

Emergent Socialist Hegemony in Bolivarian Venezuela: The Role of the Party¹

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The role of political parties in processes of radical transformation is a subject of longstanding debate. High-profile leftist critics like Hardt and Negri see the party form as hopelessly outmoded, arguing that social movements are more effective in channelling the ‘network power’ of the ‘multitude’ in its struggle against ‘empire.’² This position resonates with more anarchist and mainstream sociological critiques of parties and states (which are difficult to discuss in isolation from each other) as bureaucratic machines incapable of producing revolutionary change.³ These critiques, which have called forth vigorous leftist defences of parties and states from authors like Tariq Ali and Gregory Wilpert, are not entirely invalid.⁴ The question is whether recognising the limitations and dangers inherent to parties and states should lead to a rejection of these institutions as potentially fruitful vehicles for radical change?

The recent and on-going wave of elections of leftist leaders across Latin America has put this question squarely on the current agenda of the Left. Given that the region’s ‘left turn’ began with Hugo Chávez’s 1998 election, it should not be surprising that Venezuela has occupied a central place within this debate. Despite their differences, authors as diverse as Marta Harnecker, Michael Lebowitz, Diana Raby, George Cicariello-Maher, Dario Azzellini, Steve Ellner, Gregory Wilpert, and Sujatha Fernandes, amongst others, are relatively united on three points: (1) sympathy for what Chávez has sought to accomplish; (2) the view that Chávez’s ‘twenty-first century socialism’ must be seen as distinct from Soviet-style ‘twentieth-century’ socialism; and, (3) a belief that

1 The author would like to acknowledge the generous readings given to this text by the editors of this volume, along with Michael Burawoy and Michael McCarthy.

2 Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004.

3 See Michels 1962; Weber 1968; Przeworski 1985; Scott 1998; Holloway 2002b; Zibechi 2010. Holloway and his followers do not necessarily consider themselves anarchist, but there are enough similarities in their position to merit making this connection. Scott openly identifies as anarchist; see *Void Manufacturing* 2009.

4 Ali 2004; Wilpert 2007.

the Bolivarian process necessitates a *rethinking*, but *not a rejection*, of parties and states as tools for radical change.⁵

This chapter takes up this challenge, examining the role of parties – in terms of their class character, internal structure, and relations to the state and civil society – in the construction of emergent socialist hegemony in the Venezuelan municipality of Torres. This concept refers to the largely *political* process of building popular consent for a socialist economy. The term ‘emergent’ highlights the incipient and unconsolidated nature of this hegemony. Socialism refers to an economic system that is explicitly geared towards meeting human needs, rather than the accumulation of capital or the expansion of the forces of production, under which economic decisions concerning the use of scarce resources are subject to democratic control by workers’ and community-based councils and popular assemblies. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section reviews the most important Left and mainstream sociological critiques of parties as instruments of radical change. The following section elaborates a Gramscian theory of parties, which accepts the partial validity of these critiques but seeks to re-conceptualise rather than abandon them, the party as an instrument for change, and in particular for the construction of socialist hegemony. This theoretical perspective is explored empirically in the second section of the chapter, which analyses the conditions necessary for a political party of this type to be successful. Based upon a case study in the municipality of Torres, I argue that political, class, and bureaucratic based resistance faced by radical political leaders in Torres has been crucial in pushing a socialist agenda at the municipal level, since it has helped to solidify their horizontal links to popular classes and social movements. These links provided leaders with the support needed to carry out an ambitious project of political and economic transformation that, while remaining far short of the goal of constructing a socialist economy, has generated impressive levels of popular consent for continuing the struggle to reach this goal.

A Different Type of Party

Leftists who refuse to abandon the idea that parties can serve as useful tools of radical change must confront the arguments of those who are critical of this organisational form. Three critiques stand out as particularly important:

5 Harnecker 2008a; Lebowitz 2006, 2010; Raby 2008; Cicariello-Maher 2007; Azzellini 2010; Ellner 2008a; Wilpert 2007; and Fernandes 2010. Of these scholars, Raby is the most critical of parties, though she agrees that states can be useful for change.

(1) parties are too rigid and hierarchical to respond effectively to the constantly changing conditions of struggle in a globalised/digitised world, with social movements seen as more effective (the Hardt and Negri argument); (2) parties seek to dominate and control social movement allies;⁶ and, (3) due to electoral competition, parties cannot avoid oligarchisation, a process that leads to a growing gap between (a) leaders and bases, and (b) discourse and action (the Michels/Weber argument).

