

*The Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies*  
presents:

# Venezuela After Chavez

*A conference featuring:*

George Ciccariello-Maher  
*Drexel University*

Rebecca Hanson  
*University of Georgia*

Abraham Lowenthal  
*University of Southern California*

James McGuire  
*Wesleyan University*

Boris Muñoz  
*Freelance journalist*


Robert Samet  
*University of Massachusetts, Amherst*

Naomi Schiller  
*Temple University*

David Smilde  
*University of Georgia*

Alejandro Velasco  
*New York University*

Verónica Zubillaga  
*Universidad Simon Bolívar*



April 30, 2014  
9am - 4pm  
Joukowsky Forum  
Watson Institute,  
111 Thayer St.



Edited by Veronica Zubillaga

*George Ciccariello-Maher*  
*Rebecca Hanson*  
*Boris Muñoz*  
*Robert Samet*  
*Naomi Schiller*  
*David Smilde*  
*Alejandro Velasco*  
*Veronica Zubillaga*

April 30th, 2014



# Introduction

**Venezuela after Chávez:  
Challenges of Democracy, Security and Governance  
April 30, 2014**  
Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies  
Watson Institute for International Studies  
Brown University

The death of President Hugo Chávez on March 2013 has raised pressing questions about the future of Venezuela and the continuity of Chávez's Bolivarian project. Nicolás Maduro, Chávez's hand-picked successor, won elections in April 2013 with a very narrow electoral victory that aroused serious suspicion of fraud amidst the opposition and intense tensions among Venezuelans. Nine months later, in February 2014, Venezuelans experienced a burst of massive students protests in different states, which immediately spread to middle-classes neighborhoods of the emboldened opposition.

While we were organizing the Venezuela conference at Brown, in Caracas some middle-class neighborhoods were taken and blocked by "vecinos" (neighbors); students kept taking to the streets protesting while excessively repressive and militarized police responses reheated the students' rage. The protest's focused on a vast range of claims: from freedom of speech, citizen security, food shortages; inflation; freedom for those imprisoned for political motives since the beginning of the protests; government repression, up to Maduro's immediate resignation. The landscape resembled a war zone in one part of the city yet was amazingly calm in other parts. Social polarization was evident and finding out the reasons why people in barrios were not protesting is one of the questions posed here.

Aware of the complicated and tense situation in Caracas and across the country, we were convinced that the production of nuanced and contextualized knowledge was vital in order to shed light on the current situation in Venezuela.

We invited a group of engaged researchers to offer their perspectives on recent changes in Venezuelan politics and their implications for the future of the country. We were interested in discussing politics; media and state control; associational life and everyday politics; government and civil society responses to the persistent problems of crime and citizen insecurity in Venezuela. Interdisciplinarity is needed to understand the complexity of contemporary Venezuela, so the researchers invited here represent a range of distinct academic disciplines.



*Urbanización Caurimare, April, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014. Photo taken while walking and observing*

The Conference “Venezuela after Chávez: Challenges of Democracy, Security and Governance” was held at Brown University on April 30, 2014 and was sponsored by Brown’s Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (CLACS). We had three panels:

*I. Theorizing the Venezuelan State in the Chávez and Post-Chávez Era*

Boris Muñoz; David Smilde, James McGuire

*II. A View from Below: People’s Movements in the Chávez and Post-Chávez Era*

George Ciccariello-Maher; Alejandro Velasco; Naomi Schiller

*III. Living in a State of Fear: Violence and Citizen Security in Times of Bolivarian Revolution*

Robert Samet; Verónica Zubillaga; Rebecca Hanson

Richard Snyder gave opening remarks and was a discussant for a panel as were María Esperanza Casullo and Verónica Zubillaga. Abraham Lowenthal offered a set of concluding remarks.

We present here summarized versions of the presentations, which speak to major issues in contemporary Venezuela: debates about freedom of press in the Chávez and Maduro eras (Muñoz; Schiller and Samet); the challenge of tackling the complexity of the moment in an extremely polarized context (Smilde); the government’s socioeconomic performance in the face of an oil windfall (McGuire); the vindication of demonized actors such as the barrio-based, pro-government socio-political organizations called *Colectivos* —some of which are armed to defend the Bolivarian revolution (Ciccariello-Maher); social polarization and the feelings of rage among barrio residents in light of the February protests (Velasco); citizen security, skyrocketing crime and the government’s poor performance, despite achievements in reducing economic inequality and launching a variety of new citizen security programs (Hanson; Zubillaga).

Although the presentations present different views, certain common concerns are evident. The government’s performance in the socioeconomic domain is subject to complex evaluations: while Smilde recognizes improvements in inequalities, McGuire emphasizes the disappointment and poor results in light of the oil windfall. Regarding freedom of the press, a major issue today in Venezuela, the authors agree that under Maduro an authoritarian drift and even overt control over the media have undeniably emerged (Muñoz; Schiller and Samet).

Concerning citizen security, in the context of Venezuela’s skyrocketing crime rate, there are many paradoxes and reasons to be pessimistic. Hanson’s contribution reveals that whereas citizens identify citizen security as one of their most important concerns, they often situate the causes and solutions in the private sphere of the family. This in turn prevents the politicization of citizen security and makes it harder to hold the government responsible. Further, Zubillaga highlights that the government’s policy responses to crime, such as the militarization of citizen security, have only stirred up more violence.

Another point of agreement among the contributors concerns the opposition’s historical difficulty in

connecting with popular sectors concerns, a disjuncture that was obvious in the February protests (Smilde and Velasco). Ciccariello-Maher explores this gap by arguing that fear of the barrio-based Colectivos reveals more about those who fear than about the Colectivos themselves, which he views as welcome vehicles that allow popular sectors to break free of the confinement of informal segregation and achieve new mobility.

A fundamental point that the presentations have in common involves the flagrant concentration of power during Maduro's presidency. This narrowing and weakening of democracy can suffocate the very spaces of vindication and participation which opened to the popular sectors during the Chávez era. This trend threatens to undermine political accountability for the sake of the preservation of power, which will turn Venezuela's near future into a dark horizon of an authoritarian regime and undercut the initial optimism generated by the expanded participation of the popular sectors during the Chávez period.

### **Acknowledgments**

We want to thank Professor Richard Snyder, the Center for Latin and the Caribbean Studies Studies, and the Watson Institute for International Studies for making this conference possible. We would also like to thank all the panelists and contributors to this Working Paper, as well as the conference commentators: Professor María Esperanza Casullo and Professor Abraham Lowenthal. We would especially like to thank Katherine Goldman for her assistance in the organization of this event and Yana Stainova for her valuable English proofreading.

Verónica Zubillaga

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**ABSTRACTS**

**Boris Muñoz.** Through a historical analysis, Muñoz proposes that the confrontation between the Venezuelan government and private media conglomerates, in direct collusion with powerful economic interests, predates the Chávez era. The conflict was actually an instrumental tool in a concerted effort to discredit political actors and weaken the Venezuelan bipartisan democratic system to promote a neo-liberal type of corporate agenda. However, the hegemonic media model imposed by Chávez to counter private media attacks, has become in actual practice the chief instrument –and a propaganda machine– to establish a tight control over information restricting the citizen’s right to be veraciously informed in order to make sense of the world. At the same time, Muñoz explains how private media have been systematically subjected to hostile government’s controls to avoid being held accountable, and to disable a functioning press freedom. What emerges from these elements is a model that constrains democracy. The near total penetration of a hegemonic media model coincides with the transition from a competitive authoritarianism under Chavez’s government to traditional authoritarianism in the Post Chávez government.

**David Smilde** argues that pluralist and neomarxist perspectives provide only partial portrayals of the Venezuela conflict. He suggests a Neo Weberian perspective can provide a "full conflict theory" more useful for understanding contemporary Venezuela. This perspective works with the idea of multiple conjunctural causality and is able to criticize the deterioration of civil and political rights under Chavismo at the same time that it recognizes Chavismo's successes in addressing social, cultural and economic inequalities.

**George Ciccariello-Maher** centers his analyses in the *Colectivos* the barrio-based pro-government socio-political organizations —some of which are armed to defend the Bolivarian revolution— historically demonized and feared by opposition. But this fear would be a symptom precisely of their acquired importance. *Colectivos* represent the most organized elements of chavismo, preceding Chavez and claiming as well their autonomy. They are in the bottom a fundamental actor in keeping chavismo in power.

**Naomi Schiller and Robert Samet,** engage the highly polarized debate concerning press freedom in the Chávez era. They do so by examining the circulation of *denuncias* (denunciation) by journalists,

grassroots media producers, and watchdog groups. Schiller and Samet trace the practice of denunciation to a socio-legal tradition that is tied to the development of democracy Latin America. Denunciation is a practice that is shared by both chavistas and the opposition, the left and the right of the political spectrum. If this practice has been crucial to the expansion of democracy and press freedom in Venezuela, under conditions of extreme political polarization it can turn against itself. As denunciations have proliferated in recent years, they may have the paradoxical effect of shrinking the space of political engagement.

**Alejandro Velasco** considers why residents of urban barrios did not actively participate in the demonstrations that broke out in February 2014, even though they had filled the streets in record numbers in 2012 and 2013 to protest mounting social and economic problems. Challenging both opposition and government explanations, he instead argues that for barrio residents street protests derive their power not from challenging but from upholding the legitimacy of the government, especially in democratic contexts. This helps to explain why, historically, protests and movements viewed as insurrectional have failed to gain mass support from the population of urban barrios, who distinguish between protests made against the government (“anti”) and protests made to the government (“ante”).

**Rebecca Hanson** reflects upon Citizen Security reform in Venezuela. Using national survey data on public opinion about crime and security reforms in Venezuela, Hanson reveals that for respondents the decline of values in the family is perceived to be the main cause of crime; this is true among government and opposition supporters. This perception, by privatizing and depoliticizing the issue of crime, helps explain why the government has never paid politically for rising crime rates and why it is difficult to mobilize the support necessary for sustained security reforms in the country.

**Veronica Zubillaga** proposes that there is a new spatialization of violence in Venezuela. This novel geographical distribution of violence has to do with internal and external or regional dynamics that affect Venezuela: the war on drug policies in our neighboring country Colombia, and the concomitant displacement of armed actors inside our borders has produced a new violence in the border states; the militarization of security has only produced new problems such as prison overcrowding and periodically violent explosions.

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*Theorizing the Venezuelan State in the Chávez and post-Chávez eras:*

## *Neo-Authoritarianism and Media Hegemony*

*Boris Munoz*

April 30th, 2014



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**NEO-AUTHORITARIANISM AND MEDIA HEGEMONY**

*Boris Munoz*

Freelance journalist

In Venezuela, the establishment of a neo-authoritarian regime and hegemony of the media go hand in hand. Nowadays it's impossible to impose a vertical regime of institutional control without first obtaining control over information flow. My goal in this talk is to show how control over the media has been crucial in configuring the power system of Chavism, and how, just when it decided to impose nearly total control over the flow of information, this power system began to collapse.

Of all the types of authoritarian regimes, the closest approximation to the Bolivarian process is a hybrid regime called competitive authoritarianism, in which political competition is "real but unfair". In Venezuela, at least until recently, the opposition could win state or local governments, but their power was partial and never proportional to the number of votes they received because of gerrymandering.

Chávez understood from the beginning that the media were a space to be conquered, either through soft strategies such as the use of his political charisma, or the hard way by deploying the power of the state against them. Media hegemony becomes relevant in the middle ground between these two extremes.

And this is the second notion that may help clarify the relationship between power and the media: hegemony, associated throughout history with different forms of indirect domination –a sort of soft power- in which language, articulated through various kinds of discourse and symbolic representations of ideological content such as images and information, is of the utmost importance.

How is all this connected to Venezuela and the so-called Socialism of the 21st century?

First we have to recognize that the authoritarianism of Chavez's government appeared gradually, increasing over time. The crucial event was a new constitution that, using the rhetoric of participatory democracy, created so-called people's power represented by the Ombudsman's Office while simultaneously increasing the power of the president to unprecedented levels, weakening checks and balances and allowing immediate re-election, among many other presidential discretionary powers.

However, controlling private media was just as important as controlling the structures of the state. And the private media, represented mainly by a group of owners with powerful economic interests, were neither blind nor indifferent to what their charismatic leader was up to.



## THE MEDIA WAR.

Over the last decade, the Venezuelan government and private media have been fighting a war whose battlefield is Venezuelan society. Fourteen years ago, when he was still the promising leader of a process of transformation, Chávez said, “In the class struggle, private media are on the side of the oligarchy.” In a conversation with journalist Angela Zago, one of his advisors back then, he said that he would like to take on “that fight”.

But every war has at least two sides. Chávez’s extreme distrust of private media had some basis. Over the first decade of his government, several private media became vicious slander machines, constantly attacking the government. Confrontation between government and the private media, however, predates Chávez’s administration, engaged in more or less open confrontation since the early 80’s, after a dramatic currency devaluation shattered Venezuela’s dreams of becoming a first world country. Private media organizations, particularly Radio Caracas Television, the oldest and largest national broadcaster, began to criticize the government relentlessly.

When President Carlos Andres Perez was accused of corruption, RCTV and the newspaper El Nacional instigated a harsh campaign against the bipartisan political system and presidential power. This campaign had great influence on public opinion and was a crucial factor in President Perez’s impeachment and removal from office in 1993. In other words, media organizations, deliberately or not, helped to undermine the system that sustained Venezuela’s experiment with democracy from 1958 until 1998.

