war, or to the great dem-

agogue in the *ecclesia* or in parliament means that the leader is personally recognized as the innerly 'called' leader of men" (Weber 1958, 79; Aberbach 1996, 3).

Hugo Chávez has portrayed himself as a missionizing figure, a leader who intends not only to repair failed policies but, at a much "deeper" level, to save his nation from decadence and to assist in its rebirth as a "new Venezuela." On an internal level, the mission proclaimed entails ending the historical humiliation and neglect of the people at the hands of the elites, creating in this way a "true democracy."² On an external level, the goal is to restore to Venezuela its lost dignity and independence while making the country lead an alternative world order (commencing in South America) against U.S.-led globalization. This study argues that Chávez, through both rhetoric and symbolism, has played a crucial role in the development of the perception of his leadership as a "missionary" one.

The first dimension that emerges from his leadership is the image of Chávez as an exemplary figure, a moral archetype. Chávez presents an image of someone who has always lived for his ideal, continually struggling for his cause, and who has made great sacrifices to defend his homeland. Through this narrative, Chávez establishes himself as an example to follow, a model of patriotism. This element has been a recurrent feature of the leader's speeches, especially invoked when his leadership is threatened. "I put myself again in the frontline for this battle for Venezuela," Chávez said during the oil strike that paralyzed the country.³ "I guess I was born for this, to fight for the homeland" (2003a, 9). During one of his weekly addresses to his people, Chávez said that he "had no doubts that I will dedicate the rest of my life, what's left of it, according to God's will . . . to you [the] Venezuelan people. . . . I really feel the love you give me," he continued, "and the only way I can pay you back is to give you all my life" (2004a).

Intimately linked with the image of the leader as nothing more than a "soldier of the homeland" (Chávez 2004b) is the portrayal of Chávez as a self-sacrificing son of Venezuela who sacrifices his own self-interest and well-being for the future of his country. As he said in a speech, "my life belongs to you, my life does not belong to me, [but belongs] to the Venezuelan people, and we will remain together until the end of our days" (2006b). Thus the leader is a martyr. Because he has always been unwavering in his loyalty to the homeland and has never once caved in to the interests of factions, Chávez has been the victim of systematic persecution. Spending time in jail has only invested his narrative with authenticity. Here is how Chávez described how he felt during the failed coup to oust him from power in the spring of 2002: "I was put in jail again, as I was ten years earlier, for the same cause, [my] irrevocable compromise with the Venezuelan people, who have been betrayed a

thousand times by cowards and opportunists. I will not be one of those Trojan Horses” (Díaz Rangel 2002, 159–67). “[R]eady to die on my feet, with dignity,” Chávez said in an interview, “I told myself: Your time has come, but you’ll die because you were loyal to your people” (Harnecker 2002, 230).

Chávez has many times alluded to the possibility of being assassinated in pursuit of his mission, for his enemies will stop at nothing: “There is a minority that can turn violent, which would be regrettable . . . as you know, they have thought about killing me, which would have unpredictable consequences” (Díaz Rangel 2002, 124; Muñoz 1998, 426; ABN 2007a). This theme of sacrifice is also present in the way Chávez laments the damage that his commitment to his cause has inflicted on his personal life. “This is a hard and painful battle,” he once declared to his supporters, “because we even lose longtime friends.” However, the leader concluded, this “doesn’t matter, because this [struggle] is not about personal feelings but [is] about a compromise with a collective” (2003d). Reflecting on his failed attempt to overthrow the government in 1992, Chávez said, “As a father I will never forget the night of February 3, 1992. To leave my home and my children while they were sleeping . . . to kiss them . . . it was terrible. Terrible! It is like leaving behind a piece of my soul” (Chávez 1999). Because the “Battle for Venezuela” is time-consuming and demanding, Chávez declares his empathy toward those who stopped fighting because “not everyone is like ourselves, who leave behind wife and children. . . . Maybe we have a superior strength that pushes us further than they” (Harnecker 2002, 122–23).

In his discourse, the president identifies himself with the excluded, the downtrodden, and the poor, thus managing to add another, popular dimension to his leadership: Chávez as the people. He puts forward a life story of a “simple and common” man with humble origins who, because he is from the people, has a basic, genuine understanding of and empathy with the struggle and the hardships that the common Venezuelan must endure to survive. These addresses are full of vivid images of the young Chávez living a modest life of “selling fruit and ices on the streets” in his hometown of Sabaneta to support his family (Díaz Rangel 2002, 31). He emphasizes repeatedly his unpretentious lifestyle and his detachment from material interests. The leader once said, for example, in an address: “I never had a credit card. Many people have one, but I don’t think I ever will. I’m not interested in consumerism” (2004a). He has denounced as “capitalist propaganda” the “poison” of consumerism (2007b).

Chávez’s rhetorical style emerges as a natural consequence of this “popular” dimension: his language is plainspoken, direct, and many times, particularly when addressing the perceived enemies of his project, crude. He has often characterized sectors of the opposition as a “fas-

cist, pro-coup, and terrorist reaction” against the people of Venezuela (2003a, 344). Chávez has labeled George W. Bush “Mr. Danger,” “Mr. Devil” (2006c), and, in one of his addresses, both called him a “donkey” and challenged him to “come here Mr. Danger, coward, assassin . . . alcoholic” (*El Universal* 2006b).

Chávez’s addresses to the people—particularly his weekly radio appearances on *Aló Presidente*—often simulate an ordinary conversation between the president and his listeners. An informal and conversational style predominates, fostering an intimacy between the leader and his listeners and adding to his “popular” image of being someone who is “just like us.” Chávez tells stories about his past, shows his audience older photographs of himself, and describes his emotions about different episodes of his life (2006c). As he once said, “I am a human being, I laugh about myself. Sometimes I’m wrong, I’m exactly like you are. Anyone can make a mistake” (2004b). Chávez’s colloquial style can also be seen in the way his “conversations” with the people are full of historical anecdotes, poems, and even popular songs, which he sings to his audience. In this way Chávez shows that he is proudly (and sometimes loudly) in touch with the popular and folk elements of his culture.