Each of these problems can be seen in the Bolivarian process, as shown by the work of various scholars and the discussion of Torres provided below. Raby and Jose Molina discuss the ‘anti-party’ origins of Chávez, noting how Chávez’s rise was predicated on the inability of Venezuela’s traditional parties – the centre-left *Acción Democrática* (Democratic Action, AD) and the centre-right *Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente* (Political Electoral Independent Organization Committee, COPEI) – to effectively respond to the nation’s changing reality in the 1980s and 1990s.⁷ Chávez’s *Movimiento Quinto República* (Fifth Republic Movement, MVR) and the *Partido Socialista Unida de Venezuela* (United Socialist Party of Venezuela, PSUV), which superseded the MVR in 2007, have also been criticised for problems of party rigidity and inability to adapt to changing circumstances.⁸ Harnecker and Fernandes discuss the often-tense relationship between the MVR/PSUV and its social movement allies, noting party attempts to control grassroots Chavistas and communal councils.⁹ Wilpert and Ellner examine the gap between party discourse and action, highlighting MVR leaders’ efforts to circumvent a 2002 law mandating participatory budgeting, despite the MVR’s rhetorical commitment to popular participation.¹⁰

Critics of the party can no doubt take these observations as proof that parties and revolutionary transformation do not mix. Gramsci provides an alternate way of responding, by means of a rethinking rather than rejecting the party. In ‘Observations on Certain Aspects of the Structure of Political Parties in Periods of Organic Crisis’, Gramsci writes:

Parties come into existence, and constitute themselves as organisations, in order to influence the situation at moments which are historically vital for their class; but they are not always capable of adapting themselves to

6 See, for example, Harnecker 2008a, an author who is by no means ‘anti-party’.

7 Raby 2008; Molina 2004.

8 See contributions by Fernandes, Denis, and Lebowitz in Spronk and Webber 2011.

9 Harnecker 2008a; Fernandes 2010, p. 85.

10 Wilpert 2007, p. 58; Ellner 2008a, p. 183.

new tasks and to new epochs, nor of evolving *paripassu* [equal footing] with the overall relations of force (and hence the relative position of their class) in the country in question, or in the international field. In analysing the development of parties, it is necessary to distinguish: their social group; their mass membership; their bureaucracy and general staff. The bureaucracy is the most dangerously hidebound and conservative force; if it ends up by constituting a compact body, which stands on its own and feels itself independent of the mass of members, the party ends up by becoming anachronistic and at moments of acute crisis it is voided of its social content and left as though suspended in mid-air.¹¹

The passage touches directly on two of the problems noted above – the Hardt and Negri argument about party rigidity in the face of historical change and the Michels/Weber argument about oligarchisation, with Gramsci noting how the latter leads to the former. The issue of the party's relationship to civil society is not addressed, but is extensively dealt with by Gramsci elsewhere (as discussed below).

Gramsci's writings provide a means of re-conceptualising the characteristics that a party capable of generating radical/socialist transformation must have: (1) internal democracy; (2) horizontal links to the (a) urban/rural working class and (b) civil society;¹² (3) a practical and ideological commitment to the pre-figurative construction of democratic socialism; and, (4) links to, along with autonomy from, the (national) state. The first and second characteristics follow as obvious corollaries to the passage quoted above. This is not simply a matter of 'playing with democracy', as per Lenin's denunciation of those he sees as overly concerned with democratic proceduralism at the expense of effective party action.¹³ As the above passage makes clear, internal democracy

11 Gramsci 2000, p. 219.

12 While the urban/rural working class is 'part' of civil society, I distinguish between the two to account for the specificity of the term civil society, which highlights the voluntary, non-state and non-economic nature of civil society.

13 The Gramscian theoretical perspective taken here amounts to a partial critique of Leninism. Gramsci considered himself a faithful follower of Lenin. But his insights into the links between the party and civil society (the particular details of which I do not entirely agree with, as discussed below), and his concern with internal party democracy, take Gramsci in a non-Leninist direction. It should be noted that Lenin's own writings on the party are marked by some ambiguity with respect to the question of party democracy. In *What is to be Done?* (1902) Lenin emphasises the importance of constructing a strong party leadership, made up of full-time 'professional revolutionaries' who are well steeped in Marxist theory, and openly dismisses those who are overly (in his view) concerned

and horizontal links connecting the party's leadership to its working-class base are essential for preventing bureaucrats ('the most dangerously hidebound and conservative force') from taking over and sapping the party's historic vitality. The maintenance of party vitality also requires horizontal links connecting the party to social movements. Gramsci's view of a 'totalitarian' (which like Burawoy I take to mean nothing more than 'all-encompassing')¹⁴ party, that substitutes itself for all the ties party members previously found in a variety of social and cultural organisations, is highly problematic with respect to this. The complete subordination of social activism to party directives risks severing the party from the dynamism and creativity of social movements. Social movements must therefore remain autonomous from the party and state with respect to their operations but not necessarily with respect to their finances.