However, the crucial difference is that Chávez deliberately and actively sought battle with the private media. In his own words, he “sustained a complex system of relationships with the media as part of a historical struggle.” And Chávez declared war not only on the media, but also on journalism as a social institution.

Even while in the honeymoon stage with the media, Chávez took on Teodoro Petkoff, editor of the newspaper El Mundo, forcing him to resign by putting pressure on the paper’s publisher. Later that year, in December, Chávez denied the truth of several reports in El Nacional on human rights violations during the floods in Vargas State.

These actions also meant that from then on, the private media considered Chávez their main opponent, striking back. On April 12, 2002, during the coup d’état, most of the larger private media played cartoons all day, imposing a virtual media blackout. As we also know, the coup failed, and on April 13th Chávez returned to the presidency in the midst of grandiose theatrics.

That moment marked a turning point in the narrative of the media war in Venezuela, for three reasons. First, the blackout was a direct attack on democracy that severely damaged public trust in the private media. Second, it led the public to ask whose interests the country’s main private media really serve. Third, the coup gave the government enough ammunition to discredit any serious attempt to recover the credibility of the private media.

The media war turned the most important private media into substitutes for the political parties they themselves had helped destroy. That is, they became the trenches of the opposition. Editorial principles were replaced by political agendas and economic interests, and factual journalism was replaced by

opinion-based journalism. Meanwhile, rigorous investigative journalism, deplorably, was abandoned. In short, journalists, as media workers, became trapped in the crossfire between the government and the economic and political interests of the media owners.

Chávez had understood how important it was to keep private media on a tight leash, so he could have a free hand to govern as he thought fit, and create the political order he wanted. He began to create an impressive state media platform. An ambitious plan called the New Stage or New Strategic Map contained Chavez's 10 points of strategic importance for consolidating the Bolivarian revolution—including media hegemony.

This media platform went far beyond the crisis that originated it, becoming a structural component of Chávez's government. It also enacted a series of laws and legal instruments designed to protect its officials and servants from investigations or denunciations in the media.

According to Marcelino Bisbal, one of the most important researchers of media in the country, the practices used to create media hegemony include:

“Frequent presidential broadcasts on all channels simultaneously; denigrating remarks and threats against journalists and media owners; attacks on reporters and photographers; attacks on broadcasting facilities; the use of administrative procedures to exert pressure; disregard of the protective measures for communicators issued by the InterAmerican Commission for Human Rights; withdrawal of government advertising from the media that criticize it; denial of access to public information; broadcasting biased information on the State media” ... (Bisbal, 2006: 63).

The greatest proof that this communicational hegemony means political power was the closure of RCTV, in May 2007, in retaliation for participating in the media blackout during the 2002 coup.

Between the closure of RCTV and the death of Chávez, the government and the media frequently clashed. From 2009 onwards, dozens of radio stations have been closed down, and many others adopted self-censorship to avoid irritating the government. Private media with a critical editorial stance have been systematically attacked by the government. Antagonism to reports that criticize the government or expose corruption has also been a feature of the media hegemony.

Chavez's death had repercussions so profound that are hard to measure. As a hegemon, Chávez behaved like a two faced Janus: he was simultaneously a philanthropic and charismatic civil leader and a caudillo or military strongman.

#### **THE DEATH OF THE HEGEMON AND THE IMPORTANCE OF HEGEMONY.**

Chávez invested large sums of money in a public media system where he could broadcast the successes of his government, thus offsetting the effects of the counter-revolutionary press.

But Chávez never went as far as “buying” freedom of the press in the way his successors have done through aggressive take-overs of the private media that aren't openly aligned with them.

Exactly one year ago today, Globovision was sold for 68 million dollars to a group of businessmen considered to be boliburgueses –bolivarian bourgeoisie- because of their close ties to high-level

government leaders. Globovisión's new owners immediately took the most blatantly pro-opposition programs off the air. A wave of resignations rippled through the station, beginning with the prime-time newscasters and ending with its president.

Less than two months later, the Cadena Capriles, the news corporation that owns Ultimas Noticias, the country's largest and most popular newspaper, was sold for 160 million dollars to a banker presumed to be a front man for members of the government. As a result, even though the team of journalists in the Ultimas Noticias newsroom tried to remain independent from external pressures, censorship became a daily practice.

These two hostile takeovers guaranteed that groups sympathetic to the government would have a formidable level of control over information. They also guaranteed control over the spaces where dissident or critical voices could be heard. In fact, they were the climax of the hegemony and gave the government greater control over information than at any point during the past 15 years.

Official spokesmen for the government – as well as Chavismo's supporters abroad – argue that freedom of the press is alive in Venezuela- because private media still outnumber state-sponsored media. This is only a half truth. Today, critical and opposition media spaces are limited to a small number of newspapers and news-sites, while the government directly or indirectly operates the most important information outlets.

In political terms, the death of the hegemon has brought about an abrupt transition from competitive authoritarianism to traditional authoritarianism. Lacking a figurehead with personal charisma, and besieged by a voracious economic crisis, the troika that governs the country now has opted for direct censorship and displays of military force to demonstrate its control over a society that has begun to rebel against it. This is why it constantly violates democratic practices.

### **The crisis**

The actions of the government have heightened the fragility of the boundary between using power in a way that ignores the limits of a free press, and using it in a way that clearly violates the “basic rights and freedoms” of citizens. The Venezuelan government's tendency to harsh and direct repression is not limited to punishing demonstrators, depriving them of their assembly rights, or beating, gassing and arbitrarily detaining them when they disobey authority. One of Nicolas Maduro's first acts after the outburst of the demonstrations was to order the expulsion of CNN in Spanish and the Colombian news channel TNT24, for their coverage of the protests, accusing them of being part of a conspiracy to overthrow him. He also blocked image transmissions on Twitter for a short period during the first wave of repression after February 12th.

The government has also imposed restrictions on access to dollars to buy newsprint, causing newspaper to reduce pages and circulation—equivalent to a death sentence by starvation.

In summary, in his year in office, Maduro has been both subtler and more brutal than Chávez. Until just over a year ago, you could say that Chavismo was suffocating freedom of the press inexorably, but was doing it in slow motion. Today few have doubts that the plan is to annihilate it.

The increasing control of information is a clear indication of that collapse. So is the passage from hybrid regime to a regime with increasing levels of repression through laws, censorship, measures restricting

citizen's rights and freedoms, and abuses of human rights that include the systematic use of paramilitary violence orchestrated by the State. All this reveals a strong trend towards dictatorship within Chavismo, and that Venezuela is being pushed away from democracy. A dictatorship has not yet been installed, but the elements for installing one are there. It's only realistic to recognize their existence. And only if we recognize them, can we denounce them, and fight against them.

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*Theorizing the Venezuelan State in the Chávez and post-Chávez eras:*

***FROM PARTIAL TO FULL CONFLICT THEORY: A  
NEO-WEBERIAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE  
VENEZUELA CONFLICT***

*David Smilde.*

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**FROM PARTIAL TO FULL CONFLICT THEORY: A NEO-WEBERIAN  
PERSPECTIVE ON THE VENEZUELA CONFLICT**

*David Smilde.*

Tulane University.

Most political commentary on Venezuela comes from what might be called *partial* conflict theories that critically examine some areas of social life but systematically ignore others.

Perhaps the leading perspective used to understand Venezuela is a contemporary descendant of classic liberalism. Pluralist political theory serves not only as the paradigmatic perspective of Anglophone political science but as the tacit framework for most journalistic commentary. Indeed sociologist Michael Mann says “Pluralism is liberal democracy’s (especially American democracy’s) view of itself” (Mann 2012, p.46)

Pluralist political theory suggests that there are multiple sources of social power that compete for dominance—such as religious, legal, ethnic or labor groups—and looks at the way political systems can ensure a *polyarchy*, a relative balance of interest groups. At core it is a normative theory that looks at political institutions and whether they ensure a democratic equilibrium between competing groups (good), or end up allowing one group to attain hegemony over others (bad). In this view the democratic institutions of the state are ultimately decisive.

In the case of Venezuela, scholars and commentators working from the pluralist perspective have been remarkably insightful in critiquing the progressive concentration of power occurring during the Chávez and now Maduro governments. Yet they also tend to be tone deaf to social, economic and cultural inequalities. They ignore them as causes for the rise of Chavismo and also ignore Chavismo’s achievements in reducing them. Instead they provide analyses that begin with politics and end with politics.

A recent article by leading political scientist Kurt Weyland (2013), for example, perspicaciously traces all of the ways in which liberal democratic institutions have declined in the governments led by Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, and Rafael Correa. But this deterioration is not portrayed as the unintended or even secondary consequence of policies intending to address the inequalities of the globe’s most unequal region. Rather these leaders’ “progressive rhetoric” is simply used by them to justify a “quest for personal power” (Weyland 2013). In action-theoretic terms, all of the

motivations Weyland projected onto the actors are political. The story begins with a will to power and ends with the concentration of power. Actual achievements in addressing social, economic and cultural inequalities are not mentioned.

This perspective makes it virtually impossible to understand why Chavismo has won so many elections and indeed obliges Weyland to suggest that Chávez's 2012, eleven point electoral victory was unfair and only confirmed that Venezuela "had already fallen under non-democratic rule."

Before moving on, let me point out one more shortcoming of the pluralist perspective. Being a normative model it is generally used to evaluate existing political systems using pre-defined concepts and deductively predict paths and futures. As such it tends not to lead to serious empirical engagement which reduces its sensitivity to change as well as its capacity for significant discovery.

Most sympathetic treatments of Chavismo come from descendants of classic Marxism. Contemporary neo-Marxists provide insightful critiques of the effects global capitalism and the way it creates or exacerbates economic, social and cultural inequalities. In the case of Venezuela they have provided perspicacious analyses of the rise of Chavismo, its achievements and the clear class nature of Venezuela's conflict.

Nevertheless neo-Marxists become Pollyannaish when it comes to the concentration of power in a revolutionary state. In the Venezuelan case this is especially striking given that the original key metaphor of the Chavista project was participatory democracy. Yet almost every reform over the past fourteen years has served to centralize and concentrate power in the presidency. Even participatory instruments like communal councils are centralized and dependent upon the Executive branch instead of local governments. Neo-Marxists systematically ignore how similar the concentration of power and its effects are to the centripetal forces that plagued 20<sup>th</sup> Century socialist projects.

For example, Juan Carlos Monedero, one of the leading theorists of Twenty First Century socialism, clearly identifies problems such as "hyper-leadership," centralism, clientalism, and corruption. However, he does not see these as ironic tendencies inherent to socialism—so aptly described a century ago by Roberto Michels, Gaetano Mosca and others. Nor are they the fault of a government has been in power for a decade and a half. Rather he portrays them as carryovers from the atomization of Venezuela's neoliberal 1990s (Monedero 2013).

My argument here is that neo-Weberian theory can provide us with a fuller version of conflict theory more helpful for understanding the Venezuela conflict.

The key to neo-Weberian conflict theory is the idea of *multiple, conjunctural causality*. Of course most social and political theories include the idea of multi-causality. John Locke spoke of the state, economy and public opinion. Karl Marx analyzed state, economy and culture. Max Weber's classic, if brief formulation looked at party, class and status. Contemporary neo-

Weberian, Michael Mann has modified Weber's formulation to include four basic "sources of social power:" political, economic, ideological and military.

Where these social theories actually differ is on the issue of *causal primacy*. Marxism, of course, tends to see the mode of production as the most basic cause. While some variants of neo-Marxism give the state and culture relative autonomy, they still give production ultimate primacy "in the last instance" or through the notion of "totality." Liberalism, especially in its contemporary pluralist variant, doesn't really provide a clear theory of causal primacy. But in practice it clearly regards the state as having causal primacy, as being the most fundamental and important factor for understanding social and political life.

Indeed the blind spots of the two perspectives described above make sense from their particular notions of causal primacy.

From a Neo-Marxian perspective that thinks justice and equality are going to come from egalitarian ownership of the means of production, concentration of power can look like a temporary measure that needs to take place on the road to socialism. In this view, revolution always leads to bourgeois reaction and even if the eventual goal is to make the state unnecessary, in the transition period it needs to be strengthened and power concentrated to push forward radical change.

From a pluralist perspective that firmly believes that justice and equality are going to come from political institutions that ensure a democratic equilibrium, it is okay to look past the fact that often grotesque levels of inequality can persist in liberal democracy. If citizens are truly enfranchised and politicians are truly accountable, the latter will eventually be obliged to make progress on social, economic and cultural inequalities. Furthermore, violent, authoritarian measures can often times be justified as a temporary price that needs to be paid to allow liberty to gain traction.

What is different about neo-Weberian conflict theory is that none of the sources of social power are ultimately decisive or somehow more fundamental. In this sense it is a truly multi-causal perspective.

A second important aspect of neo-Weberian theory is the idea of *conjunctural causality*--the idea that the causal efficacy of a particular factor depends on particular historical conjunctures. Michael Mann (2013), for example, ended his four volume *Sources of Social Power* suggesting that while in any given historical context research can show one of the sources of social power to be causally dominant, no one of these causes is ultimately determinative in human history. In one context or period economics can be decisive. In another, ideology (or military power, or political processes) can be more fundamental.