Another element that helps to establish Chávez as unconventional in the popular mind (compared to “traditional” political elites) is a form of machismo that appears at certain times. Chávez suggested that U.S. secretary of state Condoleezza Rice suffers from “sexual frustration” (*Observer* 2006). In one of his speeches, Chávez blew Rice a kiss and said, “Don’t mess with me, girl” (Reuters 2006). Chávez’s discourse establishes him as the embodiment of the will of the people. “I am not myself, I am the people,” he said in a message to the National Assembly. “I say these words . . . with the conviction of someone who swears an oath” (2003a, 175). “I represent, plainly, the voice and the heart of millions,” he declared on another occasion (2003a, 118). Chávez tends to use the personal pronoun *our* when discussing his projects for the country, thus connecting his will and the people’s will. He declared, “The year 2002 was a year of supreme tests to our people, to our revolution, our democracy, [and] our Bolivarian project” (2003a, 249). Attacks on the leader become attacks on the people. “This is not about Hugo Chávez, this is about a people,” he said. “We the Bolivarians, we the revolutionaries, we are not afraid of any threats by any oligarch no matter how rich or powerful” (2003a, 105).

All these dimensions solidify the image of Chávez as a figure of historical importance who is driven by a sense of mission to save his country. They help to create the image of the leader as the missionary. He denies any role in this process of creation of what he has himself called the “myth of Chávez” (Harnecker 2002, 224). “It would be very sad and unfortunate that a process of change, a revolutionary process, would be

dependent on a caudillo,” he said. The president is, after all, “just an individual at the mercy of circumstances” (Harnecker 2002, 59–60). However, sometimes open though often implicit analogies between Chávez and the great figures of Venezuelan and world history are diffused throughout the leader’s discourse. This can often be seen in Chávez’s comparisons between his own era and that of the man who helped to liberate a large part of the continent, including Venezuela (where he was born), from Spanish rule, Simón Bolívar. In the same way that the historical elites opposed Bolívar’s project, modern elites oppose the project of Chávez. On numerous occasions, Chávez has proclaimed that Bolívar “has returned” to give back to the people the justice that was lost through the rule of the elites. Here is a typical way Chávez frames this analogy:

Bolívar declared in 1810: “Let’s build together and without fear the crucial cornerstones of Latin American freedom. If we vacillate, we lose.” Today I declare, two hundred years later, in the same city of Caracas, and in front of the awakened giant, the Venezuelan people, let’s build together the crucial cornerstones of the Bolivarian revolution. If we vacillate, we lose. (2003a, 127).

This constant cross-referencing between the mission of important figures of Venezuela’s past—Bolívar is preeminent among them, though others, such as Francisco de Miranda, Ezequiel Zamora, or Simón Rodríguez, are occasionally substituted—and the mission embraced today is constant in Chávez’s speeches. It helps to consolidate Chávez’s aura as a “savior,” a leader who, like the revered examples from the past, can liberate the country and its people from oppressive and “anti-national” minorities.

Today, the people of Venezuela have resurrected the dream of Bolívar; today Bolívar has come back with his flag of justice. Bolívar came back, and he is here in the streets of La Vega, and Bolívar is the people of Venezuela. That is Bolívar. Simón Bolívar, the greatest man of America, has returned and has arisen with the people that has been humiliated for almost two hundred years. (Chávez 2003a, 127–33)

The different dimensions of Chávez’s leadership that emerge from his discourse—his moral example, his identification with the people, his willingness to be a martyr, and his historical significance as a “great man”—together serve as the driving force of the missionary aspect of his charismatic leadership. In this case, charisma should be understood not in the superficial sense of “likability,” but in the Weberian sense that portrays a leader who is driven by a “call” to save the community and is bent on transmitting his “vision” through his discourse to his followers (Tucker 1970, 86–87). The question is how to make those who listen,

the audience, feel not that the leader has a mission but that they themselves are part of the mission and crucial to its success.

THE CHOSEN PEOPLE

To make the people feel that they are part of this mission, Chávez developed through the years a discourse of identity. The first pillar of this discourse regards historical continuity: the hardships and challenges faced today by the people of Venezuela are, in essence, those that the people of Venezuela faced in the past. The enemies are also similar. This frequent linkage of past and present empowers followers by making them feel that their struggle is not circumstantial but historical. They are participants in the long-running struggle for liberation of the Venezuelan people. “In the same way that Miranda and Bolívar, together with the people of Venezuela, two hundred years ago, liberated Venezuela from the Spanish yoke,” Chávez declared in a typical utterance, “today, you [the people], all together, we are liberating the Venezuelan people. It is a new freedom, a new enterprise of independence” (2003a, 16).

It is therefore unsurprising that Chávez heralds both his ascension to power and the beginning of the Fifth Republic as the natural successor to the Third Republic of Bolívar. The Fourth Republic (between 1830 and 1999) is dismissed as “oligarchic and anti-Bolivarian” (Chávez 2004a) because the “Venezuelan oligarchy, after the war for independence, murdered the dream of Bolívar, betrayed Bolívar, and took control of all the land and resources of the country” (Chávez 2003a, 90). Herein lies the need for a true “battle for the memory” of the Venezuelan people; therefore Chávez emphasizes the “need” to combat what he sees as distortions of the “official historiography.”