The demand that party/state leaders respect civic autonomy does not, however, negate the need for a specifically *political* leadership in order to achieve revolutionary transformation.¹⁵ The party's role as the creator of a new, *socialist* culture and worldview is especially critical for the construction of an *emergent* socialist hegemony, which differs from a fully consolidated hegemonic system due to the lack of relatively automatic mechanisms for hegemonic reproduction.¹⁶ This pedagogical work occurs through (1) the activism of organic intellectuals and (2) the construction of what Gramsci calls a 'concrete fantasy': 'a historical exemplification of the Sorelian myth – that is, of a political ideology expressed neither in the form of a cold utopia nor as learned theorising, but

with internal party democracy. At other times – in *State and Revolution* and the essay 'Dual Power', both written in the revolutionary ferment of 1917 – Lenin is more attentive to the potential for bureaucrats to abuse their power, and proposes concrete mechanisms, such as instant recall of elected officials, to prevent this from happening. Hal Draper's (1990) essay on Lenin's (non-) 'concept of the party' is worth consulting (I am indebted to Michael McCarthy for pointing this out). Draper's points about (1) Lenin's early reliance on Karl Kautsky, (2) his evolving thinking on the question of the party, and (3) the need to read Lenin's treatise in its particular historical context – that of autocratic Russia – are important. I do not fully agree with Draper's textual interpretation. In my view, the thrust of the text – even when allowances are made for historical context – is far from supportive of internal party democracy. It is important to note, as Draper does, that Lenin's writings have frequently been misinterpreted and used to justify practices that Lenin himself would never have supported.

14 Burawoy 2003, p. 226.

15 See, for example, Harnecker 2008a.

16 These more or less 'automatic' mechanisms of reproduction in consolidated hegemonic systems are what lead Gramsci to speak of the 'spontaneous' nature of popular consent. They include Althusser's 'ideological state apparatuses' as well as economic concessions, which Przeworski (1985) calls the 'material bases of consent'.

rather as a creation of concrete fantasy which acts on a dispersed and shattered people to arouse and organise its collective will'.¹⁷ In addition to their pedagogical function, concrete fantasies also have organisational and motivational value: by offering a concrete image of what socialism 'really is' (democratic control over economic decision-making), they can help dispel distorted views of socialism (that it equals state control of the economy or a lack of freedom), and convince people that it is something worth struggling for.

Being linked to state power, even at the local level, is crucial, since it provides the party with the means (i.e. financial resources, and the symbolic legitimacy that comes with state power) for constructing concrete fantasies. Having control over state resources also opens up possibilities for moving beyond distribution to redistribution, although having power at the local level almost always provides less opportunities for doing this than national power. Being part of the state, especially the national state, also brings certain dangers – of co-optation, bureaucratisation, and top-down control – as critics like Holloway, and Hardt and Negri are aware. This is why the maintenance of a certain level of party autonomy vis-à-vis the national state is so important, as a bulwark that can limit these dangers.

A theoretical basis has now been laid for this chapter's argument concerning the role parties (of a certain type) can play in processes of radical transformation. This argument is explored in empirical detail in the next section. The account is based upon five months of ethnographic fieldwork in Torres municipality, carried out over the course of several field visits conducted between August 2007 and May 2011. During this time, I directly observed political party (PSUV), communal council, and commune meetings, two yearly cycles of participatory budget assemblies, Chavista and opposition protests and rallies, and meetings between government officials and local communities. I also conducted several dozen interviews with Chavista and opposition neighbourhood activists, government functionaries, political and civic leaders, and workers in an electric meter factory. The account also draws upon newspapers and other primary source documents, and secondary literature.

Torres: Venezuela's First 'Socialist City'

In October 2004, Venezuelans throughout the country geared up for local and regional elections. In Torres, a largely agrarian municipality (population 196,000) in the central-western state of Lara, the race for mayor had been

17 See Gramsci 2000, pp. 239; Wright 2010 on 'real utopias'.

thrown into disarray in late 2003, when incumbent mayor Javier Oropeza had left the ruling MVR to join the ranks of the anti-Chávez opposition. The MVR's initial decision to support Oropeza, a rising local media baron and son of one of Torres' wealthiest families, in the 2000 election had been based on the (correct) view that he could win. This strategy, in which the party set aside its revolutionary ideals for the sake of short-term electoral gain, had obviously not worked out entirely as planned, but that did not stop the same *realpolitik* logic from being used in the 2004 election. This time the party chose to support Walter Cattivelli, a medium-sized construction contractor whom locals told me 'was an Adecco [supporter of AD] his whole life' (that is, not someone with radical politics). Cattivelli faced off against Oropeza, who was supported by local commercial media, the Church, and agrarian elites, and Julio Chávez, a relatively unknown candidate (of no relation to the president) with the *Patria Para Todos* (Fatherland for All, PPT), a small leftist party allied with the MVR at the national level that had been formed in the 1990s out of the remnants of another small leftist party, *La Causa R* (the Radical Cause). With little financing or institutional support, Chávez had the backing of local social movements, student activists, rural petty commodity producers (small-holding goat farmers), agricultural workers on the area's large cattle and dairy haciendas, workers from two local sugar processing plants, municipal and transport unions, and some middle-class professionals in Carora, Torres' capital (population approximately 100,000).

In a result that seemed to surprise everyone but himself, Chávez prevailed in the tight, three-way race, albeit by the thinnest of margins. One of the keys to Chávez's victory was the fact that, while the MVR leadership supported Cattivelli, many grassroots MVR members voted for Chávez. This grassroots rebellion was fuelled by the facts that (1) Cattivelli was seen as a top-down imposition, and (2) the last top-down candidate supported by MVR voters – Javier Oropeza – had gone on to betray the party. Chávez, by contrast, was seen as a grassroots candidate and his party, the PPT, was known for being significantly more internally democratic and ideologically cohesive than the MVR. The party's willingness to support relatively unknown, anti-establishment candidates bolstered these perceptions.