It is important to realize that a multi-causal theory does not necessarily entail a concept of conjunctural causality. Talcott Parsons' structural functionalism worked with a notion of *constant association*, the idea that all of the basic sources of causal power are at every moment



and in every context. Much social science still does work with the idea of constant association, indeed the very idea of linear regression is based on it (Ragin 1987)

Working on the basis of multiple, conjunctural causality can help us move past the *partial* conflict theories that are generally used, towards a *full* conflict theory more adequate for understanding the complexity and nuance of the Venezuela conflict. Eschewing causal primacy allows us to benefit from the critical edges of both the pluralist and neo-Marxist perspectives while avoiding their critical myopia. We can appreciate the way the dramatic inequalities of Venezuelan society that have led to a demand for change at the same time that we understand the ironies whereby robust efforts at using the state to address inequalities can lead to a concentration of power that can undermine these efforts. We can criticize the deterioration of civil and political rights at the same time that we praise improvement in social, cultural and economic inequalities. And we can point to the legitimacy of the opposition's complaints at the same time we criticize its consistent unwillingness to do the hard work required to expand their coalition beyond Venezuela's urban middle classes.

An emphasis on multiple conjunctural causality also generates an open-ended research agenda. Since there is no preestablished causal primacy, nor timeless causal relationships, research inevitably becomes more inductive than deductive, prioritizing empirical engagement.

A *full* conflict theory provides "ruthless criticism of everything existing." But it also engages in "criticism" in the literary sense, providing not just jeers but also applause where merited. Many of the Chávez and now Maduro governments' efforts have led to real improvements in people's lives and they deserve to be documented and analyzed. And many of the new generation of opposition leaders have put together successful cross-class political coalitions and governing projects, and that needs to be recognized. And here an empirical commitment is vital. While it is true that historically leftist political projects have led to concentration of power, it is important to see how the Chavista project is working out on the ground in this historical circumstance. While it is true that dominant social sectors will never relinquish privilege without a fight, it is important to appreciate the full complexity of the opposition coalition and the cases of positive innovation.

Finally, the notion of conjunctural causality can help us move past any abstract obligation to impartiality or balance in our critical analyses. While the goal of social science should always be to portray actors as fully human, this does not oblige us to strike diplomatic compromises between partisan political actors. It is entirely possible that in any given historical context, one articulation of ideological, economic, military or political power comes to attain overwhelming power. If so, it deserves more critical scrutiny.

This is precisely the case right now in Venezuela. Chavismo now controls every branch of the government, the majority of state and local governments as well as the armed forces and the goose that lays the golden eggs: the state oil company. It is in a commanding but not hegemonic position because it is experiencing serious social, economic and political problems from the inherent flaws of its model of governance. Despite enormous windfalls over the past decade the

economy has one of the highest inflation rates in the world and serious shortages of basic consumer goods. The government has not been able to keep up with the infrastructural needs of a growing society and electricity blackouts and water outages are common. Crime and violence are still at historic levels.

So far the Maduro government has confronted these problems less by improving its performance than by seeking to control dissent. Since his first month in office Maduro has progressively expanded the space of the armed forces in public administration. The citizen security apparatus is now controlled from top to bottom by the retired or active military officers. This includes the Minister of Interior as well as the head of the Bolivarian National Police—a force originally created as part of a push for civilian policing. The military has been given a television station, a bank and a large role in the importation of goods.

The militarization of citizen security is clearly a factor in the government's heavy handed response to the opposition protest movement. While most attention has been focused on the number of deaths, just as important is the indiscriminate use of tear gas and rubber bullets, as well as mass detentions without proper judicial orders or procedure. This has led to around 3000 arrests of protestors. Around 2500 of them have been given conditional release which restricts their ability to continue participating in protests. At the same time, the Maduro government has counteracted the protest movement by jailing or stripping some key opposition leaders of elected office.

The past year has also seen the government turn the corner in its consolidation of control over Venezuelan media. During the course of 2013 once fervent opposition television news channel Globovisión was domesticated. While the change in ownership a year ago was obscure, the results since then have been clear. Globovisión has shown serious signs of self-censorship during the cycle of protests, providing no coverage of conflicts in the streets and softball coverage of the politics around the protests. A similar process is currently occurring in the largest newspaper conglomerate. Cadena Capriles was sold in 2013 and is also undergoing serious turmoil as opposition journalists buck an effort to control their writing. Finally, on the most serious day of protests, February 12 the government removed Colombia-based NTN24 from the air arguing that it was fomenting chaos.

One final way the Maduro government is attempting to deflect dissent rather than address its causes is through an endless flow of domestic and international conspiracy theories. Of course, conspiracies happen. But the continual flow of accusations made on scarce evidence—frequently debunked by the government itself in the following days and weeks without any explanation—can only be seen as a government attempt to distract attention from its own shortcomings.

In May and June 2014 there has been some progress in the economy. A new exchange system has partially expanded access to dollars and some cabinet reshuffles have given economic pragmatists more say. This could alleviate some shortages in 2014 but probably not inflation.

Criticism of the government in no way requires a laudatory view of Venezuela's opposition. The close electoral loss in April 2013 unfortunately returned Henrique Capriles and the opposition coalition to the messages that they had seemingly overcome between 2008 and 2012: that they are the majority and the government is illegitimate. Capriles represented the December 2013 municipal elections as a plebescite on Maduro's presidency and lost his gamble as pro-government forces increased their percentage from the presidential elections eight months earlier.

Perhaps most relevant was the fact that shortly before the elections, polls showed that two thirds of respondents did not know where the opposition stood on the most important issues affecting Venezuela: crime, inflation and scarcities.

The electoral setback generated a process of debate and discussion within the opposition in December and January and the leading opinion was the idea that the opposition needed to work to broaden its appeal and expand its coalition by developing its message and bringing it to average Venezuelans. However, a minority position thought that the situation was too urgent and that they could not count on democratic elections in the future and needed to push for change with street mobilizations under the logo #lasalida.

Of course demanding Maduro's resignation two months after his government had received significant support at the polls was a proposal that could only sound logical to opposition radicals. But the strategy was aimed at international more than domestic audiences. The most widely used hashtag #SOSVenezuela portrays Venezuelans as captives of a tyrannical regime and in need of rescue.

The protest movement sought to create situations in which the government would show its increasingly authoritarian direction, and it largely worked. The government did answer with excessive force, it did clamp down on the media, it did jail opposition politicians, and this did hurt its national and international image. However, there is little chance that the protest movement can dislodge an elected government that has such far reach political and economic power and has considerable international legitimacy. And it does not seem that it has helped the opposition to significantly broaden their coalition.

In fairness, the dominant sector of the MUD did not support the efforts of López and Machado and fully realize they need to do grassroots mobilizing and "win the battle of ideas" as Henrique Capriles put it.

This is the situation of Venezuela today. It has a government that has everything it needs to consolidate a hegemonic position except for a viable model of governance. It seems more interested in controlling dissent than changing its model so more conflict seems likely. Venezuela's opposition is still beset by a long term inability to recognize the poverty and inequality that surround them. Significant sectors of the opposition prefer to cry foul and seek international intervention rather than develop a set of proposals that attract average Venezuelans

The common denominator of Venezuela's political conflict is a persisting gap between average citizens and those who hold political, economic, military and ideological power. The job of full conflict theory is to analyze and critique these powers, help hold them accountable, and thereby force them to take into account the people they aspire to represent.

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April 30, 2014  
9am - 4pm  
Joukowsky Forum  
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*A View from Below People's Movements in the Chavez and Post-Chavez Era:*

***FROM COLECTIVOS TO COMUNAS: THE FUTURE  
OF VENEZUELA'S REVOLUTIONARY  
MOVEMENTS.***

*George Ciccariello-Maher.*

April 30th, 2014



**Venezuela after Chavez:  
Challenges of Democracy, Security and Governance  
April 30, 2014**

Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies  
Watson Institute for International Studies  
Brown University

**FROM *COLECTIVOS* TO *COMUNAS*: THE FUTURE OF VENEZUELA'S  
REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENTS.**

*George Ciccariello-Maher.*  
Drexel University.

A specter is haunting Venezuela, the specter of the *colectivos*. All the powers of old Venezuela have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise it: political parties, NGOs, the foreign press, and of course, the Twittersphere. “Armed thugs.” “Vigilantes.” “Paramilitaries.” These are just a few of the hyperbolic and even apoplectic terms you may have heard attached recently to this other term that has suddenly emerged as the central bogeyman, bugbear, and *bête noire* of the Venezuelan opposition today: “*los colectivos*.”

However, some have publicly scratched their heads at the recent popularization of this term that *says so little* but seems to *mean so much*. It is in the gap between what the term *says* and what it *means* that I hope to locate its function and purchase in the contemporary Venezuelan crisis. *Colectivos* seems to refer most directly to the grassroots revolutionary collectives that constituted the most organized element of Chavismo, but beyond there the term loses all clarity and is revealed in its practical deployment to be dangerously lacking any clear referent whatsoever.

On February 12<sup>th</sup>, for example, it was widely claimed on Twitter that the student Bassil da Costa was shot by armed collectives. On February 19<sup>th</sup>, videos were circulated claiming that *colectivos* were rampaging through the wealthy zone of Altamira in Caracas firing hundreds of live rounds.<sup>1</sup> And when the young beauty queen Génesis Carmona was killed, her death was instantaneously blamed on—you guessed it—the *colectivos*. As it turns out, da Costa was almost certainly killed by uniformed and plainclothes Sebin (intelligence) officials, those present in Altamira on the 19<sup>th</sup> were not *colectivos*, according to the opposition mayor Ramón Muchacho, and not firing live rounds, and according to both ballistics evidence and her own friends, Génesis Carmona was shot from behind while the only Chavistas nearby seem to have been at least 2-3 blocks in the *opposite* direction.<sup>2</sup>

And yet these claims and many like them circulated instantly, tirelessly, and unproblematically throughout the Twittersphere, feeding a gullible mainstream and foreign media, often mediated by English-language blogs like *Caracas Chronicles*. While these are only a few examples of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://caracaschronicles.com/2014/02/19/19f/>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMekuc4tXsA>.

very real acts of violence wrongly attributed to collectives, we could add to these both the many nonexistent and imagined aggressions, as well as an analysis of the overall death count from the recent protests. According to David Smilde's detailed accounting, of those killed by "unidentified gunmen"—the category we would expect to be able to tie most directly to the fear of the *colectivos*—less than one-third were actually opposition protesters, a number not consistent with the level of anxiety the term provokes. (And it's worth adding that no such unified pejorative has emerged to describe those "unidentified gunmen" who have shot six National Guard and one National Police officer).<sup>3</sup>

All of which raises a peculiar and urgent analytic question: how can we make sense of the *mobility*, the *mutability*, and the sheer *contagiousness* of this shadowy concept? We find some initial clues by asking, firstly: how have the *colectivos* been *identified*? The term was not assumed voluntarily, since like many other terms—notably that of "Tupamaros" (which was created by the Metropolitan Police in the 1980s to describe urban militants)—the term *colectivos* emerged and gained its recent force in the denunciative form, an invention of its enemies. As an example of what Frantz Fanon would call "overdetermination from without," individuals were *identified as* collective members prior to choosing that identity themselves. Judging from opposition vitriol, the *colectivos* are armed by definition, but only a small sector of revolutionary organizations are in fact armed whereas most of those tarred with the term are not, making the choice of the term peculiar indeed. All of which leaves us with a much more troubling if well-worn set of markers that are simultaneously economic, political, and racial: being poor, dark-skinned, and wearing a red shirt is enough to be deemed a collective member these days.

Rather than *obscuring* its meaning, however, the sheer emptiness of the signifier thus speaks directly to its concrete function: "*colectivo*" today says more about its subject than its object, more about the one speaking it than the one of which it is spoken. It is not a description of an actual thing in the world, but a confession of a desperate *fear* that has only grown among Venezuela's privileged classes in proportion to the increasing political visibility and influence of the poor and darker-skinned. The term's function—its imposition with an aspiration to reductive homogenization—is clear from the fact that it is most often rendered with the definite article—the *collectives*.

"*Colectivos*" thus joins a long and sordid list: from the traditional denunciations of the rabble, the mob, the scum, the lumpen, and the horde (this last term surprisingly common even in the present) to more specific and recent variants like "Tupamaros" and "terror circles" (widely used to smear the Bolivarian Circles around the time of the 2002 coup). Since what is feared above all is the mobility and unpredictability with which the poor break the bounds of informal segregation, I would be remiss not to mention *motorizados*, a term so vague as to trouble translation (are they motorcycle couriers, *moto-taxistas*, or simply anyone frighteningly different from oneself who happens to be on a motorcycle?) Even in more tranquil times, one often sees tweets whipping up a panic that "Tupamaros" are in Altamira, with a blurry photo of a red-shirted motorcyclist provided as sufficient evidence of the threat. As Miguel Tinker Salas has

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<sup>3</sup> <http://venezuelablog.tumblr.com/post/83730482860/keeping-track-of-venezuelas-dead-april-update>.

noted, even the *make* of the motorcycle sharpens the class lens of such terms, since collective members are presumed to ride cheaper joint-Chinese makes like Empire, in contrast to the Hondas and Yamahas more prevalent in wealthier areas.

