When the Proletariat Becomes the People: 
Socialism, Populism, and the Politics of Hugo Chávez

“There is no socialism without populism and the highest forms of populism can only be socialist” – Ernesto Laclau

According to the mainstream American media, recent leftist political trends in Latin America reflect a strong resurgence of populism. Political analysts on the right have focused their consternation on the “populist assault” of Hugo Chávez (Ropp 17), while the left has largely busied itself rebutting the allegations by pointing to the substantive changes in Chávez’s Bolivarian Revolution. Indeed, Chávez himself has explicitly rejected the label, insisting, “I’m not a populist; I’m a revolutionary.”\(^1\).

Nevertheless, writers at both ends of the political spectrum have been complicit in the media’s cooptation of the term, allowing its pejorative resonance to dominate a space which should be reserved for a detached, meticulous and above all academic analysis of populism’s relevance to the current political landscape in Venezuela. This is not to imply that intellectuals can successfully effect a revision in the meaning of words which have acquired an alternate vernacular usage. Clearly the quotidian connotations of populism are equally germane to its discussion as the meaning academics would choose to imbue it with. Even so, the failure to separate the two and analyze them independently has obscured a more sophisticated understanding of the processes at work. Accordingly, this analysis proposes a scholarly engagement with the depiction of Hugo Chávez as a populist leader. It will explore not only the extent to which it is appropriate to classify

---

\(^1\) Chávez clarified this point at news conference in November of 2005.
Chávez as a populist, but also the question of whether this categorization precludes the labels of ‘socialist’ and ‘revolutionary’. Ultimately it will conclude that while it is appropriate to speak of Chávez as a populist, it is not a question of either/or. Only when we understand populism as a discourse and not as an ideology are we able to realize that populism and revolution are not only compatible but can philosophically constitute two expressions of a single reality.

A Brief Note on Populism

Nearly every piece of theoretical writing on populism begins by bemoaning the difficulties of defining the term. Indeed, many who have tried to capture the “substance” of populism have found that their efforts only reinforced the perception of populism as an amorphous, transitory, or chameleonic concept intrinsically antithetical to fixed definition. Ernesto Laclau is one of few authors who seem to have overcome this obstacle, explaining that populism is an ontological rather than ontic category (“What’s in a Name?” 34). Populism, in other words, is not a particular political or ideological content but rather a mode of articulating that content. Our inquiry should focus less on what it is and more on how it works. Therefore this analysis will proceed according to Laclau’s conception of populism as “a series of politico-discursive practices constructing a popular subject” (“What’s in a Name?” 43). If we are to understand populism as a discourse and Chávez as a populist, we must ask of him two questions: how does Chávez claim to speak and what does he say?

Antecedents to Populism

Chávez envisions himself as the leader of a movement whose political goals
predate him. Although Venezuela has long been hailed as the democratic exception in a region characterized by bloody civil wars, revolutions, and military dictatorships, the thesis of exceptionalism obscured more subtle processes at work (Ellner & Tinker Salas 9). Venezuela’s relatively tranquil political climate was largely the product of a power sharing agreement between the country’s two main political parties, Acción Democrática and the Christian Democrats (COPEI). Signed in 1958 and known as the Punto Fijo Pact, the arrangement established the presidential appointment of state governors, block voting in legislative elections, and the clientelist distribution of oil revenues to political supporters (McCaughan 54, 69). These latter policies were a deliberate alternative to transformative, redistributive programs that were perceived by the oligarchy to undermine democratic stability (Meyers 25). Thus for four decades Venezuelans lived under formal democracy while corruption and electoral manipulation undermined the legitimacy of any claims to a substantive character.