The MVR's regional leadership, led by Lara's governor Luis Reyes Reyes, was forced to accept Chávez's victory, but was not happy about it. According to Miguel 'Chicho' Medina, a social movement leader-cum-municipal functionary who currently heads the municipality's work supporting communes and an early ally of Chávez, 'Reyes Reyes never forgave Julio for beating his candidate'.¹⁸

¹⁸ This quote comes from an informal conversation with the author, November 2010. All quotations are from conversations with the author during fieldwork carried out between August 2007 and May 2011.

Despite losing the mayoralty, Reyes Reyes and the MVR had managed to retain a majority of seats on the municipal council, providing the party with a useful institutional base for continuing to challenge Chávez. Medina and others report that Reyes Reyes mounted a 'parallel City Hall', funnelling thousands of dollars to Naomi Lopez – a municipal councillor and close local confidante of Reyes Reyes – in an attempt to disrupt Chávez's ability to govern. The new mayor also faced continued opposition from the agrarian elite, who initially tried to buy him off. Chávez recounts that, 'they tried to seduce us. I received invitations to the *godarria's* exclusive clubs, to their *fincas* [plantations] for weekend retreats, offers of golden credit cards at local banks, and even invitations to the homes of high-society ladies'.¹⁹ When seduction efforts failed, the opposition launched full-scale confrontation, which came from all sides. The opposition included local contractors upset at being excluded from municipal construction contracts; Church leaders angered that Chávez had eliminated a lifetime pension previously paid to the bishop by the municipal government; and the usual suspects – the elite-controlled television, radio and print media. Chávez even recounts that, 'the day after the election my head appeared in a frying pan on the cover of the newspaper', *El Caroreño*.²⁰

Never one to back down from a fight (a quality that close supporters say can be infuriating), upon taking office in January 2005, Chávez quickly sought to make good on what he says was, 'my only campaign promise: to build popular power'. The mayor's first move was to convoke a Municipal Constituent Assembly, which was modelled after the 1999 national constituent assembly that had rewritten Venezuela's constitution. For the next three months, 120 delegates – small-holding farmers, student and labour activists, social movement leaders like Chicho Medina, and many more – gathered in popular assemblies throughout Torres to rewrite the ordinances guiding their municipality. Medina, Chávez, and others say that the same institutions – the PPT, and various social movement, labour and student organisations – that had helped elect Chávez were at the forefront of these efforts. The process was designed to be as participatory as possible: delegates were chosen in popular assemblies, and the results of the three-month process were then discussed and voted upon in community assemblies held throughout the municipality.

19 Agrarian elites in Torres are known as the '*godarria*'. The term is said to come from the Gothic or *Godo* region of Spain where Torres' leading families emigrated from several hundred years ago.

20 The paper, Torres' only daily, is owned by the Oropeza family, and has been edited by ex-mayor Javier Oropeza since his electoral defeat in 2004. Since then, Chávez and his successor, Edgar Carrasco (Torres' mayor from 2008 onwards), have faced a constant barrage of criticism in the paper's pages for their alleged 'ineptitude' and 'negligence'.

According to Chávez, local and regional MVR leaders viewed all this as ‘anarchy’ and ‘said that it could never work’. The process also faced resistance from the local commercial media and national bureaucrats, with the National Electoral Council refusing to oversee a referendum on the results of the municipal constituent assembly. Ironically, this political, class and bureaucratic resistance helped to *strengthen* the participatory nature of the process, since it served to solidify horizontal linkages (1) between key PPT leaders (such as Chávez) and the party’s base and (2) between the party and its social movement allies. The fact that the PPT was autonomous from the MVR’s regional and national leadership structure, without being seen as an outright ‘enemy’ of the Bolivarian process, was also an asset, since it meant that Chávez was free to put together an administration led by social movement leaders – like Chicho Medina and Eladio ‘Lalo’ Paez, the head of Torres’ Office of Citizen Participation, and a co-founder with Medina of an important local cultural movement – rather than party bureaucrats. At the same time, it should be noted that local radicals in Torres, both inside and outside of the local state and party structures, drew heavily upon the revolutionary/socialist ideology of the MVR/PSUV. They also received important political support from a few top officials within the national state, including President Chávez, who in 2006 appointed Julio Chávez as the only mayor on his Presidential Commission on Popular Power.²¹ Even Reyes Reyes eventually came around, christening Torres ‘Venezuela’s first socialist city’ following the success of the municipality’s participatory budget (see below). This highlights local radicals’ highly contradictory relationship to the national state, underscoring the importance of both their political autonomy from, *and* their ideological (and more occasional political) links to, the Chavista establishment.

Build It Now: Prefiguring Socialism through Concrete Fantasies²²

The chapter’s next section details two examples of the construction of concrete fantasies in Torres: participatory budgeting and a ‘socialist’ electric meter factory. The examples are used to highlight several theoretical issues discussed above: (1) the use of concrete fantasies as a means of building popular consent

21 Marta Harnecker, who has worked in various capacities for the Venezuelan national state since Hugo Chávez came to power, played an important role in Torres, writing a 2008 book on the municipality (Harnecker 2008b) that helped to bring it positive national attention.