Thus the history written under the old hegemonic order—which emphasized the country’s liberal tradition and celebrated the end of Isaías Medina’s rule in 1945—is rejected, and a new interpretation that stresses state intervention, popular revolts, and radical figures is promoted. There is an urgent need for the “education” of the people, rejecting “the counterculture that has invaded us and that has, in good measure, deleted our historical memory” (Chávez 2003c). Chávez said in an interview, “I believe that our movement has gone to the roots . . . to a history that has been buried but that palpitates in places and in the memories of many people” (quoted in Muñoz 1998, 30). The attempt to create in every state “Bolivarian” universities with “Bolivarian” student unions, for example, should also be understood in light of this need to reinforce an alternative history that combats the “official,” hegemonic history. The same can be said about the creation of the Bolivarian Circles, community groups that serve to “enlighten” the population by keeping alive the “revolutionary” fervor and the lessons of Bolívar as a flame against the

disinformation and deception coming from the mainstream media. The government has even created a National Center of History with the goal of “democratizing the national memory” (ABN 2007b). There is thus a need for a communication battle against those interests that promote a “falsified” history and a “distorted” view of reality.

Chávez denounces the owners of opposition media as “enemies of the people” because “they deny a fundamental human right to the Venezuelan people, the right to be informed” (2004d). He has even set up a new pan-Latin America channel, Telesur, intended as a counterweight to CNN’s “tyranny” and persistent “campaign against Venezuela” (Chávez 2004c). Thus Chávez expresses the need to break the perceived “taboos” of the dominant paradigm (marginalization of the poor, devastating effects of globalization) by creating new sources of knowledge (regular contact between the leader and the people, new universities, new forums of discussion for the Bolivarian ideology), which are promoted through new media channels. The weekly live program *Aló, Presidente*, through which Chávez many times announces both new policies and the reasons behind them; the creation of a new public channel, Vive Television, and a “Bolivarian” news agency, along with the replacement of a private TV station with a new state-funded public channel (Teves); the regular praise that Chávez gives to such sympathetic newspapers as *Ultimas Noticias* or *Vea*—these constitute new conduits through which “suppressed knowledge” (Barkun 2003, 27) can pass, without “alteration,” to the Venezuelan people.

The other pillar of Chávez’s discourse of identity has to do with the historical awakening of the Venezuelan people triggered by the Bolivarian revolution. After “almost two hundred years” of humiliations and indignities under the rule of a privileged minority, the collective, the people of Venezuela have finally started to become aware of the nation’s glorious past, proud of its roots, and empowered by its new role in the creation of a new era of justice and dignity not only for Venezuela but even for the rest of the continent.

Chávez’s discourse contains three main ideas underscoring this historical awakening of the Venezuelan people. First is the idea of consciousness: the nation has now finally become conscious both of how weak it has been in the past and of how strong it could be in the present in order to create a new Venezuela. It has finally become aware of its potential. Before he became president, Chávez talked about the need to “inspire a people whose historical consciousness of what it was, of what it is, and of what it can be, is very low” (quoted in Muñoz 1998, 95). “The most important thing that Venezuela can have today,” Chávez declared in a speech, “is not a man, but a conscious people, you [the people] conscious of what is happening, awake, conscious, marching” (2003d).

Venezuela now has a conscious people that has discovered the dignity that it lost. Here is the second idea that recurs in the discourse and that testifies, in Chávez's eyes, to the people's historical awakening. He has many times defined the mission as a "battle for our freedom, our dignity, our independence" (2003c). He called his failed coup of February 4, 1992, a "rebellion of dignity" (2003b), a crucial step toward the recovery of self-worth by the people of Venezuela.

Third, a people that has risen from such a long period of oppression as that of Venezuela will seek to claim justice. In Chávez's eyes, this justice is a historical inevitability, for the people of Venezuela have been "the most betrayed people in the history of America" (2003a, 175). "If there is no justice, keep in mind," Chávez enjoins, "there will be no peace in Venezuela" (2003a, 100). This battle for justice is twofold: it involves a domestic fight against the "corruption" and "impunity" of the powerful and an international fight against the "tyranny" of neoliberal forces. In his speeches, Chávez frequently uses an expression from Bolívar to stress this vision of justice: "Yes, one thousand times yes, justice—understood as the queen of republican virtues according to the 'liberator'—is at the center of all our work . . . of all our devotion" (2003a, 176–77).

Such a discourse of identity is framed to empower the followers, thereby transforming the mission of an individual leader into a collective popular cause. Chávez often expresses his trust that the virtues and strength of the people will propel the nation toward the achievement of the mission: "You are the most powerful force that there is between the sky and the earth, sovereign Venezuelan people" (2003a, 89). Chávez repeatedly eulogizes the people's greatness and professes his adoration. "Every day I love you more. . . . Every day I admire you more" (2003a, 43). Aware of their historical role and potential, awake to the challenges in front of them, they constitute the chosen people who will lead in the liberation of Venezuela and in the creation of the new era of dignity and justice for the country and, perhaps, beyond.

A MORAL COMMUNITY

Hugo Chávez puts forward a narrative portraying a community that is besieged, threatened, and surrounded by powerful and conspiratorial forces. The rhetoric of threat and fear serves to maintain the group's mobilization and energy at high levels. (On the importance of "threat" for contentious action, see Goldstone and Tilly 2001). The goal is to remain united and alert against internal divisions that can be exploited by the "enemies of the homeland."

Thus Chávez's discourse is anchored in a dynamic of polarization framed in friend-enemy categorizations. "Here we have the patriots fighting against the antipatriots" (2004a) is a common statement by the

leader. Chávez constantly separates the “people,” the “true” patriots, from the “oligarchy,” those self-serving elites who work against the homeland. During the general strike called by the opposition, Chávez declared, “this is not about the pro-Chávez against the anti-Chávez . . . but . . . the patriots against the enemies of the homeland” (2003a, 85). “There is no third way here,” he stated, typically. “No, here there is only revolution and counterrevolution, and we are going to annihilate the counterrevolution” (quoted in Rohter 2000).