Nevertheless, when this tension rose to the surface in February of 1989, Newsweek proclaimed that “South America’s Most Stable Democracy” had “exploded” (Ellner & Tinker Salas 8). Known as the Caracazo, these mass riots were a response to the neoliberal austerity measures prescribed by the IMF and imposed by President Carlos Andrés Pérez. While the official toll is 372, alternate sources suggest that the government’s indiscriminately violent repression resulted in over two thousand deaths (Gott 45). Chávez traces the popular origins of his Bolivarian Revolution back to this moment, explaining that “ese 27 de febrero el pueblo venezolano salió a las calles y no ha regresado de ellas” (Harnecker 18).
Chávez’s election in 1998 thus reflects two elements that René Antonio Mayorga identifies as conducive to the emergence of populism – the decomposition of the party system and a crisis of governability (Mayorga 136). 1992 saw the impeachment of President Pérez and two attempted coup d'états. Though Chávez’s group of dissident army troopers failed to seize power, the February coup did succeed in catapulting Chávez onto the national stage. When the government conceded a 60 second television spot in which Chávez called on his comrades to lay down their arms, Chávez’s use of the phrase “por ahora” resonated with disappointed Venezuelans as a promise to continue the struggle (Gott 68). Rafael Cadera’s 1993 electoral victory, based on an anti-political campaign and an unstable coalition of minor parties, also reflected the demise of the Punto Fijo system (Mayorga 144). In crises such as these, a space opens for populists who present themselves as political outsiders, promising to meet demands that have been left unresolved by the existing system.

However, as Franciscio Panizza points out, “populism is not just about a crisis of representation in which people are weaned off their old identities and embrace a new ‘popular’ one. It is also about the beginning of representation, allowing those who have never been represented because of their class, religion, ethnicity or geographical location, to be acknowledged as political actors” (11). In many ways then, Hugo Chávez is both creating a new political subjectivity and uncovering a subaltern history of Venezuela. By 1997 the wealthiest five percent of the population maintained an average income 53.1 times greater than the poorest five percent (Boudin et al. 17). This context of acute inequality has facilitated the development of Chávez’s support base amongst the urban poor. Indeed, chavistas in the ranchos in the hills of Caracas often express variations of
the notion that “Chávez is the first president who even knows we are here” (Ibid 66). Chávez thus portrays the Bolivarian Revolution as an articulation of demands for inclusion repressed by an illegitimate political system throughout the later half of the twentieth century. Such is the logic of proclamations like the following: “I declare the people to be the only and the true owners of their sovereignty. I declare the Venezuelan people the true owners of their own history” (Davila 236).

Chávez and the Construction of “El Pueblo”

Regardless of how compelling or manipulative we find this claim of returning to the people what is rightfully theirs, the preceding quotation is clearly an instance of populist discourse. Populists insist on a particular interpretation of democracy in which the sovereign people are the ultimate source of legitimate authority (Canovan 84). They reject the notion of representative democracy as an elitist conspiracy to misrepresent the interests of the population. Chávez’s calls for “democracia participativa y protagonista” tend to reflect this argument. This phrase refers specifically to demands that citizens play a role in budgeting and developing government policy at the local level, but also reflects a general preference in the Chávez government for direct democracy and mass participation. Indeed, the word “participation” appears some ninety times in the Bolivarian constitution (Vera-Zavala 1). Under Chávez the citizenry can avail itself of provisions for recall elections and revocatory referenda to repeal legislation (McCoy 288), and the Bolivarian Circles encourage political activism at the neighborhood level (Hawkins & Hansen 108). In addition to strong approval ratings, the perception that

---

2 Canovan makes the important clarification that populist and liberal strands in liberal democracy are not separate or antithetical but rather intimately connected (84).
Chávez directly derives legitimacy from popular sovereignty is expressed through the popular slogan “Con Chávez manda el pueblo”.

In order for “the people” to participate, however, populists must first define them through the creation of a symbolic division between “the people” and its “other” (Panizza 3). “The people’ has no fixed referent or essential meaning” (Panizza 5); rather it can be manipulated to include and exclude according to the political expediency of a given construction. Clearly this has occurred in Venezuela, where Chávez depicts the Bolivarian Revolution as the struggle of poor, mestizo, undereducated and historically unrepresented sectors of the population against the wealthy, cosmopolitan, and largely “white” elite who have traditionally reaped the benefits of Venezuela’s oil wealth. In this schema, the chavistas constitute the people and the “other” is composed of those that Chávez regularly refers to as “los esquálidos”. In applying this epithet to those he perceives to have oppressed the weak, Chávez turns it on its head and insinuates the inversion of the Venezuelan power structure. Such relations of antagonism help to mobilize the population, creating polarized groups of political subjects on opposite sides of what Laclau calls an “internal frontier” (“What’s in a Name?” 38).