22 This slogan is title of a book by Michael Lebowitz (2006) and has also been used by the South African Communist Party.

for the transition to a socialist economy; (2) the role played by organic intellectuals in connecting concrete issues to larger struggles; (3) the struggles waged by local political and social movement leaders and activists against regional political leaders, national bureaucrats, and local elites to construct these concrete fantasies; and, (4) the way in which these struggles have helped reinforce horizontal linkages between state/party leaders and bases, and between the party and its social movement allies.

Participatory Budgeting

In terms of building popular power, the most important institutional innovation of the Julio Chávez administration was the implementation of an ambitious participatory budget (PB) that transfers decision-making power over 100% of the municipality's investment budget to local citizens. The first step in the municipality's yearly budget cycle is a 'participatory diagnosis' in which volunteers from each of the municipality's 550-plus communal councils map out their community's resources and needs.²³ A popular assembly is then held, with 20 percent of the communal council's members needed for a quorum, after which discussion and then voting on the community's priorities takes place. Elected delegates from each communal council then come together in two rounds of parish assemblies – held in each of the municipality's 17 parishes – to discuss and vote upon projects.²⁴ Although the budget requires formal approval from the *Consejo Local de Planificación Popular* (Local Public Planning Council), the results of these parish assemblies are binding, with Julio Chávez fond of recounting that 'the mayor cannot even veto these decisions'.

In addition to generating concrete projects – roads, schools, and sewers – Torres' PB has served as a practical arena where values associated with the idea of 'twenty-first century socialism' – participation, deliberation, and solidarity – have been implemented. The PB also served as a venue for the inculcation of socialist ideology, which functioned in a variety of ways. (It should, however, be noted that the PB includes participants with a range of political beliefs, with local officials in Torres scrupulous about maintaining this political pluralism.) Delegates in parish assemblies would often publicly identify themselves as 'socialist' and used the term to discuss the merits of particular projects (that is, by putting forth arguments about why a given project

23 Communal councils are civic associations, composed of 200–400 families in urban neighborhoods, and 20–40 families in rural communities. They are fiscally dependent upon and organisationally autonomous from the state; in practice the degree of this autonomy varies greatly.

24 Parishes are the lowest political administrative units in Venezuela.

was 'socialist' and should be funded). As Gramsci's notion of concrete fantasy as 'a political ideology expressed neither in the form of a cold utopia nor as learned theorising' suggests, ideas about socialism functioned less as a fixed reference point than as an open-ended horizon of struggle that helped to both (1) facilitate discussion of practical matters (such as whether electricity, education, or transportation was the most pressing issue facing a given community) and (2) connect these practical discussions to more explicitly political questions about class, power and strategy.²⁵ Organic intellectuals like Julio Chávez, Chicho Medina, Lalo Paez, and President Chávez himself, played an important role in helping to draw out these connections. This pedagogical work took place in a variety of venues, including communal council meetings, parish PB assemblies, community and party-run media, state-funded educational and cultural 'missions', and weekly PSUV meetings (and in PPT meetings before Julio Chávez, and most of his supporters, joined the PSUV in 2007).²⁶

A fierce struggle was needed to ensure that the PB would actually be implemented. As mentioned, the MVR had retained a majority of seats on the municipal council. Given that the PPT and MVR were part of the same alli-

25 The following definition of socialism, given to me by the facilitator of a meeting in which multiple communal councils had come together for the purpose of forming a 'commune', could have come straight out of Gramsci's discussion of concrete fantasies in the *Prison Notebooks*: 'socialism isn't an abstract theory of Leninism, or Marxism, it's the practice ... it's what you see here ... it's what we do'.

26 A good example of this work is the way in which Venezuela's energy crisis of 2010 was dealt with in weekly PSUV meetings I attended in the spring of 2010. At the time, Venezuela was in the midst of a serious energy crisis, with regular blackouts in Torres and throughout the country. The crisis was a regular topic of discussion in PSUV meetings, with Julio Chávez and other party leaders discussing how factors such as global warming (nearly always linked to global capitalism), and the substantial increase in ordinary Venezuelans' access to electricity over the course of the Chávez presidency (a topic dealt with in a surprisingly critical manner), had helped to contribute to the current crisis. As one means of mitigating the crisis, the party spearheaded a plan to distribute energy-efficient light bulbs to local residents, with party leaders stressing the need to explain the 'true' nature of the energy crisis, as opposed to the view presented in the commercial media, in which President Chávez was blamed for the crisis (along with everything else bad happening in Venezuela). PSUV meetings were also important as a venue where grassroots party members worked through their own understanding of what socialism was. This often occurred by means of discussion of the gap between socialist discourse and practice, with grassroots party members frequently airing grievances about a few local 'socialist' factories which had failed to pay their workers on time, and were seen as 'worse than capitalist factories'. Finally, it is worth noting how party meetings provided a regular venue for public, and often quite critical, discussion between party leaders and base-level members.

ance, and that this alliance (which also included the Venezuelan Communist Party) controlled eight out of the council's nine seats, there should have been little difficulty in getting the council's members, almost all of whom had to express rhetorical support for popular participation, to approve the PB. But in December 2005, when it was time for the council to do so, a majority refused. Chávez, who comments that, 'I had to fight against my own party... they thought I was crazy to give up my power', responded by mobilising hundreds of supporters, who physically occupied the council and refused to leave until the budget they had spent months discussing had been approved. Edwin Juarez, a PPT-cum-PSUV municipal councillor – who was the only consistent supporter of Chávez during this time period – told me that the same tactic had been used in May 2005 when the council had refused to approve the results of the Municipal Constituent Assembly.