This “oligarchy” is defined as the first and most dangerous internal obstacle to the new era of justice and dignity for the people. By controlling the privately held media in the country (both television and major newspapers), the oligarchy influences Venezuelans’ perception of their government and thus distorts reality. These internal enemies, however, are not alone: they are allied with external forces, which Chávez connects in his narrative both with powerful economic interests and with the U.S. government. Thus the Venezuelan oligarchy is nothing more than a loyal sycophant of the United States.

Chávez paints Venezuela as the first country to rise against neoliberal globalization and to “protest against the hegemonic pretension” of the United States (Chávez 2003a, 323). The idea of a conspiracy of powerful, evil forces arrayed against his community—depicted as the “national” resistance against a unipolar and uniform new world order, led by the United States—frequently recurs in Chávez’s discourse. Chávez connects the dots between different events and provides people with a key to understanding a rapidly changing and confusing reality. The conspiracy logic serves to enhance the “would-be messiah’s charismatic authority” in the followers’ eyes (Tucker 1970, 90; Alvarez Junco 1987, 236–49). It is slight wonder that underlying such disclosure by Chávez is the theme of a “New World Order: a hegemonic project, which was announced with the fall of the Soviet Union and a little before the fall of the Berlin Wall, when it was announced the end of history, the last man, a new technocratic age, the new world order” (2003a, 305–6). To Chávez, “we are facing a conspiracy of international dimensions . . . hegemonic world forces want to disrupt the Venezuelan process because in doing that they are disrupting an alternative path for our people” (2003a, 349).

“Imperial America” is everywhere, and it has declared war on Venezuela. The United States sometimes “acts” indirectly, through its “servants” in the country, as in the failed April 2002 coup attempt to oust Chávez or the 2004 recall referendum, with President Bush as “the true instigator of all these movements against us” (Chávez 2004e). At other times, this “action” is direct: Chávez announced that the United States was “sketching out assassination plans” in order to halt the advance of the Bolivarian revolution. The leader said in his weekly radio program, “if something happens to me, I blame the president of the United

States.” He added, “I will not hide. I am going to be in the streets with you. I entrust myself to God, but I know I have been condemned to die” (2005a). The president has also repeatedly warned his compatriots that the Bush administration has plans to invade the country, so they should get ready to repel it (2006b).

The reason the Venezuelan “community of patriots” has attracted so many powerful enemies is because it is involved, as Chávez insists, in a historical battle. To stress this, Chávez’s language becomes aggressive, even belligerent. Chávez defines his policies and initiatives in terms of battles and uses military terminology. “Now brothers, let us unleash the sword of truth,” he said on one occasion. “All of you are warriors, so let us once again seek the oracle of war and put on our combat boots” (quoted in Rohter 2000). An alternative to what he calls the “fascism of neoliberalism” cannot be sufficiently found through mere political engagement. “It is much more than that: it is a historical battle,” because “what is at stake is not a government or a person but the new century [. . .] the history and the future of Venezuela” (Chávez 2003a, 116).

In this never-ending struggle against omnipotent, ominous external forces, the community of patriots is portrayed as a moral community (Tiryakian 1995, 274), standing alone against all offensives, bound and empowered by nonmaterial values and goals. In these trying times, the members of this community share a common love, sacrifice, and faith in the creation of a new era of justice and dignity for the people. Chávez stresses these values on every occasion. The community is frequently portrayed as a “community of love.” In Chávez’s words, “we are only building with love the homeland that we want” (2003a, 285). Chávez often describes this creation of a new Venezuela as the actions of a people “engaged in a march full of love” (2002). The mission is depicted as a sign of selfless love for Venezuela: “Let’s be like Christ, let’s be like Bolívar, let’s get rid of everything, of any personal ambition, and let’s give everything for this revolution, for this people, for this love, for this hope” (2005b).

The path is full of challenges and requires sacrifice. Chávez warns, “It is possible to make our project of a homeland a reality... but we cannot be triumphant, no, no, the road is very hard, we have very powerful forces against us” (2005b). Community members’ full commitment is required, “but we don’t want easy roads; let all the obstacles, now and in the future, come to us, and we will defeat them with our will and our work” (2003a, 272). Chávez also emphasizes the faith that drives the community of patriots in the realization of the mission: “We the patriots, those who believe in our America, those who have this hope, this faith that moves mountains” (2003c). Chávez, as president, will lead this chosen people “forward in search of our dream, [for] defeat is impossible [and] our path leads to victory” (2003a, 283).

The focus on values helps to create both an internal dynamic of self-righteousness and a conviction about the absolute goodness of the chosen people's mission against its wicked enemies. To reinforce this conviction, Chávez constantly compares the Venezuelan people's mission to the work of Christ. "The morality is on our side," Chávez has announced. "God is with us, because this is the fight of God. . . . Who can defeat us?" (2003a, 144). "Wherever there's someone fighting," Chávez has exhorted his people, "wherever there's a fight for equality and true justice, there will always be Jesus" (2004b).

The leader's emphasis on the spiritual forces that pervade and sustain the community in its missionary path may serve as one explanatory factor for many of his followers' high levels of emotion, energy, commitment, and activism. These features were visible in the way Chávez supporters swarmed the streets demanding his return after he was briefly ousted in the April 2002 coup, or in the high levels of turnout when they feel that "their" project might be at risk, as with the recall referendum of 2004 (CNE 2004). The activism of the members is rewarded by the psychological and emotional benefits of belonging to such a moral community.