At the same time, Laclau reminds us that “the people” is in reality much more diverse than it claims to be. Populism thrives on what he refers to as a “logic of equivalence” in which unsatisfied popular demands retain their specific character but also acquire a second, dominant dimension whereby heterogeneous demands are united in their common condition of dissatisfaction (Ibid 37). More concretely, the chavistas are not a homogenous mass (Valencia Ramírez, “Who Are the Chavistas?” 136); they are a conglomeration of anti-neoliberal, anti-system, anti-elite, anti-corruption, anti-imperialist,
and anti-capitalist interests, to specify only a few. As Panizza says, “we can only name
the people by naming its ‘other’ because...in oppressing all of them the oppressor renders
all of them ‘the same’” (6). Thus, for example, Chávez’s repeated railings against Bush,
in addition to stimulating press coverage at the international level, serve to garner support
from diverse sectors at home. A protester’s sign “Chávez, el Mesías; Bush es Lucifer”
nicely illustrates how the logic of equivalence works to unite the diverse grievances of
“the people” against a common enemy.

Yet as Margaret Canovan has pointed out, “‘the people’ has always had two
apparently incompatible senses, meaning either the whole polity or one part of the
population – sometimes the privileged part that controlled the polity, but more often the
part excluded from power” (65). Populism depends not only on a political discourse
which derives its legitimacy from popular sovereignty but also on metonymic relations of
power in which a part of the people comes to represent the whole. By defining the
‘other’ as the opposite of ‘the people’, therefore, they symbolically cease to become part
of the polity. It is on the basis of this point that theorists have suggested a tension
between populism and democracy, an insight which, despite Chávez’s victory in free and
fair elections, is important to bear in mind.

**Holding “El Pueblo” together**

As we have seen, populism expresses itself through “a political discourse that
claims to speak for the people as its unmediated representative” (Panizza 29). How is it
then that a populist leader qualifies as such a representative? In Chávez’s case, the
answer is partially conveyed in his declaration to the Venezuela populace: “I am a little
of all of you" (Davila 236). Chávez represents himself as the epitome of Venezuela, both ethnically and socially. His facial features reflect the mestizaje of indigenous and African roots, a point of both popular identification and racist ridicule by the opposition. As the son of two school teachers, Chávez can claim a humble upbringing in the savannah town of Barinas, an eight hour drive from the capital (Gott 26). The plains of the Orinoco Basin sometimes serve as the setting for Chávez’s television addresses, where the viewing audience is reminded of his rural, “down to earth” origins. The political expediency of these qualities supports Panizza’s argument that “populist leaders transform what the dominant culture considers signs of inferiority into symbols of the dignity of the people” (27).

In addition to presenting himself as an extension of the populace, Chávez’s has made effective use of media in order to connect with the masses. Kurt Weyland has suggested that television serves a similar function for neopopulists as the radio once did for traditional populists, the screen serving as a personalistic medium that channels a leader’s charisma to a mass audience (Boas 28). Moreover, as Silvio Waisbord has commented, “all commercial media-saturated societies nurture, glorify, and reinforce populist discourse...With relentless appetites for what shocks and draws huge audiences, commercial television’s obsession is to be loved by the people. By definition, it bows to popular tastes and rejects elitist culture outright” (214). As such, the media is the ideal vehicle for a leader who achieves legitimacy through popular support. In Venezuela, where the private media overwhelmingly and unapologetically backs the opposition, Chávez depends on his television/radio program Aló Presidente for direct communication with the population. During the show Chávez outlines the specifics of new social
programs and responds to the concerns of citizens who phone in from across the country. “He speaks to them every day, in words that they understand, in the vivid, often biblical language of [an] evangelical preacher. God and Satan, good and evil, pain and love, are the combinations that he often uses” (Gott 7). By employing the language of “the people” and establishing a mechanism for unmediated communication between the leader and the base, Aló Presidente sustains the conception of Venezuela as a direct rather than representative democracy.

