Compare and Contrast Contemporary Citizenship on the Left in Venezuela and Brazil

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The resurgence of 'the left' in Latin America has received a great deal of attention from policy makers, academics and journalists alike. The November 2006 victory of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua is merely the most recent in a string of electoral triumphs which has seen Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Bolivia come under the control of leftist governments. Following five decades in which civil, political and socio-economic rights have been damaged variously by authoritarianism, neo-liberalism and clientelism, many hope that a new era may be on the horizon.

In this essay I will investigate contemporary citizenship in Lula's Brazil and Chávez's Venezuela; two countries which have followed very different paths under their respective leaders. First, the dramatic polarisation of Venezuelan society will be explored within its historical context and contrasted with a Brazilian political process that has been characterised by dialogue and willingness to compromise. Secondly, I will examine the discourse (and reality) of participation in the two countries. It will be argued that Chávez's social justice initiatives, the 'Bolivarian Missions', exist in an environment of top-down 'verticalised' power structures which limit government accountability. This will be contrasted with the participatory budgeting which has been successfully utilised by the Brazilian 'Worker's Party', or 'Partido dos Trabalhadores' (PT), to foster community-level activism and self-governance. Finally however, I will briefly argue that whilst citizenship is experienced very differently in Brazil and Venezuela, it can be understood within a context of continuity in the two countries. As such, there are similarities in the approaches of Lula and Chávez; in different ways, bothhave sought to maintain (and profit from) a status quo existent in their respective states. Before I begin my argument it is important to clarify my terms. I will draw heavily from Ruth Lister's conception of citizenship to define it as: possessing the necessary rights for agency and socio-economic and political participation (1997: 41).

A Politics of Exclusion vs. Dialogue and Principled Compromise:

In their resounding electoral victories of 1998 and 2002 respectively, Chávez and Lula addressed strikingly similar public concerns. For both politicians, the central focus of their campaign included: attacking the previous administrations' liberal economic model; highlighting and politicising social injustice; criticising cultures of corruption entrenched within the 'old' parties; and nurturing a public perception that little would change without a significant break from historical patterns of party politics (Hunter and Power, 2005: 129; Canon, 2004: 293). However, whilst the issues they tackled were broadly comparable, the differing nature of the two politicians' approaches has resulted in highly contrasting situations with regards to contemporary citizenship.

Venezuelan society seemingly exists in a state of paradox. On the one hand, Venezuela is among the world's top oil exporters. It is perhaps unsurprising then that survey data, reported by Romero in the year prior to the 1998 elections, indicated that 91% of the population 'believe that the country is very rich' (1997: 21). However, contrary to these expectations, statistics from the same year show that poverty levels hovered between 55 and 60% (Weisbrot et al. 2006: 2). Explaining this paradox is crucial to understanding the polarisation of Venezuelan society and its damaging implications for citizenship.

Since the 1958 'El Pacto de Punto Fijo',two parties (AD and COPEI) had dominated Venezuelan politics through elite-based consensus mechanisms. These sought to preserve the inequitable (but seemingly stable) status quo whilst providing enough oil-funded social provision to ward off revolution. However, during the 1980s, 'plummeting oil revenues' and 'massive foreign debt'seriously undermined the pact (McCoy, 1999: 64). A string of economic reform programmes designed to ease the crisis did little to help and 'by the 1998 elections, a Venezuelan populace accustomed to an easy middle-class lifestyle had seen poverty rates grow to over 50%' (McCoy, 1999: 64). Furthermore, the economic policies of successive presidents appeared to be exacerbating the problems(Romero, 1997: 24). The crisis, coupled with (and caused by) the exclusionary policies of elites, created fractures within Venezuelan society. One survey indicated that 70% of the poor believed (elitist) political parties were a cause of the problems and 63% believed them to be of no use whatsoever (Zapata in Roberts, 2003: 65). Similarly hostile attitudes can be seen towards business leaders (Romero, 1997: 23).