In terms of its impact, Torres' PB can be linked to several important local developments, including (1) a dramatic reduction in practices of clientelism and corruption, and (2) the opening up of avenues for direct citizen input into government decision-making. The most important result of Torres' PB (in terms of the present discussion) may be the way it has generated high levels of popular consent for ideas about popular power and socialism. This can be seen in the dramatic increase in the electoral support given to radical political leaders (those who actually support the construction of popular power and socialism) in Torres between 2004 and 2010. While Julio Chávez barely managed to scrape by in the 2004 mayoral election, in 2008 his successor, Edgar Carrasco, won office with 48.3 percent of the vote (an impressive achievement in Torres, given that Julio Chávez was elected with only 35.6 percent in 2004).²⁷ And in September 2010, Chávez won a National Assembly seat with almost 56 percent of the vote, one of the highest percentages achieved by any PSUV candidate in the election.

Equally impressive is the way in which Torres' PB has altered popular consciousness. In addition to leading thousands of *Torrenses* (residents of Torres) to proudly self-identify as socialists,²⁸ the PB has narrowed the gap separating rulers and ruled, a gap which, as Azzellini argues, lies at the core of capitalist social relations (this volume). I was able to observe this first-hand while attending numerous PB parish assemblies.²⁹ Following one assembly, I provocatively asked a teacher attending why PB made sense: 'Why not just leave the

27 CNE 2008; CNE 2004.

28 This phenomenon is obviously also linked to President Chávez's 2005 declaration of the socialist character of the Bolivarian Revolution, and the formation of the PSUV in 2007.

29 Azzellini 2010.

budget to the mayor to decide?' His response, clearly tailored to my national identity, was immediate: 'Why not? I'm equal to the president of the United States. If he can make decisions, why can't I?' Another delegate, standing nearby, chimed in to say:

In the past, government officials would stay in their air-conditioned offices all day and make decisions there. They never even set foot in our communities. So who do you think can make a better decision about what we need, an official in his air conditioned office who has never even come to our community, or someone who is from the community?

Both responses indicate the impressive degree to which residents of Torres have accepted the essentially socialist idea that ordinary citizens from the popular classes can be entrusted with significant decision-making power over issues that in the past would have been left to government officials, elites, and technocratic experts.

Socialist Production

As the Bolivarian process has progressed in Torres, there has been a growing awareness of the fact that, if 'twenty-first century socialism' is to be more than a slogan, institutions must be constructed – or expropriated – to allow popular control to extend *political* decision-making to *economic production*. The second example of a concrete fantasy in Torres is 'socialist' electric meter factory (its official name) that began production in late 2010, as it addresses this issue head-on. Unfortunately, since the factory had only been in operation for three months at the time of research (December 2010), this discussion will raise as many questions as it answers. To facilitate the analysis, it is worth restating the three elements of the 'elementary socialist triangle': (1) social ownership of the means of production, (2) worker control over production, and, (3) production for collective needs.

An agreement between the Torres municipal government and *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A.* (Petroleum of Venezuela, PDVSA) Venezuela's national oil company, established the electric meter factory. The agreement was signed in May 2009, with PDVSA agreeing to construct the factory, which relies on technology from China.³⁰ From the beginning of its operation, the plant has been a contested space. The plant's workers – who appear to be quite united – and local community residents have been pushing for worker and community control

30 Escalante 2009.

over the operation and profits of the factory. The Ministry of Electrical Energy, the de facto owner of the plant, has not, however, acceded to all of the workers' and community leaders' (many of these being the same people) demands.

As of December 2010, the all-important issue of ownership over the factory and its products, seen by workers and communities associated with the factory as key, remained unresolved. The workers of the factory have pressed the Ministry of Electrical Energy (MEE) to designate the factory as 'social property'. This would mean that instead of the state deciding (via the MEE) how to use the factory's profits, it would be the workers themselves who would do so. The workers have already put together a proposal by which the factory's profits would be given to local communities (via communal councils and communes). Under the proposal, local communities would have to meet and decide, in popular assemblies, upon project ideas. These project ideas would then be submitted to the factory's Workers' Assembly (see below), which would have final say. If enacted, the workers' proposal would effectively establish social ownership over the factory, which as Lebowitz notes must include mechanisms for *community*, as well as worker, input into economic decision-making.³¹