The recent popularization of the term *colectivos* is thus a powerful exercise in opposition *myth-making*. Writing about the racialized panic surrounding exaggerated and even false reports of violence, looting, and rape that followed like a swelling tide in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Slavoj Žižek observed that:

*even if ALL reports of violence and rape were to be proved factually true, the stories circulating about them would still be “pathological” and racist, since what motivated these stories was not facts, but racist prejudices... In other words, we would be dealing with what one can call lying in the guise of truth: even if what I am saying is factually true, the motives that make me say it are false*<sup>4</sup>

This point notwithstanding, however, it *does matter* that such claims in 2014 Venezuela are as detached from reality as those in 2005 New Orleans, and I believe that this detachment only redoubles as further evidence of the pathologies of anti-Chavismo.

If this collective panic is a form of myth-making, it is dangerous myth-making at that. By dehumanizing and objectifying all those it snares in its broad descriptive net, the term *colectivos* legitimizes violence against them (just as the bizarre, racist rumor that the National Guard is infiltrated by Cubans no doubt serves to legitimize sniper attacks).<sup>5</sup> Thus when the retired general Ángel Vivas tweeted the brutal suggestion to hang barbed wire at neck height on the barricades to “neutralize the motorcycle hordes,” thereby seamlessly connecting several fear-induced pejoratives, multiple deaths seems to have been the result. And on the same day that an opposition protester was recently stripped naked at the UCV—prompting outcry and slightly comical expressions of solidarity—a Chavista student nearby was severely beaten for the mere suspicion of pertaining to a “*colectivo*.”

There are, nevertheless, those who see in this expression of elite anxiety something more fundamental and specific, and even a mirror of the very power it seeks to demonize. As Reinaldo Iturriza put it recently, “the collectives are synonymous with organization, not violence,” and by extension, to demonize them is to demonize the organized capacity of popular sectors.<sup>6</sup> Such “expressions of hatred” are part of what Iturriza calls the “psychological work” and “fear factor” of a small sector of the Venezuelan opposition that is, in his words, “truly and literally fascist.”

In line with the generalized dynamics of oppositional conflict and Manichaeism in the Bolivarian process, however, the deployment of such terms is rejected by the so-called collectives themselves, causing them instead to “draw together, to unify” in the face of such demonization. According to Iturriza, the opposition as a whole needs “to criminalize any form of popular

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<sup>4</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 99-100.

<sup>5</sup> [https://twitter.com/mariesther\\_mey/status/445356449028268032/photo/1](https://twitter.com/mariesther_mey/status/445356449028268032/photo/1).

<sup>6</sup> <http://elotrosaberypoder.wordpress.com/2014/03/10/los-colectivos-son-sinonimo-de-organizacion-no-de-violencia-entrevista-en-ciudad-ccs-10-de-marzo-de-2014/>.



organization,” and the violent sectors of the far right, in particular, do so in order to “blame them for their own violent actions, to have a guilty party marked beforehand.”

Seizing upon this pejorative term that is *colectivos* and inverting it thereby reveals a positive content very much in line with the double-valence of Marx’s own “specter”: namely, that revolutionary grassroots organizations are the backbone and foundation of the Bolivarian process. The fear of the collectives constitutes a tacit recognition of this importance, which is only underlined by the fundamental contradiction that pulls at opposition discourse on the *colectivos*: the opposition simultaneously denounces them for being both blind followers of the government, helpless in the face of their attachment to the memory of their charismatic leader, and also for being dangerously *beyond* the authority of the state.

The reality is much more the latter: as I document extensively in *We Created Chávez*, popular revolutionary organizations like those slandered today as *colectivos* both *preceded* Chávez and *exceed* Chavismo in the autonomy they demand and maintain.<sup>7</sup> These revolutionary groupings were active in the mass popular upheaval in 1989 against neoliberalism, they coalesced in support of the 1992 coup attempts, and played major roles in supporting Chávez’s election and government while insistently building their own spaces for autonomous participation, often in tension with that government (sometimes productively so, sometimes not).

It is no coincidence that Iturriza, for whom the collectives are synonymous with organization, is also the current Minister of Communes, because it is toward the communal project—itsself simultaneously political and economic—that much popular energy has been dedicated in recent years. This is because those popular organizations so slandered today as *colectivos* have always stood at the vanguard of the struggle for a new kind of state and a new kind of productive apparatus. In this struggle, the movements often outpaced and leapt beyond not only the state but their own ostensible political leaders.

The demand for both socialism *but also* a more direct form of democracy to replace Venezuela’s corrupt, two-party liberal democracy emerged directly from decades of struggle. Long before the Bolivarian government institutionalized communal councils (in 2006) for directly democratic participation and decision-making on the local level, those engaged in grassroots struggles had pioneered *barrio* assemblies. Years before Venezuela’s communes entered into the law (in 2010), movements were unhesitatingly building these from below, and if their autonomy were not perfectly clear, the National Commoner Network (*Red Nacional de Comuneros y Comuneras*)—initially a state-affiliated institution—voted recently to detach itself from the state and operate independently.<sup>8</sup>

What the communes embody today is the hope that popular participation will continue to expand, and moreover that it will gain some economic teeth. By drawing together institutions of *political* participation with *economic* production, the hope is that socialism will be able to emerge hand-in-hand with the ever-more-ambitious claim to popular self-government. The task

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<sup>7</sup> George Ciccariello-Maher, *We Created Chávez: A People’s History of the Venezuelan Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Dario Azzellini, “The Communal State as Venezuela’s Transition to Socialism,” in S. Brincat, ed., *Communism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, vol. II (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013), 234.

is far from an easy one and the future far from certain. The communes frighten not only the Venezuelan opposition, but also entrenched Chavista political and economic elites as well.

If there is a reason that the poor and radical sectors are not in the streets alongside these protests, despite the fact that they often suffer the same shortages, it is because the solution many envision does *not* involve handing *more* oil money over to comprador capitalists who produce nothing at all, but cutting them out of the equation entirely, and because many recognize that this can only be truly considered once the country's productive base has been rebuilt on entirely different foundations.

Finally, I want to conclude by insisting that the true political weight of the *colectivos* would only become manifest in resistance to the coup against Chávez and the Constitution some twelve years ago this month. Twelve years ago, deaths in the streets were used to justify a coup that gave us what arguably remains the best picture we have of the Venezuelan opposition in power: all legitimate branches of government abolished, the Constitution scrapped, state *and grassroots* media shut down by force, popular organizations under military attack, and dozens dead in the streets. Some of the very same people currently accusing the Venezuelan government of violating articles of the Constitution were among those who approved of, applauded, or even insisted (as in the case of Leopoldo López) that we should be “proud of” the events of April 2002.<sup>9</sup>

But the more fundamental point is that the coup failed due in large part to the participation of the popular masses in the streets, as extolled in the popular phrase “Todo 11 tiene su 13,” every 11<sup>th</sup> has its 13<sup>th</sup>. And playing a powerful, arguably a central role in the effort to restore Venezuelan democracy—in part because some of them *were indeed armed* and used those weapons to protect and restore democracy—were none other than those so callously slandered and demonized today as “*colectivos*.”

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SVIDco4DAto>.

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**WHERE ARE THE BARRIOS? STREET PROTEST AND POPULAR  
POLITICS IN VENEZUELA, THEN AND NOW**

*Alejandro Velasco*  
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Venezuelans are no strangers to social conflict. In the fifteen years since Hugo Chávez first took office in 1999 promising to refound the nation, coups, countercoups, devastating strikes, media wars, massive demonstrations, and violent street clashes have marked the deep divide between supporters and opponents of the late President. But even against this backdrop, the protests that began in early February 2014, claiming at least forty lives in the process, are remarkable.

Unlike earlier periods of unrest in the Chávez and now post-Chávez era, an unprecedented confluence of factors has made this moment especially fraught. For one, Venezuela's government faces social and economic crises that even officials agree are severe: skyrocketing inflation, worsening shortages, crippling devaluation, rampant crime. Politically, too, following a surprisingly narrow electoral victory in April 2013 scarcely a month after Chávez's death, his successor Nicolás Maduro has struggled to consolidate leadership over a fractious government coalition comprised of revolutionary hardliners, centrists, and opportunists. For its part, after a poor showing by government opponents in municipal elections last December 2013, longstanding personal and ideological rivalries in the opposition crystallized around dueling factions, one pushing for Maduro's immediate ouster, the other opting to build an electoral majority, leaving a long-splintered opposition all the more so. And, a two year break in scheduled elections – rare as yearly nationwide elections have been the norm since 2004 – has fueled impatience among radicals and left moderates with few institutional outlets to lessen tensions.

And yet, the most remarkable feature of the protests is not what is different from previous cycles, but what is similar: as even opposition leaders admit, following a pattern in the Chávez era, the protests have largely failed to connect with popular sectors, with residents of the sprawling city *barrios* of Latin America's most urban country. On the surface, conditions seem ripe for a cross-class mass movement to challenge a government fifteen years in power and showing major signs of weakness. And yet that has not been the case. Instead the protests have remained largely confined to middle class sectors long identified with the political opposition, and with few

exceptions, have failed to incorporate disenchanting chavistas whose support for the government is based more on performance than ideology – those who helped make the last presidential election so close. Why, then, if social and economic conditions have worsened since last year, have barrio residents not taken to the streets in a major way?

It's an especially curious dynamic since just before the current cycle of protests began in early February; Venezuelan streets were in fact teeming with demonstrators in and from barrios. The Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict, which compiles data on protests nationwide, reported just over 4400 demonstrations in 2013 – 12 a day on average<sup>1</sup>. Of these only six percent responded to grievances over political rights – freedom of the press, transparency, due process. Most protests concerned shortcomings in social and economic rights – labor issues, insecurity, prison conditions, housing shortages, and education. With only slight hyperbole, then, in October of last year the opposition mayor of the capital Caracas could claim that under Maduro Venezuela held a “world record” of protests.<sup>2</sup> Seen thus, the question is not why popular sectors have failed to take to the streets, but why they left them when this round of protests began?

Responses vary. Government officials argue barrio residents have no reason to protest because they have benefited from and are loyal to chavismo.<sup>3</sup> This of course is unsatisfactory. It ignores how often popular sectors have taken to the streets in the recent past to express grievances. For the opposition, fear is what keeps popular sectors from joining the protests en masse – fear of losing increasingly precarious government benefits, or of falling victim to pro-government gangs in their midst.<sup>4</sup> But this, too, is unsatisfactory, both because it ignores that barrio residents have not shied away from taking to the streets before, and because intimidation is as yet not so widespread to account for the general absence of barrio residents among the protests. Analysts meanwhile note that the opposition has failed to put forward a credible alternative that would justify the risks of mobilizing against a government that, despite its recent failings, has delivered in the past and may again in the future.<sup>5</sup> Also, insofar as protesters' grievances focus on claims for civil and political rights, not the more immediate social and economic concerns that tend to draw most barrio residents to the streets, opposition protests operate on a different register from those that fuel a very real and palpable discontent among popular sectors.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social, “Tendencias de la Conflictividad Social en Venezuela” (January 2014): Accessed 8 June 2014. <http://bit.ly/1ieEajb>

<sup>2</sup> “Ledezma: Este gobierno tiene el récord mundial de protestas,” *El Universal*, 24 October 2013. Accessed 8 June 2014: <http://bit.ly/1kbbkA7>

<sup>3</sup> “Mesa de Diálogo - Jorge Rodríguez (11/04/2014),” Accessed 8 June 2014: <http://bit.ly/1rZfRPS>

<sup>4</sup> Javier Corrales, “Venezuela’s Middle Ground,” *Foreign Policy*, 22 April 2014. Accessed 8 June 2014: <http://atfp.co/1pqOj4D>

<sup>5</sup> Michael McCarthy, “‘New Game’: The Opposition’s Opportunities and Constraints,” *Venezuelan Politics and Human Rights Blog*, 22 April 2014. Accessed 8 June 2014: <http://bit.ly/1ieJy5S>

<sup>6</sup> David Smilde, “Brutal Poll Numbers Provide Context for Venezuela Dialogue,” *Venezuelan Politics and Human Rights Blog*, 7 May 2014. Accessed 8 June 2014: <http://bit.ly/1kJzWVA>

Each explanation has some grounding in fact. But a longer view, beyond the Chavez era and instead towards the origins and development of democracy in Venezuela, suggests another reason for why barrios have largely refrained from partaking in these protests.<sup>7</sup>

Since 1958, when Venezuela's last dictatorship fell in a civilian-military coup that ushered in electoral democracy, oppositional movements seeking to oust legitimately elected governments extra-institutionally have historically failed to capture popular support. It was true in the uncertain days of the transition to democracy, when several coup attempts aimed at reinstating military rule were met by street barricades and demonstrations by popular sectors. It was true in the 1960s when, despite generalized violence by the state against leftist guerrillas seeking power through armed struggle, popular sectors flaunted guerrilla calls to abstain from voting and instead flocked en masse to the polls. And it was true in 1992, when Lt. Col. Hugo Chávez failed to garner popular support in a coup seeking to oust an elected government that just three years earlier had responded to massive street protests over structural adjustment policies—the so called 1989 Caracazo – in a massacre that left hundreds if not thousands dead in the span of a week.

And yet, popular rejection of insurrectional movements – whether real or perceived – did not automatically equate to popular sector support for particular governments. In the capital Caracas, for instance, it was not until the 1970s when popular sectors voted significantly for the major parties of the pre-Chávez era, opting instead during the years of transition and guerrilla conflict to lend their electoral support to third party candidates. But by participating in the electoral process, they registered their support for the democratic system that granted elected governments legitimacy on the one hand and on the other, once in power, responsibility to respond to popular demands, whether made institutionally or otherwise.