MYTH, SYMBOLISM, AND RITUAL

A prominent aspect of Chávez's missionary leadership is his steady use of myths, rituals, and symbols to sustain both the community and its commitment to the mission. Such activity establishes a form of popular participation that many people perceive as more "authentic" and "real" than previous modes, while creating at the same time messianic expectations about the leader and, consequently, playing an essential role in the development of a charismatic dynamic between the leader and the community. "The leader who becomes charismatic is the one who can inadvertently or deliberately tap the reservoir of relevant myths in his culture," wrote Willner in her study on charismatic leadership, "and who knows how to draw upon those myths that are linked to its sacred figures, to its historical and legendary heroes, and to its historical ordeals and triumphs" (1984, 62).

Myth has played an important part in Chávez's discourse. This may be witnessed through the observation of three interdependent dimensions. The first is the mythification of the historical narrative. The history of Venezuela as transmitted by the leader is a dramatic parade of sacred, saintlike figures who have engaged in holy battles to defend the sacred homeland against powerful forces. On every occasion, Chávez invokes this mythologized historical narrative of "pure" patriots against "corrupt" enemies, darkness against light, good against evil. Historical figures are elevated through Chávez's hagiography to transcend their human condition and attain a quasi-divine status. But unlike previous cults—and the cult of Bolívar enjoyed a long history preceding Chávez's

incessant invocations of it—these figures are not ossified monuments to the past. Instead, their exemplary lives become the driving force of the Bolivarian revolution. “Bolívar is more alive than ever, Bolívar has come back body and soul, Bolívar lives and so will the fight,” Chávez has announced (2003d). A similar mythologizing treatment has been given to the figures of the peasant leader Ezequiel Zamora and Bolívar’s mentor and close friend, Simón Rodríguez.

Chávez places the words and actions of this trinity of heroes at the center of his project for the country. In his discourse, Venezuela’s historical past is collapsed into the present in such a way that it transcends human, linear time and creates what can be called an eternal present, a living continuity, in which past wars fought over the independence of the country, for example, are experienced as “eternal” sources of the spiritual strength of the Venezuelan people. The past is not dead but is relived in the present.

From this framework come the repeated analogies between the battles fought in the past and those fought today. The decisive victory of Bolívar’s army against the Spanish forces in the battle of Carabobo (1821) is celebrated not merely as a historical memory but as a call for action in the present. “One hundred eighty years after Carabobo—the road has brought us back to Carabobo one hundred eighty years later,” declared Chávez. “We must return to this course: we are not at the center of the road, but I do believe that we are approaching it once again, that we are returning to our own roots” (2001b). Chávez has proclaimed his intention to remain in power until 2021, the two hundredth anniversary of Carabobo, on which day the people will celebrate two anniversaries: the historical battle and “the new independence of Venezuela” (Chávez 2003a, 274).

In another example associated with this mythic continuity between past and present, the new land reform law that enraged large landowners came into force on December 10, 2001, the anniversary of the battle in which Ezequiel Zamora, leading an army of peasants, defeated the forces of the landowners (Marcano and Tyszka 2005, 214). In his addresses to the public, Chávez often notes the historical significance of a date and explains its importance to the present. For example, when he read the famous speech of Bolívar to the Congress in Angostura, Chávez added, “Today, one hundred ninety years after this speech, we are going after the same dream” (2004a).

Present-day policies are named after historical figures in order to reinforce the connection with the mythic past. The social welfare and education programs launched by Chávez—referred to as missions—are named after such “sacred” figures as Zamora (for land reform), Robinson (pseudonym of Venezuelan philosopher Simón Rodríguez, for literacy), Ribas (for education, named after José Félix Ribas, another figure

in Venezuela's fight for independence), or Guaicaipuro (for the indigenous peoples, named after an indigenous anti-Spanish leader). Chávez proclaimed his campaign in the recall referendum on his presidency to be a new "Battle of Santa Inés," invoking Zamora's 1859 victory over the oligarchs, and named his "get out the vote" organization "Comando Maisanta," after Chávez's great-grandfather, whom he hails as a radical fighter for the people (Chávez 2004e). These juxtapositions between past and present, far from being irrelevant, are important steps Chávez has taken to enforce both mythical continuity in his sacred narrative and the moral community's attachment to that narrative.

A second dimension of the centrality of myth in Chávez's discourse deals with the mythification of the people. Canovan notes how populist movements place the people "in the realm of myth" with powers of redemption over the ills that afflict society (2005, 139). Chávez indeed transforms the Venezuelan people in and through his discourse into such an all-powerful "mythic being," granted special dispensation to redeem the country from its past mistakes and build a new Venezuela. The Venezuelan people collectively represent a "giant who has awakened," the "heroic people of Simón Bolívar" (Chávez 2003a, 124), the ones who will execute and fulfill the Bolivarian transformation of the country, because "this revolution does not belong to a man or to a caudillo [but] belongs to the Venezuelan people" (Chávez 2003a, 256). Chávez rarely misses an occasion to remember the Venezuelan people's heroic character: "You know that I belong to you," he said in a speech. "All the years that I have left I will dedicate fully to fighting for the Venezuelan people whom I love more than my life, because you are a heroic people, you are a beautiful people, you are a great people, hero and liberator" (2003a, 144).