It is in this context, that Chávez's election victory must be understood. He denounced the corruption of AD and COPEI and addressed issues such as oil revenues, poverty and unemployment (McCoy, 2005: 110). In doing so, he sought to mobilise and represent those who had been politically and economically marginalised. McCoy asserts that 'Chávez rode a wave of disgust with this group into office in 1998' (2005: 110).

On this reading, it appears that the damaging polarisation of Venezuelan society can be understood as a product

of the former elites' corruption combined with the state's structural vulnerability to oil prices under the pacted democracy. Chavez emerges as a champion of citizenship rights, especially for those people whose cause had been previously neglected. However, this is only half the story.

Chávez's 'diagnosis' of the crisis was simple: 'Venezuela was a rich country, and if most Venezuelans were poor, that was because the rich minority had misappropriated the wealth' (Gunson, 2006: 61). He set about 'correcting' this situation with a series of confrontational policies. Through decades in government COPEI and AD had gradually come to dominate most organisations in civil society (McCoy, 1997: 65). To prevent 'institutionalised resistance' from these groups Chávez systematically promoted loyalists regardless of merit. In doing so, he exacerbated the opposition's concerns that just six years after a failed coup attempt he was again attacking democracy by 'politicising and militarising the state' (Buxton, 2005: 337). Chávez did little to pacify such fears by persistently dividing 'Venezuelans into 'patriots' (that is, his supporters) and 'traitors' [the opposition]'. He also equated himself with 'the people' and the opposition with 'the devil' whilst dismissing their support as 'puny' (Gunson, 2006: 60-61). Perhaps unsurprisingly, opposition parties have been reluctant to engage with the new government. Instead, their strategies have been radical, typified by 'insurrection' rather than dialogue (Canon, 2004: 300).

What has been the impact of this polarisation on citizenship? Gunson writes that 'Chávez was elected not simply to put right' the inequalities within Venezuelen society, 'but to exact revenge' on those deemed responsible (2006: 61). His government's provocatively implemented policies have alienated the middle and upper classes. As a result, although their privileges have yet to be seriously impinged upon, they conceive themselves to be in the midst of an existential ideological struggle (Canon, 2004: 293-294; McCoy, 2005: 109). Chávez's language and policies demonstrate that he not only recognises the cleavages within Venezuelan society, but seeks to capitalise on them and entrench them (Canon, 2004: 293). His aggressive brand of populism has dealt a 'deathblow' to the previous political order (Roberts, 2003: 72) and created a 'vacuum of representation' for those allied to the opposition (McCoy, 2005: 112) Political interaction in Venezuela has subsequently been characterised by a damaging zero-sum game which leaves society void of trust and creates a fertile environment for human rights abuses (McCoy, 2005: 121; Amnesty International, 2006). Consequently, at least part of society inevitably conceives their political and social citizenship rights to be under threat. Furthermore, as I will explore in the next section, the Venezuelan poor may not even be benefiting from such policies.

In stark contrast with Chávez's 1992 coup attempt, the Brazilian PT's time in opposition was characterised by principled cooperation and efforts to build consensus. They successfully utilised alliances with other left and centre parties in order to strengthen their cause and came to see that 'working within institutions even as unpalatable as the

National Congress' could be beneficial (Nylen, 2000: 138). Whilst they remained inflexible with regards to their essential principles (namely, opposition to neo-liberalism) there was a willingness to moderate other policies 'in favour of building alliances [and] negotiating deals' (Nylen, 2000: 139-140).

When Lula first stood for president in 1989, he was actively opposed by military, business and media elites (Hunter and Power, 2005: 137). However, as a consequence of the PT's policies over the following thirteen years, he came to be seen as responsible and trustworthy. Consequently, 'elite opposition was largely invisible' during the 2002 presidential campaign (Hunter and Power, 2005: 138). Negotiation, cooperation and an adherence to existing norms and institutions have remained features of the PT since their accession to power. Indeed, they have become essential strategies within the context of a highly 'fragmented party system' where the PT controls fewer than one in five seats (Hunter and Power, 2005: 133). In order to maintain support Lula has been forced to moderate several policies and offer cabinet posts to other parties within his coalition. Whilst Souza identifies a slight polarisation between the PT and the Brazilian Social Democracy Party during the 2004 municipal elections, she writes that this 'should be seen as a political strategy' to ensure progression through to the second round run off 'rather than the expression of a national divide' (2004). Consequentially, in contrast to Venezuela, there is political space for citizens to hold agency whether they are on the left or the right and Brazil hasn't witnessed a widespread violation of human rights to the same extent. As I will now show, the PT's 'participatory budgeting' projects have also fostered political accountability and socio-economic citizenship.