Indeed, the historical record is replete with contentious, often illegal street protests seeking not the ouster of but engagement with the government. In 1969, just months after the first peaceful handover of power to an elected opposition party in Venezuelan history, and following the formal defeat of leftist guerrillas, residents of the *23 de enero* neighborhood in downtown Caracas – a massive complex of public housing high rises and squatter settlements – set up barricades in protest over severe water shortages, eventually securing compliance from authorities. In the 1980s, after years of neglect, residents hijacked and for a month held over a dozen public service vehicles until the government agreed to a complete overhaul of the neighborhood.<sup>8</sup> And when in 1989 barrio residents massively took to the streets during the Caracazo, it was not to seek the overthrow of the government but to register deep opposition to neoliberal reforms.

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<sup>7</sup> The following paragraphs draw from archival and oral historical materials and observations found in: Alejandro Velasco, *Barrio Rising: Urban Change and Popular Politics in Modern Venezuela*. Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming.

<sup>8</sup> Alejandro Velasco, "A Weapon as Powerful as the Vote: Urban Protest and Electoral Politics in Venezuela, 1978-1983," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 90 no. 4 (November 2010).

All of which suggests that since 1958, what popular sectors in Venezuela have defended is not governments, but the right to elect governments, and once in power, the right to hold them accountable, institutionally or extra-institutionally, to their responsibilities with the electorate. Movements and protests that undermine the vote by challenging not the performance but the legitimacy of elected authorities have historically fared poorly.

Why then have barrio residents left the streets during this cycle? Because they perceive these protests as insurrectional, a qualitatively different motive of protest despite similarities in the modalities of protest – contentious street actions – that have long formed part of their standard repertoire of democratic engagement. For popular sectors, the vote confers powerful legitimacy to elected governments, but it also imposes heavy responsibilities to respond to popular demands when made *toward* rather than *against* the state. Insofar as they perceive this as an insurrectional movement that dismisses the vote as a primary locus of popular expression in a democracy, they are likely to continue to remain absent from the streets.

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9am - 4pm  
Joukowsky Forum  
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*A View from Below People's Movements in the Chavez and Post-Chavez Era:*

## ***BATTLES OVER PRESS FREEDOM IN VENEZUELA***

*Naomi Schiller.*

*Robert Samet.*

April 30th, 2014





**Venezuela after Chavez:  
Challenges of Democracy, Security and Governance  
April 30, 2014**

Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies  
Watson Institute for International Studies  
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**BATTLES OVER PRESS FREEDOM IN VENEZUELA**

*Naomi Schiller*

Temple University

*Robert Samet*

University of Massachusetts at Amherst

For over a decade, we have witnessed a procession of well-publicized reports about the demise of press freedom in Venezuela. Most recently, accusations that the Venezuelan government is stifling expression were leveled against Nicolas Maduro as part of the international social media campaign [#SOSVenezuela](#) campaign. These accusations have been echoed by mainstream [press organizations](#), [human rights activists](#), and [Hollywood celebrities](#), many of whom have little understanding of the local context. Defenders of the Maduro government have, in turn, [denounced](#) the [denouncers](#). They assert that this is another attempt to undermine a democratic project with spurious accusations. What are we to make of this echo chamber of denunciations?

Debates about press freedom in Venezuela are highly polarized (Schiller 2013)<sup>1</sup>. Many who have opposed the Chávez and Maduro governments understand changes to Venezuela's media world over the past fifteen years as [a blatant attack on press freedom](#) and an effort to consolidate an authoritarian regime. They frame their struggle in terms of a fight to defend civil and political liberties, and point to laws regulating media content, the shuttering of hostile news stations, as well as the expansion of state media as evidence that democratic rights are under assault. Those aligned with the opposition have engaged in transnational activism to develop and circulate their narratives of press freedom's demise.

In contrast, supporters of the Bolivarian revolution view the political terrain instead as a [guerra mediatica or media war](#). They argue that the commercial media represents the interests of the national and global economic capitalist elite who have turned to propaganda and outright misrepresentation in order to undermine the development of a socialist project. They point to the role that the private press played [in a failed coup d'état](#) against President Chávez, its

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<sup>1</sup> See Schiller's article, "Reckoning with Press Freedom," (2013) for an effort to engage a critical anthropology of the concept of press freedom informed by the practice of community media producers in Caracas.

participation in an oil strike that paralyzed the national economy, and its cynical manipulation of images and statistics for partisan purposes.

Rather than parsing blame, we offer ethnographically grounded observations about the practice of media producers in Venezuela, based on Robert's research among professional journalists working for the commercial press and Naomi's research with community media producers aligned with the Bolivarian Revolution at a television station called Catia TVe. In doing so, we focus on the practice of denunciation and its relationship to press freedom. We argue that the widespread media practice of "denouncing" social, political, and economic problems in Venezuela challenges narratives about the demise of press freedom.

Furthermore, these denuncias reveal how journalism in Venezuela can paradoxically both deepen and threaten democratic forms of expression and action.

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The use of *denuncias* (denunciations) is one of the defining characteristics of journalism in Venezuela. While doing fieldwork among community television producers and journalists employed by the private press, we were surprised to find that this practice was of central importance to all of our interlocutors even though they were positioned at opposite ends of the media-political spectrum. The term "denuncia" is often translated as "accusation," "complaint," or "denunciation" and it is familiar to any student of Latin American politics. Denuncias have a long history that is bound up with the legal and political tradition of popular sovereignty in Spanish America. In the latter half of the twentieth century, journalists began publishing denuncias of state violence, corruption, and cronyism as a way of speaking out against injustice before a mass public. Although the use of denuncias or denunciations is commonplace in Latin America media, the practice has received scant attention from scholars and practitioners.

No practice is more closely linked to the exercise of press freedom in Venezuela than the practice of denunciation. During the 14 years that Chávez was in power, scores of denuncias were broadcast by private, community, and state-based media outlets. The sheer volume of accusations in circulation made it rather straightforward for many doing research in Venezuela to counter claims that in Venezuela, press freedom was dead (which is not to say that reports of censorship were unfounded).

Denuncias allow Venezuelan journalists and media producers to claim the role of "fourth estate." In this capacity, they disseminate accusations about wrongdoing (e.g. corruption, waste, abuse of power, etc.) in order to safeguard democratic institutions. In so doing, journalists may assert that they are neutral, removed observers of the wrongdoing they document (the preferred idiom of professional journalism) or they may claim a role as active participants in catalyzing community response and involvement in local problem-solving (the framework of community media producers). Either way, these kinds of denuncias tend to legitimize the broad institutional framework by claiming that the answer to problems is revision and redress, not regime change.

However, denuncias also allow the media to take up the function of activist vanguard against the existing status quo, be it a democracy or a dictatorship. In this capacity, the press becomes an unapologetic political protagonist, and mass mediated denuncias become a tool of popular mobilization for social movements that included demands like regime change (Samet 2013). Under conditions of extreme political polarization, this form of denunciation can quickly overshadow the kinds of denuncias that focus on reforming existing institutions. Instead of watchdog, the media assumes the role of attack dog. Producers, editors, and pundits often take up the mantle of broad political projects and, as a consequence, denuncias can often devolve into cynical tools of political warfare. This form of denunciation tends to approach audiences as passive spectators to be won, rather than as savvy participants in politics who are capable of managing complexity.<sup>2</sup>

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What happens to press freedom and debates about press freedom under conditions of extreme political polarization? Is it reduced to an empty signifier, a value that each group believes it upholds and that its enemies oppose?

In the international arena, this seems to be the case. Since the beginning of the Chávez era, national and international elites denounced the Venezuelan government for obstructing press freedom. For example, Freedom House first categorized the Venezuelan press as “not free” back in 2003, a designation that it has maintained until today. This claim was deceptive. Few places in the world rivaled the diversity, power, and privilege of the private press in Venezuela circa 2003 (Duffy and Everton 2008). During President Chávez’s first term in office, Venezuela would likely have outstripped the United States in most if not all metrics of press freedom. Our purpose is not to single out Freedom House, because it was not alone or entirely at fault for this mischaracterization of Venezuela. Rather, we want to point out how the abuse of denuncias can undermine democratic processes.

Preemptively labeling Venezuela a violator of press freedom was unfortunate for a number of reasons. First, it echoed a message well known throughout the region: democratic institutions of Latin American are secondary to the political and economic interest of the United States. In the past, democratically elected governments whose policies conflicted with U.S. interests have found themselves attacked on two fronts. They are labeled undemocratic, and they discover that institutions like press freedom are militarized for the purpose of counter-revolutions, U.S.-backed insurgencies, and coup d’états (Grandin 2006). This was certainly the lesson learned by the Chávez administration in 2002. Spurious accusations that the Venezuelan press was un-free sent a clear message to the Venezuelan government. It convinced Chávez and his supporters that the private press and its international allies were more concerned with overthrowing the government than with upholding democracy. Regardless of whether or not press freedom was actually under attack, the government would be accused of stifling it. To make matters worse,

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<sup>2</sup> This is, admittedly, a typology. While it provides a framework for understanding denuncias, the practice of denunciation is far more fluid and less easily categorized.

preemptively labeling Venezuela a violator of press freedom damaged the ability of watchdogs to do their job. By crying wolf they lost both leverage and credibility.

The discredit done to defenders of press freedom is all the more alarming, as the atmosphere of openness in Venezuela has deteriorated in recent years. Under current conditions, the channels for good-faith denunciations seem to be narrowing. The opposition news outlets that once dominated the media landscape have been greatly neutralized under the legal and financial muscle of the Maduro administration. Likewise, supporters of the Bolivarian revolution stifle internal critique as the government and chavistas close ranks to protect Maduro's thin electoral margin.

If there is space for hope, we find it at the grassroots level, among the media producers and journalists who are doing the hard work of documenting peoples' lives and crafting narratives that expose the complexity of the challenges they face. Our ethnographic research with journalists from opposite ends of the political spectrum revealed that although some people did use denunciations in a cynical fashion, the vast majority insisted on grounding their work in their ideals of democracy. Among producers at Catia TVE this meant putting the tools of representation in the hands of those who were being represented; it meant using the process of media production to catalyze barrio-based activism. Among journalists on the Caracas crime beat, this meant fact-based reporting; it meant following important stories regardless of their political ramifications; and it meant trying to bracket their own personal prejudices. These are, to be certain, different visions of media and democracy, but they share a commitment to good faith reporting, to processes of political self-determination, and to ensuring accountability.

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*Living in a state of fear violence and citizen security in times of Bolivarian  
Revolution:*

***CITIZEN SECURITY REFORM IN VENEZUELA:  
TAKING STOCK OF “SOCIALIST-HUMANIST”  
SECURITY SIX YEARS***

*Rebecca Hanson.*

April 30th, 2014



**Venezuela after Chavez:  
Challenges of Democracy, Security and Governance  
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**CITIZEN SECURITY REFORM IN VENEZUELA: TAKING STOCK OF  
“SOCIALIST-HUMANIST” SECURITY SIX YEARS**

*Rebecca Hanson*  
University of Georgia.

Since 2008, the Chavista governments (first led by Hugo Chávez, followed by Nicolás Maduro after his death in 2013) have implemented a slew of citizen security programs in response to skyrocketing crime and violence rates. Violent crime in Venezuela has been on the rise since about 1993. However, in the past 14 years, homicide rates have been climbing at an increasingly rapid rate in the country. In 2000 Venezuela had a homicide rate of 33 per 100,000 residents. By 2012 this rate had risen to 56/100,000<sup>1</sup>. And, apart from intermittent deployments of the military into areas with high crime rates, the Chávez government largely ignored the issue of citizen security for a number of years. Partially due to an assumption that the state’s efforts to reduce poverty would lead to a corresponding reduction in crime; and rampant police corruption and crime did not garner consistent attention from the administration until Chávez’s second term as president.

Within the past seven years, however, the national government has supported an ambitious police reform that not only created a new police force (the Policía Nacional Bolivariana [PNB] or the National Bolivarian Police) but also set out to retrain officers in the 130+ police bodies in the country; the creation of new mechanisms by which citizens could denounce officer corruption and abuse; the organization of a presidential disarmament commission, which resulted in the eventual passage of a disarmament law in 2013; and dozens of cultural and social initiatives have also been founded or financed by the government with the goal of creating a “culture of peace.”

Using national survey data, this presentation looks at public opinions of crime, security reforms, and the police. Given that Chavista and opposition parties, and thus many of those who identify with one side or the other, are fiercely polarized I also look at how respondents with different political affiliation perceive these issues.

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics taken from the CICPC, the MPPRIJ, and Centro para la Paz y los Derechos Humanos, UCV.

Between August 2013-January 2014 Datanalisis, a Venezuelan polling firm, conducted the surveys and collected the data included in this paper. David Smilde and I wrote the questions included on the surveys, questions that were based on our previous research as well as fieldwork that I was in the process of conducting at the time the surveys were being carried out.

In the presentation I will focus on three major takeaways from the responses we received to survey questions: 1) Rather than pointing to the state or the government, citizens hold the family primarily responsible for causing crime and resolving it; 2) Human rights-oriented police reform has significant support among citizens, but limiting officers' use of force, an important component of this police reform, receives much less support; and 3) Support for security reforms can only be understood if we take political affiliation into account.

Before delving into opinions of reform, let's take a step back and consider what citizens believe the principle causes of and solutions to crime are. In August 2013 Datanalisis asked survey respondents the following question: "What do you consider to be the principal causes of delinquency in Venezuela?" (¿Cuáles considera usted que son las principales causas de la delincuencia en Venezuela?)<sup>2</sup>. Respondents were given the following options from which they could choose.