Tied with this mythic nature of this "grandiose" and "invincible" people (Chávez 2003a, 192–93) is the third dimension of myth in the discourse of Chávez: the mythologization of the leader. Invocation of religious rhetoric infuses Chávez's image with a messianic aura. References and analogies to Christ permeate Chávez's statements. Here is an example of this dynamic:

We are building a true democratic State of justice and law. . . . And I'm happy and [I] praise God, my Lord; Christ my redeemer; Christ, our father; Christ, the one who came to our world to fight for justice and to defend those who are oppressed and the vulnerable, and I praise the Lord because He has allowed me, with these hands, these peasant hands, these hands of a soldier, to finally start making justice. (Chávez 2003a, 135)

Chávez establishes a parallel between the life and mission of Christ, whom he calls many times "my commander-in-chief" (2003c), and the

Bolivarian mission that Chávez has launched in contemporary Venezuela. Chávez portrays the anti-imperialist thrust of his social policies as the re-enactment of Christ's own combat against the powerful on behalf of the poor. As Chávez once reminded his weekly audience in *Aló Presidente*, "Christ was a rebel: Christ lived, He was a human being, an anti-imperialist rebel, He faced the Roman empire, He faced the powerful and the economic, political, military, and ecclesiastical elites of his time and, as we know, he wound up crucified" (2005b). The social programs initiated by the Chávez government have been collectively named "Christ's Mission," aiming at achieving "zero misery [and] zero poverty [while inaugurating] equality and liberty in the land of Venezuela" (Chávez 2005b).

A detailed attention to symbolism is a central feature of the sacralization of politics in contemporary Venezuela. George L. Mosse identifies the contribution of nationalism to the production of symbols that become "the self-representation of the nation [and] the means by which the people [have] represented and indeed worshiped themselves" (1988, 4–5). Further, they serve to delimit and strengthen the boundaries of the group, separating the insiders (the people—the good, the pure) from the outsiders (the "antipeople"—the evil, the debased) and deepening the moral righteousness of the community (Kertzer 1988, 18; Douglas 2003 [1970], 115–32).

This attention to the galvanizing potential of symbols was present long before Chávez ascended to power. Chávez has himself made many references to the launch of his first movement, Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario-200, in 1983, on the bicentenary of Bolívar's birth. To enhance the symbolism, Chávez repeated the words of Bolívar in swearing to devote his life to Venezuelan liberation (Márquez 2000, 21). The failed coup of February 4, 1992, an operation significantly named Ezequiel Zamora, has always been celebrated by Chávez and his followers as a supreme step toward the liberation of the people and has accumulated a deep symbolic value in the missionary community.

Given the context of strong popular hostility toward the government, Chávez's defiance in defeat in 1992 and his televised call to surrender *por ahora* (for now) made him a symbol of dignity and hope, a cause of public adulation, and the subject of a series of popular songs and poems (Gott 2000, 71).⁴ His military uniform and trademark red beret came to be associated with a break from the corrupt past and hope in a new dawn. They captured the imagination of many Venezuelans, and the red beret (and the color red in general) was transformed into a political statement, a symbol of the change ahead. The coup was thus transformed into a mythic origin for the Chávez movement, and Chávez never fails to mention the date in his speeches. There are "two 'Venezuelas': that before February 4, 1992, and that after February 4,

1992,” the leader notes, invoking the uprising as a symbol of the “awakening of the Venezuelan people” (2001a). He has announced that “the revolutionary Bolívar was reborn on February 4, 1992, he left obscurity, he left the grave, and he is here with us, embodied in the people, as [Pablo] Neruda says: ‘I will come back every 100 years, when the people awaken.’ In the dawn of February 4 the real Bolívar returned” (2003b).

Since he took office, Chávez has shown that the “battle” for a new Venezuela is crucially waged at a symbolic level. It started with Chávez overseeing the drafting of a new “Bolivarian” constitution that consecrated a Moral Power (with a people’s defender, or ombudsman) and renamed the country as the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (Asamblea Nacional 1999). It continued National Assembly approval of the addition to the nation’s flag of an eighth star, representing the eastern province of Guayana, thus fulfilling Bolívar’s proposal of a flag with eight stars. To Chávez, this is the “Bolivarian star.” Venezuela’s national seal was also changed to feature the white horse galloping to the left instead of to the right. A bow and arrow and a machete were added to represent, respectively, the indigenous people and the labor of the workers (Asamblea Nacional 2006). In order to break with the previous regime’s “celebration of colonization” and to honor the nation’s indigenous peoples, Chávez signed in 2002 a decree that officially changed the Columbus Day holiday to a commemoration of the Day of Indigenous Resistance (ABN 2006b).

These changes to official national symbols are derided by Chávez’s critics as superfluous. A commentator wrote that this “exaggerated focus on symbols” only served to divert attention from the “real problems” afflicting Venezuela (*El Universal* 2006a). Yet in the self-understanding of the missionary community, these are not cosmetic changes; they serve to objectify the popular will and testify that the leader’s sacred narrative (as opposed to the narrative promulgated by the elites) is a genuine attempt to integrate the people.

Yet another element, ritual, plays a crucial role in the missionary dynamic between the leader and his followers. Rituals consolidate the citizens’ attachment to the mission. Chávez’s weekly addresses to the people constitute a rite—a patterned, regular action—by which the leader informs the followers of the next steps to further the Bolivarian revolution, thus deepening the intimacy between his community and him. Chávez’s presidency has been characterized by a constant focus on processions and parades, which the leader attends. Traditional Venezuelan holidays like Army Day and Flag Day have been re-energized and sharply contrasted with the celebrations of the past regime, which were devoid of the enthusiasm that Venezuela’s “rebirth” demands. The national Pantheon has become a central place of ritual attachment to the homeland: not a place for formal and “empty” celebrations, as in the

previous regime, but a place to celebrate the physical linkage of the present “revolution” with the era of historical heroes and the sacred continuity in the present revolutionary moment between past and future.

At the Pantheon in March 2006, Chávez raised the new Venezuelan flag. Chávez and his supporters commemorate every February 4, the anniversary of the 1992 coup, as the “day of dignity,” and, similarly, every year there is a commemoration of the failed 2002 coup against Chávez. A solemn session of the National Assembly and a parade testify, in the words of Chávez, to “the popular Bolivarian triumph against the coup, against fascism, against tyranny” (2004b).