Unfortunately, key officials in the MEE whom workers strongly suspect are opposed to their proposal have been dragging their feet on the issue. Several delegations of workers have travelled to Caracas to pressure the MEE to make a decision. But, as of December 2010, the ministry had still failed to convene a meeting of the factory's Board of Directors, which must meet to decide the issue. The board is composed of seven members, three appointed by the MEE and four elected by the plant's workers. This seemingly democratic, pro-worker arrangement belies the fact that the board must come to a consensus for crucial decisions (such as the factory's property status), effectively giving the board's ministry-appointed members veto power. The workers, however, are aware of the struggles waged by workers elsewhere – such as at the Sidor steel plant in Ciudad Guayana which was only nationalised after a protracted fight that led to President Chávez's eventual intervention on behalf of the workers – and spoke openly of the possibility that direct action on their part might be needed to force the issue.

Somewhat more progress has been made in terms of worker control over production. The plant's 113 workers are organised into a Workers' Assembly, composed of all workers and empowered to make decisions regarding day-to-day operations, such as plant hours. Other decisions are made by a Workers' Council, made up of nine committees (health, discipline, etc.), each with two

31 Lebowitz 2010.

members elected by the Workers' Assembly. As one of the plant's supervisors told me, the workers determined their own schedule, a contrast – she noted – with how things work in capitalist factories: 'This isn't like a private firm, where if your boss says that you have to show up at such and such a time, you have to. It doesn't matter if you live far away, or anything. Here, this is decided by consensus'. The workers have also put together a proposal that would equalise pay amongst all of the factory's employees, including the plant director. According to workers, the Workers' Assembly will ultimately decide on the proposal, though the Board of Directors must consider it first (which as noted was still non-existent at the time of research). The factory's hiring system represents one of the most promising areas in terms of worker and community self-management. As a worker told me, all but six of the plant's 113 employees 'were chosen by assemblies, who took the person's situation into account, what their economic situation was, if they really needed this job, if they had kids'. The area supervisor mentioned above again noted how different this was from an impersonal capitalist firm, where 'they don't care who you are'.

The issue of whether the factory is producing for collective or individual needs remains unclear. It will depend, to a large extent, upon whether the factory is designated as social or state property; the former would clearly open up more possibility for producing for collective needs. The question of how the factory's products (electric meters) are distributed is also key, with distribution via the market, state, or some form of social exchange mechanism clearly holding out different possibilities in terms of production for collective or individual needs (with social exchange or state distribution holding out greater possibilities for producing for collective needs). Unfortunately, workers at the factory were unable to enlighten me much on this issue, possibly due to the plant's limited time in operation.

Despite these unanswered questions, and the crucial, unresolved issue of ownership, the factory can be seen as a relatively hopeful example of the potential for establishing democratic worker and community control over production. Obviously, even if the factory is designated as social property, it will have a limited impact in terms of directly challenging the still-overwhelming capitalist character of economic production in Torres. The factory is, however, of immense symbolic and political value, and has been taken as a source of inspiration by thousand of local radicals who believe that it is possible to establish socialist production. Most importantly, the factory is a concrete site where the intertwined class/political struggle to establish democratic control over production is actively taking place.

Conclusion: The Struggle Continues

Amongst certain circles in Venezuela, Torres has been seen as a model for how to construct popular power. Julio Chávez has travelled throughout the country, as well as abroad, speaking about the municipality's constituent assembly and participatory budget. And over the course of 2010, Chicho Medina travelled regularly to the municipality of Yare, in the state of Miranda, to advise local officials who had convened their own municipal constituent assembly modelled on Torres. Given this, it is important that the lessons of Torres be clearly understood. This chapter has focused on one of the key lessons of Torres, regarding the role that a particular type of political party can play in processes of radical transformation. As the above discussion has sought to demonstrate, this is a party that is (1) internally democratic, (2) horizontally linked to (a) the urban/rural working class and (b) civil society, (3) ideologically and practically committed to the pre-figurative construction of democratic socialism, and (4) linked to, but autonomous from, the national state.

The discussion has also examined the particular conditions under which a party with these characteristics may be found, highlighting how the contradictory nature of the relationship between local, regional, and national class and political actors helped to strengthen the hand of local forces in the PPT (and then PSUV) committed to popular power and socialism. As noted, the class, bureaucratic, and political resistance faced by political radicals in Torres helped to *facilitate* the construction of popular power by solidifying party leaders' horizontal links to popular classes and social movements. In dialectical fashion, these links provided leaders with the popular support they needed to overcome elite resistance to their attempts to construct concrete fantasies. These concrete fantasies, in turn, helped to generate popular consent for the idea of moving to a socialist economy, with organic intellectuals playing a key pedagogical role of drawing out the connections between local struggles and larger issues. The contradictory relationship that radical local political leaders had to the national state – drawing on the state's revolutionary and socialist discourse while (initially) remaining politically autonomous – was also crucial, since it provided them with important discursive and institutional tools, along with the political breathing room needed to effectively make use of these tools.