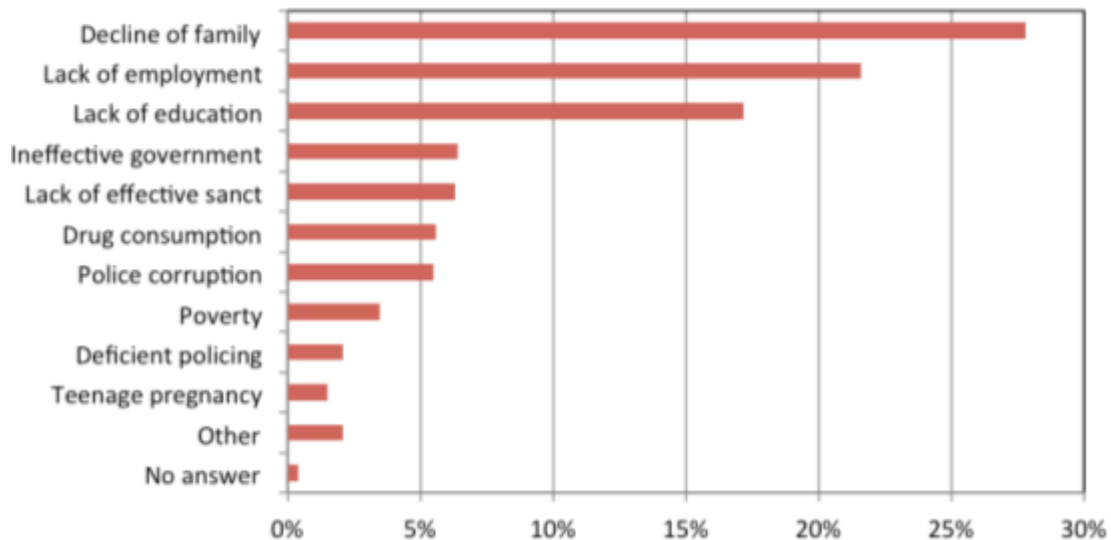
- Lack of values in the home/decomposition of the family.
- Lack of employment.
- Lack of education.
- Weak government.
- Lack of laws/sanctions for law-breakers.
- High rate of drug consumption.
- Police corruption.
- High poverty rate.
- Deficiency in police bodies and personnel.
- High rate of youth pregnancy.
- I do not know/no answer.

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<sup>2</sup> Because the word "delincuencia" can connote crimes primarily committed by youth, we also ran this question with the word "la inseguridad" with similar results. Looking at the total list of options chosen (instead of just the first choices), values and family decomposition remain the most popular choice at 61.5%. Police corruption moves up to second place when we ask people to chose a cause of "inseguridad" rather than "delincuencia" (31.2%). However, it is followed closely by lack of employment (30%) and lack of education (29%).

The graph below provides the first factor respondents chose when they answered this question.

**Graphic 1.** Cause of delinquency, first answer, 2013.



Source: Datanalisis, 2013.

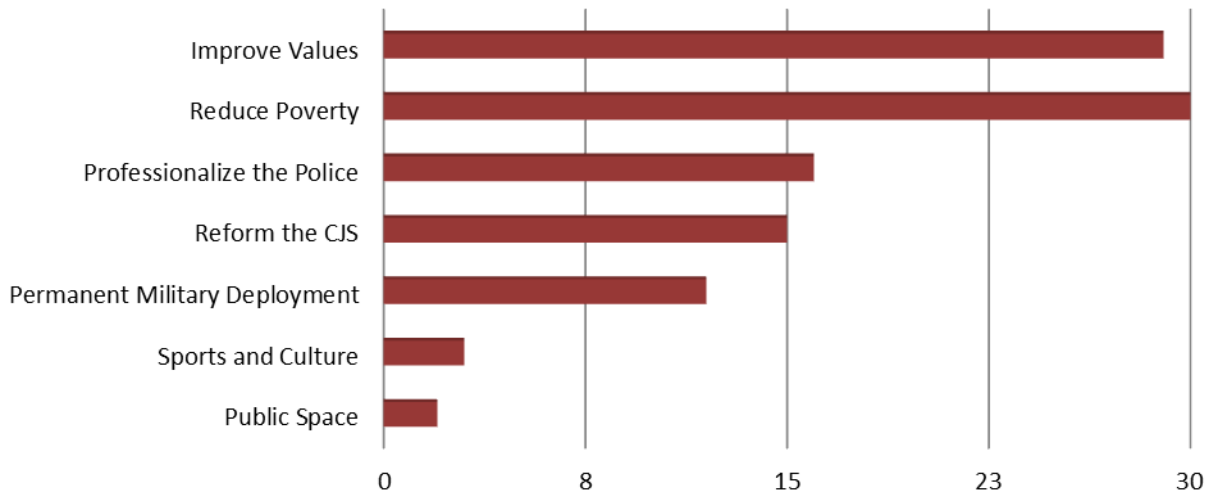
The lack of values in the home and family decomposition (27.8) is by far the most popular first choice in explaining “delinquency.” This is followed by a lack of employment (21.6) and education (17.2). Together police corruption and deficiencies in policing make up less than 10% of respondents’ first choice explanation, while ineffective government only gets 6.4%.

In July Datanalisis asked a similar question: “Of the following factors, which are the three most important in fighting crime?” (De los siguientes factores ¿cuáles son los tres más importantes en combatir la inseguridad?). Respondents were asked to choose three factors from the following options:

- Improve the values taught to children by the family.
- Reduce poverty and social inequality.
- Professionalize the police officers.
- Reform the judicial and penal systems.
- Permanent military deployment en areas with high crime rates.
- Improved access to cultural activities.
- Improved access to public space.



**Graphic 2.** Number one factor in Combating Crime, 2013.



**Source:** Datanalisis, 2013.

Again, the top first mention (67%) was improving values taught by the family. Before the police, the government, or the criminal justice system the family is the institution to which more people look to both explain and resolve crime. This perception effectively privatizes and depoliticizes the issue of crime, holding individuals and families—rather than state institutions and actors—responsible for "delinquency." There is also consensus across political lines on this issue:

**Table 4.** Number One Factor in Combating Crime

Factors	Pro-Government	Opposition	Ni-Ni
Values	70%	66%	68%
Professionalize Police	52%	57%	57%
Reduce Poverty	56%	54%	51%

**Source:** Datanalisis, 2013.

As we can see, government and opposition supporters as well as the Ni-Nis (those who support neither the government nor the opposition) respond that the recuperation of the family and values is the most effective way to combat crime.

It is worth noting that the use of the term “the family” here conceals an intense gender bias in the way in which blame is assigned. In the Venezuelan context “the family” often boils down to single mothers, meaning that women are more likely to be blamed when their children commit a crime (Zubillaga et al., Forthcoming). Indeed, in everyday discourse people often blame single mothers for “not doing their jobs” when discussing why crime has increased in the country.

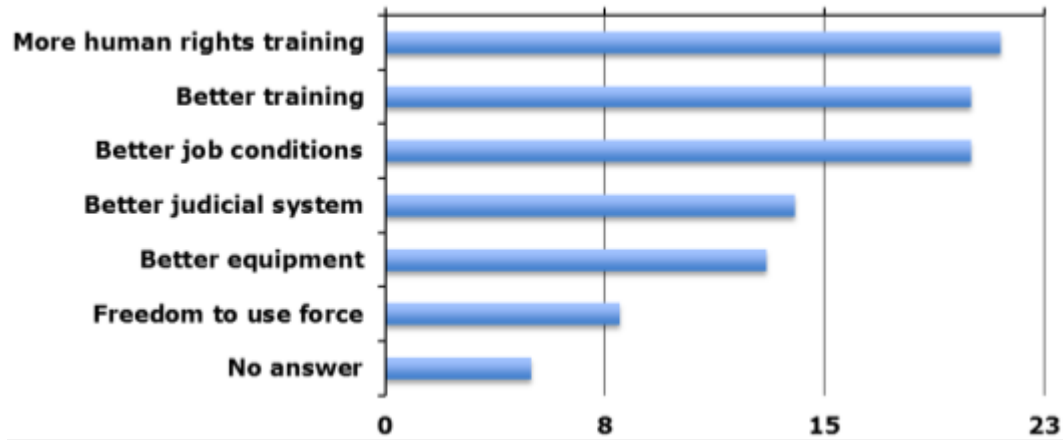
Identifying the family, and the values families impart to children, as the institution responsible for crime helps to explain why the government has never “paid” politically for crime. Though Chávez’s popularity was tied to fluctuations in the economy, it was never heavily impacted by upswings in crime (Smilde, 2012). These responses also suggest why it is so difficult to generate political support for efforts at citizen security reform in the country. For most people, citizen security reforms (reforming the police, cracking down on gun sales, etc.) are not the most obvious and convincing ways to address crime.

Following the family and values option, institutional and economic measures were the most commonly chosen means to combat crime. For 23% of respondents the reduction of poverty (an issue that the Chávez government often received high marks on in public opinion surveys) was the preferred way in which to accomplish this. Over 30% of respondents answered that reforms in the police, penal and judicial systems were the principle means of fighting crime, clearly winning out over military deployment (12%), which has made a comeback as a popular security strategy in the past two years (Smilde and Hanson, 2014).

Not only is there support for police reform in general, but there is also relatively high support for human rights-oriented police reform. In September Datanalisis asked respondents “In your opinion, in order for our police officers to be more capable of fighting crime, what is the first thing that needs to happen?” (En su opinión, para que nuestras policías sean más eficaces en lucha contra la inseguridad ¿qué es lo primero que debería pasar?):

- More training in the protection of human rights.
- Better training.
- Better job conditions (salary and benefits).
- A better functioning judicial system.
- Better equipment.
- More freedom in using force when confronting criminals.

**Graphic 3. Making Police More Effective, 2013.**



Source: Datanalisis, 2013.

More human rights training for officers was the most frequently chosen first response, narrowly edging out better training and better job conditions. In its initial years these three factors were pillars of the 2008 police reform. The police university that emerged from the reform requires officers to take multiple classes on human rights; in the retraining process that officers must undergo throughout their careers 12 different modules are dedicated to this subject. Education levels were also raised and standardized for all police officers, and initially pay was more than doubled<sup>3</sup>.

There is also political consensus on human rights training as the most effective way by which to improve policing in the country:

**Table 5. Making the Police More Effective**

Factors	Pro-Government	Opposition	Ni-Ni
Better Human Rights Training	23%	23%	18%
Better Training	24%	14%	18%
Better Working Conditions	17%	24%	19%

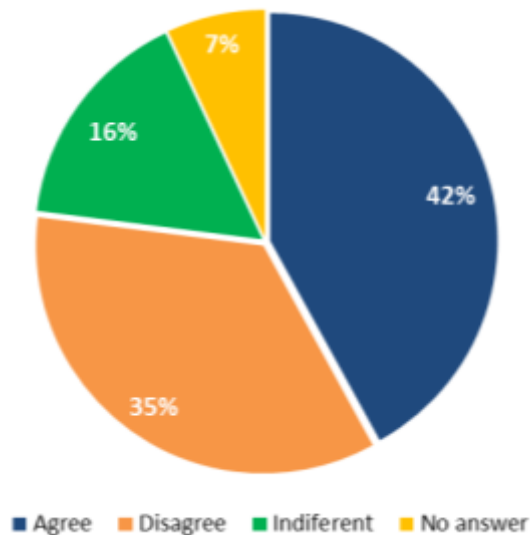
Source: Datanalisis, 2013.

As we can see, this was the first pick for both government and opposition supporters; for “Ni-Nis” better human rights training and better training in general came out as equally important.

<sup>3</sup> These reforms have also encountered numerous barriers: inflation has reduced the purchasing power of the Bolivar, with pay increases unable to stay ahead of rising inflation; many municipal and state police forces have been reticent to fully implement new training and education requirements; and officers in the National Police force are intensely critical of the approach to policing taught at the university.

However, while human rights training have popular support, this does not translate into support for limiting officers' use of force. In July Datanalisis asked respondents: "How in agreement are you with the following statement? 'Limiting the actions and force that the police can use limits their ability to fight crime'" (¿Qué tan de acuerdo se encuentra usted con la siguiente frase? "Limitar las acciones o fuerza que pueden usar los cuerpos policías restringe su capacidad del combatir el hampa y la inseguridad.").