Naturally, the cult of the fallen is at the center of the ritual life of the Bolivarian movement of national regeneration. Chávez’s first act as president was to organize a ceremony in “memory of those who fell on February 4, 1992” (Marcano and Tyszka 2005, 191). The government has unveiled a monument to those killed during the anti-Chávez coup of April 2002. The murder of the magistrate in charge of investigating the members of the opposition behind the coup rose to prominence in the movement’s martyrology; Chávez announced, on the second anniversary of the prosecutor’s death, that his example “will shed light on the paths of the new Venezuela and of the people” (ABN 2006c).

All these dimensions commingle with a final aspect of the sacralization of contemporary Venezuelan politics that aims to transform political action into a tool for a total and complete change, a change that leads not merely to social transformation but to national redemption and salvation.

MISSION TOWARD SALVATION

Political philosopher Michael Oakeshott describes the dynamics of politics of faith (opposed to politics of skepticism) in history, in which “perfection, or salvation, is something to be achieved in this world: man is redeemable in history” (1996, 23). This holistic vision of politics (De la Torre 2000, 67; Alvarez Junco 1987, 257) undergirds the missionary leadership of Hugo Chávez. The goal from the outset has not been to make small, pragmatic changes to an already existing political system; instead, Chávez envisions the creation of new forms of political and social participation that could assist in the rebirth of Venezuela.

To stress this need for a radical transformation of the country, Chávez’s discourse gains an apocalyptic dimension in which the survival of the country and even the world seems to be in question. Chávez often invokes images of death to describe the gravity and urgency of the crisis facing the nation. Chávez regularly states that in the battle against their all-powerful enemies, the “life” and the “existence” of the people are endangered. But this crisis is not circumstantial; it is historical and

epochal, because the contemporary human condition is akin to “a body with AIDS, with no defenses . . . a body that is heading toward death” (quoted in Muñoz 1998, 361).

“I am certain that the world needs to change,” Chávez once remarked. “Society cannot commit suicide; the world cannot end” (2003a, 318). Chávez’s discourse illuminates for the Venezuelan people that “the world as it is, is not viable: If we want the world to end then let’s keep following this road, the road toward hell” (2003a, 158).

It is important that a strong millennial dimension follows the apocalyptic tone in Chávez’s discourse. The imminence of disaster also holds the possibility of both renewal and the creation of a new era. This millennial trajectory in the discourse of the leader is framed in typical Christian terminology. Here is how the “world to come” looks to Chávez:

We are heading toward the beautiful homeland. This is our path, and no one can stop us. We have God on our side, so that the Kingdom of God that Christ announced may turn into a reality, but here on earth, not anywhere else. Let us live like equals, like brothers, in peace, in justice and dignity. That is our path—that’s where we’re heading. (2003a, 271)

The “new era” ushered in by the Bolivarian revolution will bring an end to the suffering and tribulations of the people. By 2021 there will be no poverty or misery in Venezuela (ABN 2006a). The president announced before a crowd of thousands of supporters, in his victory speech after his December 2006 re-election, that they were heading toward the “Kingdom of Christ”—of peace, justice, solidarity, and socialism—“the kingdom of the future Venezuelan” (ABN 2006d; see also Vilorio Vera 2004, 60–61).

There are two notions that testify to the millennial dimension pervading Chávez’s discourse and actions. The first is the universal character of the Bolivarian revolution. Millennialism, as noted by Mary Douglas, “has a message for the world” (Douglas 2003 [1970], 126). By leading the fight against the materialistic, soulless neoliberal forces, Chávez’s Venezuela is offering the world, beginning with and in Latin America, a model of salvation: “the peoples of this continent have their eyes and hearts, once again, on the people of Bolívar . . . the humiliated peoples of this continent have put their eyes and hopes in the Venezuelan people. We cannot fail” (Chávez 2003a, 121).

Chávez’s focus on an independent foreign policy committed to increasing the economic and political union between the diverse peoples of Latin America is indebted to this millennial drive for a new, redemptive path of justice and dignity, which itself drives the Bolivarian revolution. The mission of the community of patriots is expanded in scope and character, so that the real “evil” to defeat is U.S. “imperial-

ism,” the “enemy of the revolution” (*Ultimas Noticias* 2006). After all, “We need to defeat imperialism to save . . . not only ourselves [but] to save the world” (Chávez 2006a). “All those who are poor on earth know that today in Venezuela a hope is rising,” announced Chávez, “because here we are fighting not only for our people *but for all the peoples of the world who deserve justice, life, and dignity.*” The “fight” in which Venezuela engages “is the fight of Christ, the redeemer of peoples,” Chávez reiterated (2003a, 268, emphasis added).

This totalistic character of his politics, what Chávez calls the need for a “comprehensive moral and spiritual revolution” (Chávez 2006c), implies a mission of cleansing and renewal, directed at the “demolishment of the old values of individualism, capitalism, and selfishness” (Chávez 2007a). His rationale for an education reform initiative titled *Moral y Lucas* (morals and enlightenment) was couched in specific spiritual terms of purity and impurity of the dominant capitalist value system. Purified from evil—the capitalism, materialism, and consumerism that “destroys humanity”—a new socialist society “where we can be truly human again” will emerge (Chávez 2007b). Accordingly he has mentioned the universal need for “a new man, a new society, a new ethics” (2003a, 312).