A third populist strategy employed by Chávez to hold “the people” together is the manipulation of what Laclau refers to as “empty or floating signifiers” (“What’s in a Name?” 43). Returning momentarily to his “logic of equivalence”, we recall that these equivalences attempted to universalize a highly heterogeneous reality. Such disparate demands are united, Laclau argues, by populist symbols which “[reduce] to a minimum their particularistic content” (Ibid 40). In other words, populist symbols signify in a way that is deliberately vague and expediently empty. For Chávez, the figure of Simón Bolívar is one such symbol. As Latin America’s great Liberator, Bolívar has been appropriated by Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution as a source of inspiration. Bolívar suits Chávez not only because freed the country from Spanish tyranny but also because Bolívar’s Gran Colombia was an expression of Latin American unity, one of Chávez’s long term foreign policy objectives. Chávez regularly addresses the nation while seated below a large portrait of the Liberator and frequently quotes him in speeches. However, amongst the discussion of a series of 1998 interviews with Chávez, we find the following complaint:

[Chávez] tried to present himself as a person who wanted to construct an original Venezuelan position, based on traditional historical figures like Simón
Bolívar, Ezequiel Zamora (a populist of the nineteenth century), and Simón Rodríguez, who was Bolívar’s teacher. Since Bolívar was an aristocrat and Zamora a rebel who promised land to the peasants, it was unclear what Chávez was about at all. (Kelly & Palma 217-8)

In addition to being an aristocrat, Bolívar wrote about the importance of the separation of powers, property rights, and the free market, none of which are particularly consistent with the aims of the Bolivarian Revolution. Yet this inconsistency, though a source of frustration for the authors cited, is the very essence of what Laclau implies by the notion of floating signifiers. Ultimately Bolívar means what Chávez wants him to mean in any given moment. His relevance to the cause is not as a concrete model but rather as a mode of articulation that loosely expresses a variety of unmet “Bolivarian” demands.

**Chávez as a Populist (If it looks like a duck, why not just call it one?)**

In light of the preceding analysis, it would seem that Hugo Chávez is in fact a populist. While at this point in our study this conclusion can hardly be shocking, it has nevertheless met with vehement resistance from the left, and not without good reason. Unwillingness to classify Chávez as a populist partially stems from a desire to reject demeaning characterizations of chavistas as “poor, blind messianic supporters” easily deceived by populist promises they lack the education to question (Valencia Ramírez, “Who are the Chavistas?” 124). Undeniably, representations of Chávez like the appellation “Latin America’s Pied Piper” (Shifter 10) are disturbing in so far as they reinforce the image of squalid masses (rats?) blindly following the sweet music of Chávez’s rhetoric. However, to insist upon the inapplicability of the populist label as a form of resistance to its cooptation ultimately perpetuates a non-academic interpretation of the concept. In other words, a meaningful debate must start at the level of definitions.
By delineating a purely intellectual engagement with the concept of populism scholars on both sides of the political spectrum can begin a dialogue that has more to do with furthering understanding and less to do with defending their political positions.³

There remains, however, a more compelling and less polemic argument for the pervasive resistance to populist characterizations of Chávez. As Michael Conniff points out in his discussion of Latin American populists, “none [have] advocated genuine revolution or the violent overthrow of the existing government followed by radical restructuring of society” (Conniff 7). Indeed, there is a sense in which populism’s minimal ideological content compels scholars to stop talking about populism once a clear ideology emerges. For instance, despite the fact that “the Cuban revolution...had the classic features of a left-populist movement” (Raby 113), Castro is generally studied not as a populist but as a socialist revolutionary. If populism is a discourse, the argument seems to run, then once a leader stops talking and starts doing, he ceases to be a populist. If we are to provisionally embrace this logic if only to see where it leads, then Chávez’s self-proclaimed identity of revolutionary rather than populist suddenly becomes very relevant.

The most legitimate protest against the populist stigma ironically derives not from the restriction of populism to movements without clear transformative ambitions but from the recognition of its ubiquity in the political sphere. “If populism consists in postulating a radical alternative within the communitarian space, a choice at the crossroads on which the future of a given society hinges, does not populism become synonymous with politics? The answer can only be affirmative” (Laclau 47). This insight has led Canovan

³ The polarisation of academics around the Chávez question illustrates that they too get caught up in populism’s relations of antagonism.
to the recognition of a phenomenon she dubs “politician’s populism” (77). Indeed, there is a sense in which nearly all politicians periodically employ populist rhetoric, making the distinction between populists and non-populists not only difficult but artificial. In so far as populism is part of politics as usual (even as it purports to be a form of anti-politics), any analysis of populism as a distinct mode of articulation is somewhat misleading. For now though, we shall leave this objection aside and return to the central problem of compatibility between the populist and revolutionary visions of Chávez.