**Graphic 4.** Limiting Police Action and Force, 2013



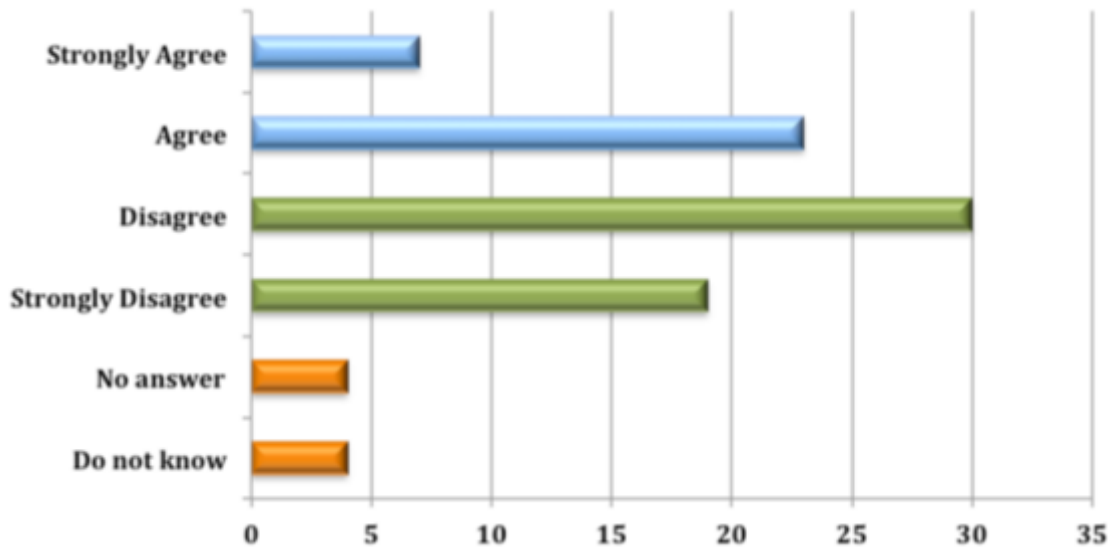
**Source:** Datanalisis, 2013.

42% of respondents agreed that limiting police action and force limits officers' ability to fight crime (compared to 35% who disagreed). These responses make it difficult to interpret what citizens mean when they say they support human rights training. Training a police force to respect human rights without limiting the amount of force they may use when dealing with citizens would seemingly have little impact, as the choice of when to respect human rights would be left up to the discretion of each individual officer.

Despite the consensus over what could be done to improve the police, evaluations of the reforms that have actually been implemented are quite mixed. Take, for example, the answers that Datanalisis received to a question asking respondents to evaluate the National Bolivarian Police (PNB), the police force created by the 2008 police reform. In November 2013 respondents were asked: "How in agreement are you with the following statement?

'The National Bolivarian Police is the security body most capable of combating crime.'" (¿Qué tan de acuerdo se encuentra usted con la siguiente frase? 'La Policía Nacional Bolivariana es el cuerpo de seguridad más capaz de combatir la inseguridad.').

**Graphic 5.** Confidence in the National Bolivarian Police, 2013.



Source: Datanalisis, 2013.

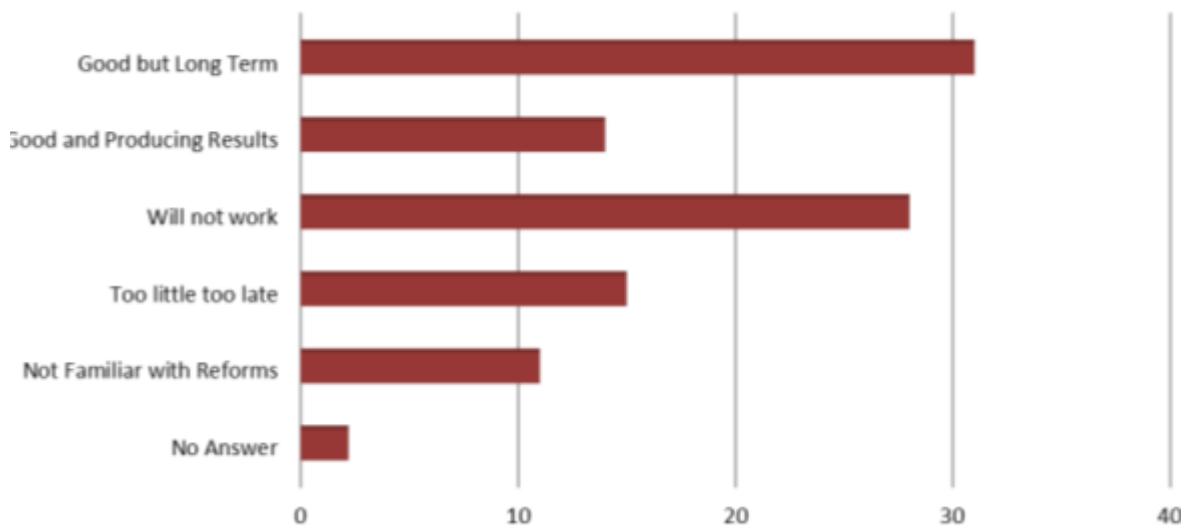
Almost half of respondents report a lack of confidence in the PNB, with only 30% reporting that this body is the most capable of dealing with crime. In interpreting these responses, we should keep in mind that Venezuelans do not trust police forces in general. When Datanalisis asked respondents whose presence made them feel safer (the police, the National Guard, or neither) 57% opted for the National Guard with only 14% choosing the police. These negative evaluations, then, probably have more to do with perceptions of the police as an institution in general than the PNB in particular.

When we zoom out and look at perceptions of security reforms in general, positive and negative evaluations are split almost right down the middle. On the August survey respondents were asked: “In the past few years the Government has put various citizen security reforms in place, including the Police Reform and the Presidential Disarmament Commission. Which of the following opinions is closest to your own?” (“En los últimos años el Gobierno ha puesto en marcha varias reformas en materia de seguridad ciudadano, incluyendo la Reforma Policial y la Comisión Presidencial de Desarme. ¿Cuál de las siguientes opiniones es más cercana a la suya?”):

- These reforms are good and are showing results.
- These reforms are good but are long term reforms.
- These reforms are too little too late.
- These reforms are not going to work.

- I am not familiar with these reforms.

**Graphic 6.** Evaluations of Reform, 2013



Source: Datanalisis, 2013.

14% of the respondents answered that the reforms are good and 31% responded that they are good but long-term solutions. Combining these two responses, we see that a slight majority of respondents familiar with reforms positively evaluated them (45%). Nevertheless, 43% of respondents answered that reforms were too little too late or would not work. Given that the margin of error of the poll is around 2.5%, this is a statistical toss-up.

And, while we saw a high degree of political convergence over what changes people would like to see, there is little consensus over those that have been implemented. Indeed, if people agree on what needs to be done about crime they differ drastically over the reforms that have been put into place by the government.

**Table 5.** Evaluations of Reform by Political Affiliation

Evaluations	Pro-Government	Opposition	Ni-Ni
Reform is Good	75%	17%	37%
Reform Has Not Worked	15%	73%	48%

Source: Datanalisis, 2013.

While citizens seem agree on how to combat crime, most opposition supporters do not think that the reforms implemented by the government have done this very well. Only 17% of those who identify as opposition supporters evaluate reforms positively and only 9% are confident that the PNB is the police most capable of fighting crime.

As we can see there, opposition supporters are much less likely to positively evaluate the reform as well as the PNB than government supporters. There is an important political component, then, to evaluations of reform. Regardless of their content, the opposition is unlikely to support any measures supported or passed by the government.

In summary, these responses suggest a number of contradictions that complicate the consolidation of security reform in Venezuela. First, the institution most frequently held up as the cause of and solution for crime is the family. Assigning blame and responsibility to "the family" privatizes a public issue, making it difficult to gain support for institutional reform; this belief also allowed the government to avoid implementing reforms of the police and criminal justice system—which are notoriously difficult to carry out—for years. Second, while human rights-oriented police reform does have support, an important component of this approach—limiting officers' use of force—does not. And, third, while there is consensus on the need for reform centered on human rights, those reforms implemented by the government—even if they promote human rights education for the police—are unlikely to be supported by the opposition.

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*Living in a state of fear violence and citizen security in times of Bolivarian Revolution:*

***A “PACIFIC BUT ARMED REVOLUTION”:  
UNDERSTANDING THE PARADOX OF  
BOLIVARIAN VENEZUELA AND THE NEW  
SPATIALIZATION OF VIOLENCE***

*Veronica Zubillaga*

April 30th, 2014





**Venezuela after Chavez:  
Challenges of Democracy, Security and Governance  
April 30, 2014**  
Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies  
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**A “PACIFIC BUT ARMED REVOLUTION”: UNDERSTANDING THE  
PARADOX OF BOLIVARIAN VENEZUELA AND THE NEW  
SPATIALIZATION OF VIOLENCE**

*Veronica Zubillaga*  
*Brown University Universidad Simon Bolivar*

The Bolivarian Revolution of Venezuela represents a paradox for studies on urban violence: if on the one hand there is improvement in the basic living conditions of the most vulnerable populations due to the State’s investment of its extraordinary resources from the oil revenues in massive social programs called Misiones Sociales<sup>1</sup>, on the other hand, violence disproportionately affects these same vulnerable groups.

Nowadays, as compared to the past, fewer Venezuelans die when they are babies and fewer children die from nutritional deficiencies<sup>2</sup>. However, these children, who might be safeguarded, upon reaching adolescence are more likely than before to die in fatal encounters—in armed clashes with peers or with the police. Homicide is the leading cause of death for young men ages 15 to 24 in Venezuela (MPPS, 2009). And, obviously, there is an uneven distribution of risk among these men in terms of their chances of being the victims of a violent death. Those who are dying are poor young men from the barrios: 81% of homicide victims are male, and most (83%) comes from disadvantaged urban areas (INE, 2010). Furthermore, according to official records, the overwhelming majority of these deaths (90%) are perpetrated with guns (CODESARME, 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> In the Bolivarian Venezuela public policies intended to combat poverty and inequality have been developed through massive social programs called Misiones Sociales. The Misiones consist of a series of social programs created in 2003 – a year of intense political confrontation after the coup of 2002 - to meet the needs of the most vulnerable through expeditious policies. Even though Misiones Sociales have been criticized because of extensive corruption, poverty in income has decreased significantly. Between 2003 and 2011 the percentage of households defined as poor in Venezuela (according to the national income line method) dropped from 55 to 26 percent of households (Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística, consulted on February 4th, 2013. [http://www.ine.gov.ve/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&id=104&Itemid=45#](http://www.ine.gov.ve/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=104&Itemid=45#)).

<sup>2</sup> The death rate from nutritional deficiencies dropped from 72 to 27 among children under one year between 1997 and 2006 (Rate per 100.00 inhabitants for each age group). Source: <http://www.sisov.mpd.gob.ve/indicadores/NU030090000000/> Consulted on February 4th, 2013.

As in other Latin American countries such as Mexico and Brazil, violence in Venezuela escalated during the nineties, and more specifically in its most important cities. Caracas, as well as Mexico City and Rio de Janeiro almost doubled their homicide rates. But in the first decade of the new century, Venezuela, undergoing the process known as the Bolivarian Revolution, and in contrast to Mexico or Brazil which continued with stable homicides rates, almost tripled its rates. Furthermore, what has also changed in the country is the spatial distribution of violence; violence is still an urban phenomenon, as it was during the nineties, but in the present, it is also a border phenomenon; regions next to Colombia or in the north coast, have shown important increases in their homicides rates.

What makes this possible? Which processes underlie this new spatialization of violence in Venezuela? Why has the Bolivarian state been so ineffective in controlling this violence that is predominantly affecting people from the barrios? These questions will guide my discussion in this overview paper of my presentation at The Conference “Venezuela after Chavez: Challenges of Democracy, Security and Governance” held at Brown University on April 30, 2014, sponsored by Brown’s Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (CLACS).

I will argue that the increase of violence and its novel regional distribution in Venezuela has to do with internal and external or regional dynamics that affect Venezuela. We will analyze how this rise of social violence is embedded in factors and processes particularly shaped by the doings and non-doings of a privileged actor such as the State. I will organize my discussion in an already classic perspective in the study of urban violence (Briceño-León, 2012; Imbusch, Misse and Carrion, 2011<sup>3</sup>). My approach seeks to unravel the complexities of violence by studying the interplay of different factors and levels of analyses and their mutual relationships in time and space.

### Regional

We have one order of factors, that we could call *regional* associated with the war on drug policies in our neighboring country Colombia, and the concomitant displacement of armed actors inside our borders. As a result we have a new reconfiguration of illicit markets flows and Venezuela occupies a new place in the international drug trade, especially the trafficking of cocaine to Europe and the United States (UNODC 2010:75).

A heterogeneity of armed actors (state and non-state) competing for territory and lucrative illicit networks would be now working in Venezuelan territory and multiple signs suggest the involvement of sectors of the armed forces and the police in these illegal economies with the corruption and armed violence it implies (See Corporación Nuevo Arcoiris, 2012). This takes place amidst the weak capacity of enforcement of the Venezuelan Government. After the Coup

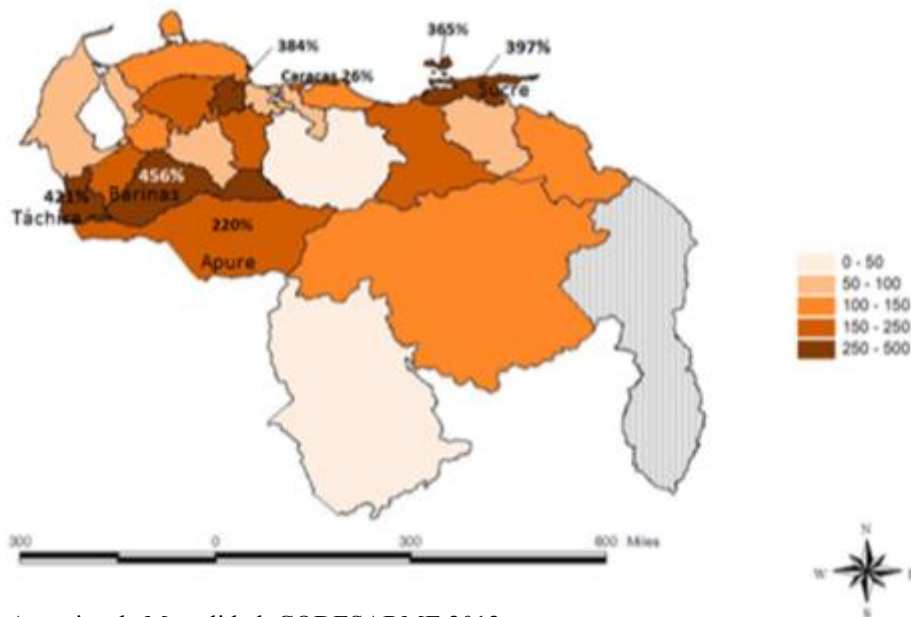
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<sup>3</sup> Imbusch, P. Misse, M.; Carrión, F. (2011) Violence Research in Latin America and the Caribbean: A Literature Review. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, Vol 5, No 1. Briceño-León, R. (2012). Un marco sociológico para la violencia urbana. En R. Briceño-León, & y. A. O. Ávila, *Violencia e Institucionalidad*. Informe del Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia 2012. Caracas: Alfa Editorial.

d'état of 2002 it looks like the priority became political loyalty and Government would be especially flexible (soft) with military who are engaged in drug trafficking but are loyal to government.