As the above discussion should have made abundantly clear, the expansion of popular power depends upon popular struggle. Successful struggles, however, can bring unintended consequences; one consequence of the success of radicals in Torres have had is that it has brought them *inside* the

power structures they previously struggled *against*. The clearest example of this is the trajectory of Julio Chávez, who in just six years went from being a local, anti-establishment fringe candidate to a national assembly member with the ruling PSUV.³² Chávez's rise appears (perhaps unsurprisingly) to have partially blunted his radical edge. In PSUV meetings in late 2009 and early 2010, Chávez occasionally sounded like the MVR leaders he used to rail against. Chávez spoke frequently of the need for PSUV members to avoid publicly criticising the party, alleging that public criticisms of the party (even when justified) would serve to strengthen the 'enemies of the Revolution'; on a separate occasion, Chávez had told me of how MVR leaders had often used this label in their attempts to discredit him during his time as mayor. And in April 2011, Chávez was featured in a prominent, front-page piece in a leading regional newspaper, appearing to offer relatively unconditional support to Reyes Reyes as the PSUV candidate for the 2012 governor's race, following statements from President Chávez that Reyes Reyes should be the candidate (*El Informador* 2011). Chávez was upset about the article, which he claims took his words out of context, but he has not withdrawn his support for Reyes Reyes, an indication of his changed position within the party, and a sign of the distance he has travelled since his days of challenging Reyes Reyes as Torres' mayor. The fire in Chávez's belly has not been completely extinguished, as the prominent role he played supporting the formation of a 'radical current' within the PSUV in November 2010, despite the president's vocal opposition to the idea, shows.³³

As is the case throughout Venezuela, Torres is a long way from socialism. This reality is underscored by the fact that the wealth and economic power of the local agrarian elite remains largely untouched. The municipality's continuing reliance upon central government transfers for the vast majority of its

32 Chávez's rise through the PSUV has not happened without a fight. When he tried to run for governor in the June 2008 PSUV primary, party leaders in Lara initially blocked him, since they did not want to see a challenge against their preferred candidate, Henri Falcon. They blocked him despite the fact Falcon is alleged to have supported the 2002 coup against President Chávez (similar to Javier Oropéza) and was always seen by Julio Chávez as a 'neoliberal'. Chávez was only allowed to run in the primary after hundreds of his supporters mobilized in support of his candidacy, prompting a phone call from the president telling Chávez that he could run. Chávez lost badly to Falcon, but feels as though he has had the last laugh, with Falcon leaving the PSUV in early 2010. Ironically Falcon joined the PPT, which has moved away from its radical roots, and now seeks to present itself as a 'third way' between President Chávez and the anti-Chávez opposition. Julio Chávez was also initially blocked by regional PSUV leaders from running in the party's May 2010 primary leading up to the September 2010 National Assembly elections, although in the end he was allowed to run, this time without any need for popular mobilisation.

33 *Aporrea* 2010.

revenues highlights its dependence and fiscal vulnerability. This shows that socialism cannot be constructed in a single city (much less one as fiscally poor as Torres), and underlines the fact that the possibilities for radical change and socialist transformation in Torres are dependent upon changes happening at the national (and international) level. While it is beyond the scope of this article, it is clear that to actually challenge (as opposed to symbolically discredit) the hold of capitalist relations of production in Venezuela, or even to alter the predatory, *rentier* nature of this capitalism), would, at a minimum, require addressing: (1) the nation's continued extreme dependence on oil; (2) the fact that the United States remains the single largest importer of Venezuelan oil; (3) the continuation of widespread corruption and inefficiency within the state bureaucracy; and, (4) the almost shocking fact, given the image of the Chávez administration presented by both supporters and opponents, that the private sector's share of economic activity in Venezuela has *increased* under President Chávez.³⁴ While Chávez has talked repeatedly of the need to tackle these issues, and there have been promising signs (for example, the effort to form a radical current in the PSUV) that grassroots Chavistas may take their own initiative on issues like corruption and bureaucratic power, progress has been painfully slow.

Despite these limitations at the local and national level, radicals in Torres have succeeded in doing something that would have been unthinkable just fifteen years ago: generating massive popular consent for the idea of moving towards a socialist economy. This active consent, which is linked to the ongoing construction of the types of concrete fantasies discussed above, provides the basis for the claim that an emergent socialist hegemony has been established in Torres. This hegemony is fragile and unconsolidated, and it is likely that elite forces will seek to re-appropriate the popular energies unleashed in Torres in order to legitimate the continuation of capitalism and their own power. It cannot, however, be denied that the 'explosion of popular power' (to use a phrase coined by President Chávez) in Torres has resulted in a thorough transformation of local politics, helping to erode the gap separating rulers and ruled. The genie of popular power is out of the bottle and, whether or not it leads to socialism, it may not be entirely easy to put back inside again.

34 During a November 2010 meeting, held to launch the PSUV's 'radical current', Victor Álvarez, former Minister of Mining and Basic Industry in the Chávez Administration, reported this fact (that is, that the percentage of private control over the economy has risen under Chávez). See also *Aporrea* 2009, as well as Weisbrot, Ray and Sandoval 2009 on the surprising *lack* of state control over the economy under Chávez. For an alternative view, see comments by Lebowitz in Spronk and Webber 2011.