Radical Populist or Populist Revolutionary?

Both the left and the right seem to agree that there is something transformative about Chávez’s political program. Analysts studying Venezuela from the perspective of U.S. security interests commonly refer to the threat of “radical populism” (Vilas 249); liberals tend to disagree more with the populist label than with the qualification of radical. Thus having concluded that Chávez is a populist, our analysis will now attempt to evaluate persistent contentions that he is in fact not a populist but a revolutionary. If the first section of this analysis focused on how Chávez claims to speak, the latter portion will examine what he says. Specifically it will explore the latest revelation in Chávez’s Bolivarian Revolution – the shift to 21st Century Socialism.

Chávez announced Venezuela’s new course towards Socialismo del Siglo XXI at the January 2005 World Social Forum in Caracas (Ellner 102). The movement towards socialism was an integral part of his December reelection campaign, and at his inauguration, Chávez injected socialism into the slogan of the Cuban revolution, crying “Patria, socialismo, o muerte!”. Chávez has asserted that, “we must reclaim socialism as
a thesis, a project and a path, but a new type of socialism, a humanist one that puts humans, not machines or the state, ahead of everything. This is the debate that we need to promote around the world” (Ibid 102-3). While the populist discourse is evident, this formulation alludes to four important and arguably revolutionary theses to be imminently discussed at length. Whether 21st Century Socialism really amounts to a revolution depends largely on the successful implementation of these principles. But not all revolutionaries have the luxury of conducting victorious revolutions. Some fail, and failure should not automatically annul the sincerity of the effort.4 What follows then is not an attempt to determine whether the Bolivarian Revolution actually constitutes a revolution. Rather it is an evaluation of the revolutionary character of its stated objectives in an effort to ascertain whether, in the case of Chávez, the denomination of populist revolutionary is a viable one.

The first important notion in Chávez’s proclamation is that socialism is not dead, that it is possible to resurrect and revise socialism in such a way as to make it a viable alternative to traditional capitalism, which Chávez has characterized as “deshumanizado” (Hanneker 112). Socialismo del Siglo XXI outlines a mixed economy that includes private investment, the nationalization of key industries5, and an emphasis on what Chávez calls “endogenous [self-generated] development” Through government credit organizations known as Núcleos de Desarrollo Endógeno (NUDEs), communities have thus far established 6,814 cooperatives in which workers elect their own managers (ICG

---

4 Nor do I mean to take as a given that Chávez is entirely sincere.
5 Chávez does not generally advocate a return to the state-owned enterprises of the ISI period. Nationalizations within the oil industry are rationalized through the argument that subsoil resources belong to all Venezuelans and therefore profits should be utilized to benefit those who previously were denied access. Chávez has described upper class Venezuelans who grew wealthy on oil profits as “‘facist oligarchs’ obeying ‘foreign masters’” (Rivas 84).
29). Though the sustainability and growth of the cooperatives are two goals that have yet to be realized, the cooperative solution undeniably represents an alternative to both capitalism and previous socialist models. Similarly, trade with Cuba envisions the resources of each nation not as a source of comparative advantage but as potential tools for the support of the other’s revolutionary process (Fischer-Hoffman & Rosenthal 2). Recently Chávez has expanded this model to include the barter of oil for livestock and agricultural products with Argentina. In so far as Chávez is able to present a humanist alternative to profit-based trade partnerships, the Bolivarian Revolution does offer a revolutionary economic model.

A second but related idea is that 21st Century Socialism takes the people and not the state as its engine. The Chilean social scientist Tomás Moulia has identified excessive centralism as the fundamental error in past versions of socialism. Without reference to Venezuela he writes that, “el socialismo del siglo XXI debe abandonar el error del siglo XX, la Estadolatría o el culto al Estado…El mejor Estado es donde se puede combatir contra el propio Estado, desarrollando la asociatividad de ciudadanos, trabajadores, productores” (111). Chávez obviously understands the importance of citizen associations. As the Círculos Bolivarianos decline in importance (Hawkins & Hansen 124), the newly created Consejos Comunales are projected to assume many of the functions of local government (ICG 27). Moreover, literacy, health and education missions have reinforced participatory democracy mechanisms to create new political subjects with a fundamentally different understanding of citizen rights and responsibilities. In implementing Socialismo del Siglo XXI, Chávez calls for “an explosion of communal power” (Wilpert 2), and it is plausible that earlier efforts to build
a sense of community in the ranchos will now bear fruit. What remains less convincing, however, is the claim that we are witnessing the receding of the state and not the reinforcement of links between the state and civil society.