Furthermore, Venezuelan health statistics reveal that while homicides rates in Caracas have increased by 30% between 1999 and 2009; the increase in areas where drug trafficking activities are presumed, such as the border states, is much higher. In this same period, homicides rates increased in Táchira by 429% and in Apure by 220%. In the east, in the coastal region of Sucre, where an intense activity of drug trafficking is also reported, murders have increased by 397% (CODESARME, 2012).

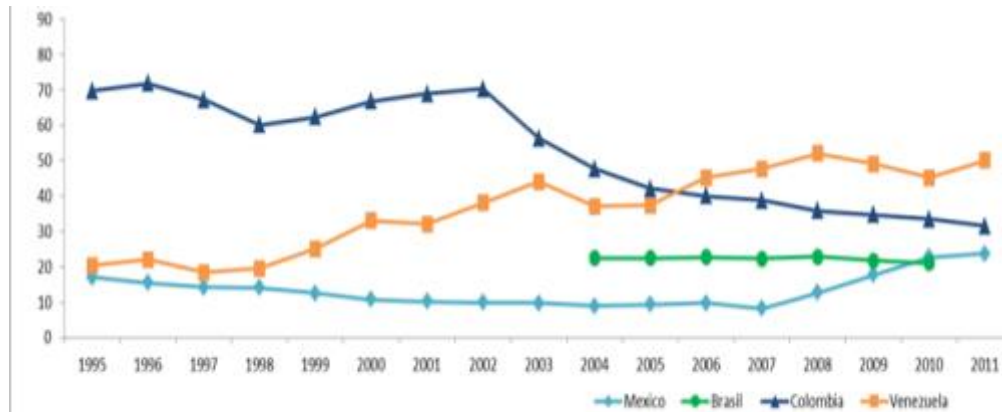
**Figure 1.** Venezuela. Percentage growth in deaths by firearm by state, 1999 and 2009.



**Source:** Datos Anuarios de Mortalidad, CODESARME 2012.

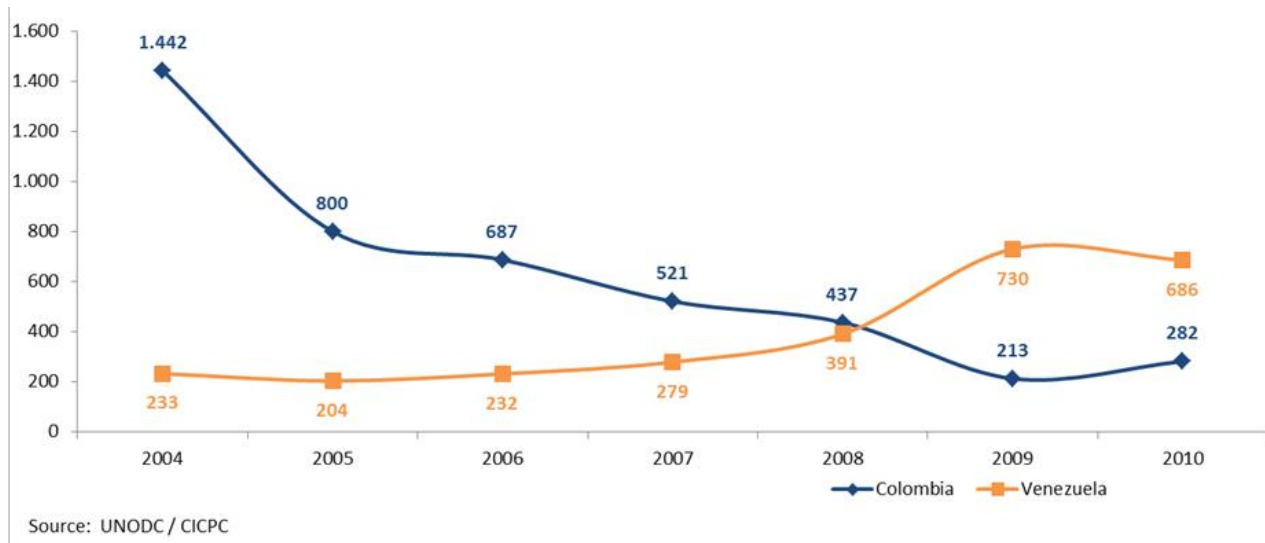
This increase may reveal that the interdiction policies of the Colombian and American governments have led to the rapid migration of actors linked to drug trafficking in the country, resulting in the unorganized territories and competition for illicit profit networks among a multiplicity of armed actors. In Colombia homicides rates decrease from 69 homicides per 100.000 inhabitants in 2001 to 31 homicides per 100.000 inhabitants in 2001; while in Venezuela rates increased from 32 to 50 homicides per 100.000 inhabitants in 2011.

**Graphic 7.** Latin American. Intentional homicide, count and rate per 100,000 population, 1995-2011.



Another symptom of the escalation of organized crime in Venezuela, and the displacement of armed actors to Venezuela is the increase of kidnappings. While in Colombia kidnappings have declined in recent years it has risen in Venezuela.

**Graphic 8.** Venezuela and Colombia. Kidnapping at the national level, number of police-recorded offenses, 2004-2010.



### Structural

Other factors, traditionally called *structural*, convey the fact that even if there have been social improvements for the most disadvantaged in terms of income, some social indicators in the area of health, political inclusion and structural inequalities, such as urban exclusion and youth exclusion, persist. Social analysts point out that the social gains of recent years are more related to the increase in oil prices and not to structural changes in the factors that configure social exclusion (González, 2012).

In this sense, structural inequalities persist. People in barrios, despite having more income, still live in extreme harsh conditions and are over-exposed to environmental hazards. For instance, concerning certain social indicators such as the Gini Coefficient, which measures inequalities in terms of income, Venezuela is, together with Uruguay, among the countries with less social inequality on the continent<sup>4</sup>, but while Montevideo's *cantriles* (uruguayan shantytowns) make up 11 percent of the population, half of Caracas' population lives in *barrios*<sup>5</sup>. *Favelas* in Rio de Janeiro, which might produce Rio's spectacular landscape of inequality, make up 18.6% of the city's population<sup>6</sup> (Koonings, and Veenstra, 2007).

On the other hand, although young men from barrios are the main victims of social violence there are no social programs such as Misiones Sociales to targeting this population. Youth inhabitants of barrios are the ones forgotten by the Bolivarian process leaving them ready to join gangs or criminal networks all of which fundamentally foster urban social violence; or they might be killed by police agents in extrajudicial killings, as I will discuss in the following section.

### **Institutional**

One group of factors could be called broadly *institutional* to point institutional networks and organizational platforms, political factors and social policies in the urban violence domain in Bolivarian Venezuela. It mainly refers to State capacity, State networks, and the actions or non-actions of this privileged State.

One fundamental trait in contemporary Venezuela is that the political polarization prevents the coordination between Chavistas (name given to supporters of Hugo Chavez political process) and opposition authorities in state and municipal levels to implement basic citizen security policies such as arms control. It is evident in the inability of local and national leaders to work together when they are of different partisan affiliations.

This institutional level also relates to the historical and serious deterioration of the police and the slow pace of the implementation of a new effective police. Even though an important investment of resources in the police reform, results have been poor in terms of transforming police practices and lowering crime rates. One important factor is the absolute lack of control of arms and ammunitions and their widespread use. According to official information 90% of homicides are perpetrated with guns; this is a very high number and puts Venezuela with countries such as El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, which displays the highest homicide rates in the region, and the highest proportions of firearms homicides (Small Arms Survey 2012:15). The overwhelming majority of violent deaths occur (71%) among armed men in disputes.

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<sup>4</sup> Gini Coefficient indeed displays a decrease going from 0.498 in 1999 to 0.40 in 2012. (<http://sisov.mppp.gob.ve/indicadores/IG000240000000/> Consulted on August, 19, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Cilento, A. (2008). Políticas de alojamiento en Venezuela: aciertos, errores y propuestas. *Tecnología y Construcción*, Vol.24, no.2.

<sup>6</sup> Koonings, K. and S. Veenstra. (2007). Exclusión social, actores armados y violencia urbana en Rio de Janeiro. *Foro Internacional*, Vol. XLVII, N°3.

And to my point of view a very important factor: Citizen Security has undergone an important militarization. In 2010 the militarized citizen security plan the Dispositivo Bicentenario de Seguridad performed by the National Guard was implemented and in 2013 this was transformed into Plan Patria Segura. The Minister of Interior and Justice is a military officer as well as others in key positions. The militarization of public security has not only been unhelpful in improving the situation, but it has created new social problems, such as the prison crisis. Prisons have become overcrowded with young men from the barrios, a process triggered by the punitive wave (See Zubillaga y Antillano, 2013).

Venezuela's incarcerated population increased from a total of 30,483 in 2009—the year before the DIBISE came into effect—to 50,000 in 2011, two years into the plan. A recent study, Diagnóstico Sociodemográfico de la Población Penitenciaria (Socio-demographic Diagnosis of the Penitentiary Population) revealed that 90.5% of those incarcerated were men; 88% were under the age of 40 (45% were between the ages of 18 and 25); most (68.28%) came from the most disadvantaged classes (56% from stratum IV and 11.6% from stratum V<sup>7</sup>), and a quarter (23%) of them were in prison for trafficking and distribution of drugs (Consejo Superior Penitenciario, 2011).

With the rapid and important increase of the incarcerated population, problems such as overcrowding and inhumane living conditions in prisons are exacerbated. The January prison conflict in Uribana in which 55 prisoners were killed was only the biggest, most recent example of what is actually a daily tragedy.

Three years of the DIBISE have evidenced the failure of these militarized approaches to security, the worsening of past problems, and the emergence of new, more serious ones. The DIBISE's failure is evidenced by the simple fact that the total number of homicides increased from 13,851 in 2010—the year the plan was implemented—to 16,030 in 2012. Put differently, homicides rates increased from 45 per 100k to 53 per 100k despite a 20% increase in incarceration.

The tendency to rely on military and police operations has become a central strategy for citizen security; it indicates the expansion of the Penal State, with incarceration for the most disadvantaged; it distracts from preventive programs that would center on programs of socio-productive training for young men, focusing on their needs; and relegates the issues of gun controls and disarmament of the population. Plans such as Patria Segura can only produce more and more serious social problems that most likely will feed the fatal cycle of violence of Venezuelan society.

And finally, together with this militarization of citizen security, we have had the regular and repeated official discourses about the war on crime, and the appealing to police killings on duty as a way to warn “delinquents about their fatal destiny.” These were literally the words of

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<sup>7</sup> The Diagnóstico Sociodemográfico de la Población Penitenciaria identifies five socioeconomic strata, being stratum I the wealthiest. The socioeconomic strata were calculated following the Graffar Method.

Antonio Benavides, the military responsible for the DIBISE, mentioned before. This has only contributed to the rise of police brutality, and as a fatal cycle, increased cruelty and violence. Ethnographic testimonies as well as the important increase of resistance to authority cases point to the fact that cases reported as “resistance to authority” might be in fact extrajudicial killings, turning the State into an actor that contributes directly to the increase of violence in Venezuela.

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All these factors come together to turn Venezuela into the country with the highest rate homicide in South America (53 homicides per 100.00). Social Urban Violence affects and has affected very differently the different groups of the population, but have finally created a general social unrest. It has become one of the most bitter and extended claims of the population; it is the biggest and most basic debt that the Bolivarian State owes to its people.

Cities continue to be the site of increasing armed violence in Venezuela but, linked to regional factors such as the war on drugs policy developed by Colombia with the U.S. support, a new spatialization of violence contributes importantly to the increase of violence in rural regions. More sophisticated organized crime begins to be visible, especially in borders States such as Táchira and Apure revealing the porousness of borders and the continuous flux of armed actors between Colombia and Venezuela. Hence, violence in Venezuela cannot be understood without regarding regional trends and above all the U.S. and Colombian policy against the war on drugs, which has apparently displaced the problem to neighboring regions.

State responses, such as the militarization of citizen security, have only contributed to doubling the prison population and creating new problems such as the regular prisons explosions. And further, resorting to brutality as a “method to persuade delinquents”, following the already well known path of the Mano Dura policies in Central America, which only leads to increased cruelty and violence.. Violence in Venezuela has much mostly to do with the actions or inactions of a privileged actor such as the State.