The millennial drive of the Bolivarian revolution also aims to bring forth a true democracy. “We are heading toward the light, toward the open horizon, gradually building a true democracy, and not toward the darkness of the jungle,” Chávez proclaimed (quoted in Rohter 2000). This “revolutionary democracy” will be the embodiment of the new era of justice and dignity promised by the redeeming forces of the Bolivarian revolution. This project of a new, direct, participatory democracy will replace the previous representative democracy, which is derided as formal and false. “I think that the time for a liberal democracy has passed,” Chávez said in an interview. “We need to rethink the concept of democracy . . . we need to invent models” (quoted in Muñoz 1998, 121). Chávez has taken steps to further the image of this “new democracy” that will appear “where the people truly participate” (Chávez 2003a, 324). The repeated holding of referendums is part of this dynamic. The constant dialogue that the leader establishes with his followers—through his weekly addresses, for example—helps those who felt excluded in the past to feel that they are included in the present political debate. These addresses often mimic cabinet meetings and allow people to follow both the decisionmaking process and the rationale behind new policies.

These moments of direct contact between the leader and his followers, these moments of inclusion and participation, give a glimpse into the “real democracy in the making” promised by Chávez. Through such moments, Chávez and his followers bridge the psychological and

physical distance between governors and governed, and thus shorten the distance between democracy as ideal and as practice. In this way, democracy is both felt and experienced by the mass of the underprivileged as authentic. The approval of a *ley habilitante* (enabling law) that gave Chávez broad powers to advance the Bolivarian agenda was made by Congress “on the street,” in an outdoor session in a public square (Plaza Bolívar) in Caracas, among hundreds of Chávez supporters (*El Nacional* 2007), and aimed at increasing perceptions of the “new” Bolivarian democracy.

Of course, in order fully to understand the impact of this missionary dynamic on the followers, a substantive amount of empirical research is crucial. Only then we will know for sure what now remains only a strong possibility: that the community perceives itself as a brotherhood of equals bound by values and mobilized by the same collective mission of redemption and salvation.

CONCLUSIONS

Braun, who writes on the life of the “political savior” Jorge Gaitán, comments that, in neoliberal times, Latin American populists like Chávez are no longer attached to epic and heroic narratives, to “passionate national poems” (2001, 273). Waisbord notes that “charisma is not exactly what it used to be,” due to the lack in Latin American politics of “quasi-prophetic leaders, widely believed to have a unique, revolutionary, charismatic genius” (2003, 210). In the words of Santiso, the end of the twentieth century in Latin America was “marked by the ebb of messianic attitudes and of great teleological projects” (2006). The light cast by the missionary politics of Hugo Chávez, however, may inspire these authors to reconsider these statements. This study has sought to demonstrate that Hugo Chávez has deftly articulated a verbal and symbolic discourse anchored in charismatic and messianic frames, which testify not to the ebb but to the continuing flow of grand and epic stories of renewal and salvation in Latin America, at least in the case of Venezuela.

The leader’s narrative has played an essential part in the establishment of the rhetorical construction of a “missionary community” that is driven by the sacralization of the political, led by a charismatic leader, and bound by common enemies and values. Infused by a holistic vision of politics as a soteriological tool, this missionary dimension provides a worldview aimed at increasing the followers’ sense of belonging and identity and, thus, maximizing their levels of commitment both to the leader and to the mission of “saving” Venezuela. The firm belief behind this study is that social analyses that interpret the leadership of Hugo Chávez only through rationalistic and utilitarian categories risk losing sight of the crucial role played by cultural and political-religious frames

in maintaining and propelling the Bolivarian emancipatory drive for justice and equality in the “new” Venezuela.

NOTES

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1. The bulk of the texts on which this article focuses come from the traditional weekly (and, since 2007, daily) TV and radio talk show *Aló Presidente* (Hello President), hosted by Hugo Chávez. As mentioned throughout this article, these particular broadcasts serve as a ritual, in which Chávez addresses his followers directly and informally; explains the reasons behind his policies, taking calls from listeners; and reveals aspects of his private life. They are important because they reinforce the personal and charismatic dimension of Chávez’s relationship with his followers; in them the leader, using a discourse that appeals to the sacred, repeatedly reveals both the “path ahead” to completion of the collective mission and the obstacles and enemies to be overcome, in order to create a “new” Venezuela. These ritualistic and intimate moments aim to cement in the audience the image and perception of a “true democracy,” in which the Venezuelan people, through an authentic, “popular,” and responsive leader, “finally” have a say in the destiny of their country. For these reasons, these broadcasts, together with speeches in which the leader talks directly to the people, offer insight into the missionary dimension of Chávez’s discourse.

2. It is worthwhile to note that when Chávez talks about the “people” he does not mean it in a civil society sense of the word. In his discourse, “people,” as Daniel Hellinger notes, “refers to a majority of Venezuelans who live in that ‘other’ society, at the margins of civil society as it is known to the wealthy, the middle class, and parts of the working class” (2001, 19). Chávez appeals many times, however, to the middle class to join the Bolivarian battle to renew the country.

3. On February 4, 1992, Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez Frias led a military coup against the Venezuelan government. The rebellion failed, and Chávez and other officials were imprisoned for two years, until a presidential amnesty set them free. Chávez was elected president in 1998 and re-elected in 2000. From the outset, Chávez has faced strong opposition, particularly from media, labor, and business sectors that feared that he was transforming Venezuela into a “new Cuba.” In April 2002 he was the target of a failed coup attempt; later that year a general strike, which continued through the opening months of 2003, was called by the opposition in order to force Chávez to step down or at least call a referendum. Though this strike failed in its goals, Chávez did win an August 2004 recall referendum. In December 2006, Chávez was re-elected president with more than 60 percent of the vote, and won a new mandate to govern for six more years (see CNE 2006).

4. It is significant—and another sign of the importance of symbolism for Chávez—that after narrowly losing a December 2007 referendum on a constitutional reform, he repeated the words of 1992, “for now . . . we could not do it” (ABN 2007c).

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