The third thesis, alluded to only vaguely in the suggestion of promoting socialism around the world, is that Socialismo del Siglo XXI is part of a counter-hegemonic project to alter the world’s economic and political landscape. Chávez has long been engaged with Argentina and Brazil via Mercosur, and has recently developed strong relations with leftist presidents in Bolivia and Ecuador, as well as Nicaragua. It seems that he is in the process of forming what Heinz Dieterich has called a “Bloque Regional de Poder”. According to Dieterich, the BRP “es la precondición de cualquier avance económico latinoamericano, porque la renegociación de la deuda externa, del protecciónismo del G-7, del desarrollo de tecnologías de punta y ciencias de la excelencia latinoamericanas sólo pueden realizarse desde una base de poder regional” (190). The most obvious expression of this concept is the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), Chávez’s answer to the U.S. backed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Though the project has yet to come to fruition, recent talks with Ecuador regarding an oil pipeline from Venezuela to the Pacific coast in order to facilitate exports to China would make it more feasible (Ellner 99). Beneath all of this political maneuvering is an idea that Chávez regularly expresses by quoting Bolívar: “los Estados Unidos de Norteamérica parecen destinados por la providencia para plagiar la América de miserias a nombre de la libertad” (Harnecker 117). Realizing that the United States will always perceive Latin America as its backyard, Chávez is slowly moving to counteract its influence and undermine relations of dependency.

6 Now G-8
The final point in Chávez’s declaration is that socialism is a long term project and a path that Venezuela is just now beginning to follow; unlike the Cuban example, Chávez does not propose to institute socialism overnight. Instead Chávez refers to a process of “daily construction” (Wilpert 1), which he calls “el arte de hacer posible mañana lo que hoy parece imposible” (Harnecker 113). Alternately, the director of one of the NUDEs likened 21st Century Socialism to “changing a tire when the car is running” (Marx 3). The analogy is not inapt and certainly highlights one of the central challenges of nonviolent revolution. But Cuba offers ample evidence of the difficulties of sudden change in a globalized world, and at any rate Chávez doesn’t have the same options since the opposition has endeavored to retake power rather than flee to Miami. Inevitably a slow revolution draws criticism from both sides, and is always susceptible to charges of not changing quickly enough or deeply enough. Yet we can see that Chávez is building his political project on the social foundations laid during his first term. While the gradual pace of 21st Century Socialism certainly doesn’t guarantee its success, we must bear in mind that a revolution must be transformative but it need not be abrupt.

When the Proletariat Becomes the People

In view of the evidence presented in the preceding section, Chávez’s self-identification as a revolutionary appears legitimate7. If a revolution is simply a drastic and far-reaching change in ways of thinking and behaving, the thesis that one is not currently underway in Venezuela becomes difficult to sustain. It is therefore tempting to reconcile the two strands of this analysis by concluding that Chávez is a revolutionary

---

7 Here I find it necessary to reiterate the point that a revolution need not be successful for its leader to be characterized as a revolutionary.
socialist who employs populist discourse. Yet “ideology can be considered as distinct from the rhetoric involved in the political action only if rhetoric is understood as a pure adornment of language which in no way affects the contents transmitted by it” (Laclau, *On Populist Reason* 12). In other words, we must resist the temptation to characterize Chávez as a socialist who uses populist rhetoric for political gain. The discourse of populism is inseparable from its content such that suggested dichotomy between populist form and radical, transformative or revolutionary substance is unsustainable. As a political subject, Chávez is constituted not only by what he does but also by what he says. We must therefore reconcile ourselves to understanding 21st Century Socialism (and the Bolivarian Revolution with it) as a populist movement, regardless of the socialist ideology it might aspire to.

Interestingly, Laclau seems to have resolved this dilemma long before Chávez implicitly posed it. Writing in 1977, he explains:

> The struggle of the working class for its hegemony is an effort to achieve the maximum possible fusion between popular-democratic ideology and socialist ideology. In this sense a ‘socialist populism’ is not the most backward form of working class ideology but the most advanced — the moment when the working class has succeeded in condensing the ensemble of democratic ideology in a determinate social formation within its own ideology. Hence the unequivocally ‘populist’ character adopted by victorious social movements. (“Politics and Ideology” 174)

In contrast to populisms of the dominant classes, which develop relations of antagonism and later become repressive when they realize the need to prevent these relationships from reorienting towards their inherent revolutionary potential, Laclau says that populism of the dominated sectors is a way of assimilating direct democracy in to socialism (Ibid). Thus, as Raby maintains in her analysis of the Cuban and Venezuelan revolutions, “it is possible, and perhaps even necessary, to be both populist and revolutionary” (237).
Laclau's argument is reproduced here not as a definitive conclusion but as a proposal for further study. Since they are often understood to be antithetical, very little work has been conducted on the affinities between populism and revolutionary socialism. In the case of Chávez, we must explore the extent to which the notion of "the people" as the engine of populism is compatible with the proletariat as the engine of socialism. In other words, can a heterogeneous group of anti-others conduct a revolution grounded in an ideology of explicitly class-based mobilization when the upper class is only one of multiple others against which they have united? We must also question Laclau's characterization of the relationship between socialism, populism and democracy. While many theorists have written on the tensions and intersections between the latter two, we must ask how this changes when we throw socialism into the mix. Undoubtedly in the course of such an analysis further complications will arise, and we cannot pretend to understand the issue from the outset. Nevertheless, Laclau's insight is exceedingly important in that it demonstrates at least a theoretical compatibility between the identities of populist and revolutionary socialist. What is more, Chávez seems to be suggesting the same on the ground in Venezuela.

**Conclusions**

During the course of this study we have observed that Hugo Chávez exhibits many of the characteristics of populist leadership. Emerging in a crisis of representation and governability, Chávez claims to derive his legitimacy not from institutions but from the sovereign people. Using relations of antagonism and a logic of equivalence to create an internal frontier, Chávez has constructed "el pueblo" as the antithesis of a
conglomerate of "others". Although these "others" range from imperialism to neoliberalism to the oligarchy, Chávez constitutes them as cohere: opposition through the use of floating signifiers, of which Simón Bolívar is a primary example. Additionally Chávez has used participatory democracy mechanisms and the media to establish a direct relationship with the people, representing himself as embodiment of their identity and an extension of their agency. As such, insistence upon the inapplicability of the populist label not only appears untenable but also serves to reinforce a non-academic cooptation of the term.

In addition to being a populist, however, Chávez is also a revolutionary. A close examination of 21st Century Socialism and its roots in the Bolivarian Revolution reveals that Chávez's plans include a gradual but profound transformation of Venezuelan society. Trade initiatives like ALBA and the consolidation of leftist political solidarity are part of efforts to develop a Bloque Regional de Poder, a counter-hegemonic project to alter the balance of power in the hemisphere. Endogenous development programs and "humanist" regional trade models insist that 21st Century Socialism can be a viable alternative to traditional capitalism. Moreover, Venezuelans are learning to govern locally, exercising a new political subjectivity, and changing their conception of the rights and responsibilities that come with citizenship. The revolution is clearly not a sudden upheaval, and it may not ultimately succeed, but even Chávez's opponents agree that the country is changing in a radical way.

We are therefore left to the conclusion that Chávez, as a political subject, is both a populist and a revolutionary. Laclau reminds us that rhetoric and ideology cannot be represented as clearly delineated manifestations of form and content respectively, but
rather mutually constitute one another in each speech act ("On Populist Reason" 13). In other words, what we say is always partially determined by how we say it, as well as the converse. Chávez's populist discourse is therefore not something distinct from his identity as a revolutionary socialist. Both are manifest in the political project of Socialismo del Siglo XXI and the larger context of Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution.

Nevertheless, further empirical and theoretical investigation is necessary to elaborate on how the two identities interact. For now we can conclude that Chávez corroborates Laclau's thesis that "there is no socialism without populism"; whether indeed "the highest forms of populism can only be socialist" is yet to be determined ("Politics and Ideology" 196-7).
Works Cited


Kelly, Janet and Pedro A. Palma. “The Syndrome of Economic Decline and the Quest