Participation, Accountability and the Position of the State in Brazil and Venezuela:

Chávez and Lula both receive the majority of their support from the poorer classes having pledged to represent them in the formal political arena. Abers reports an increasing academic consensus that in order to 'improve the quality of life in impoverished urban areas' the 'capacity of local residents to form social networks and civic organizations' is crucial (1998: 511). Many thinkers believe that this only occurs if the state's role is unobtrusive, because when it paternalistically provides services social movements become redundant or co-opted (Hochstetler, 2000: 175; Abers, 1998: 511). However, it is also acknowledged that 'poor people's movements often only mobilize with the direct help of outsiders' (Abers, 1998: 514). This leaves the state to tread a fine line between facilitating and suppressing progress when it intervenes on behalf of the poor. I will argue that whereas the PT's 'participatory budgeting' has successfully fostered political and socio-economic agency, Chávez's 'Bolivarian Missions' exist within 'verticalised' structures of control which prevent empowerment and undermine accountability.

Participatory budgeting was first begun in the city of Porto Alegre shortly after the PT gained its mayorship in

1989. It has now been enacted in over 100 municipalities in Brazil and has become internationally recognised as a mechanism to challenge clientelism and social divisions (Wampler, 2000: 3; Goldfrank, 2003: 46). The system functions through direct democracy, allowing people to 'discuss and decide on public policies and the public budget' (Souza, 2004: 57) Regular forums let citizens assign resources, examine spending and direct future social policies. In a municipality with a 'decent' financial situation, between 12% and 15% of funds are typically set aside for infrastructure improvements to be decided upon in the participatory budget (Wampler, 2000: 7).

The scheme has numerous benefits. The political dimension of citizenship is vastly enhanced through the increased transparency which results from regular public meetings and the dissemination of information into the community. Koonings reports that in Porto Alegre clientelism at the municipal level has been almost eradicated (2004: 90). Furthermore, it has promoted 'a dramatic increase' in 'activism in the poorest neighbourhoods of the city' (Abers, 1998: 511) leading some to suggest that it 'strengthen[s] solidarity bonds' and breaks down the hierarchical divisions in Brazilian society (Wampler, 2000: 26). As such, the decisions that are made have legitimacy throughout the community. Several observers have also proposed that there is a 'pedagogical aspect' to the process; Baierle found that over 40 percent of participants leaving one meeting cited 'a desire to serve the community… and support citizenship as important reasons for their participation' (Koonings, 2004: 94; also Wampler, 2000: 2).

The participatory budget mechanism is widely deemed to have been enormously beneficial in enhancing civil, political and socio-economic citizenship. This is reflected in its adoption by the 1996 UN Habitat Conference as a global 'best practice' (Goldfrank, 2003: 27). Unfortunately, as I will now show, Chávez's 'Bolivarian Missions' have not matched this success.

Since taking power, Chávez has greatly increased opportunities for citizens to participate in politics. Venezuelan's now have the right to plebiscite, *consulta*, referendum, constitutional initiative, indirect legislative initiative and recall, and the ability to revoke existing laws' (Barczak, 2001: 51). However, Crisp and Levine argue that in order to assess the role of civil society in Venezuela, an 'integrated theoretical perspective' is necessary which acknowledges that social movements are not isolated and independent from the state (1998: 30). Indeed, I will argue that in Venezuela the positioning of the state has allowed for the manipulation of new citizenship rights and resulted in social initiatives being fundamentally undermined.

Despite the claims of the opposition, Chávez is widely regarded to have a democratic mandate having gained power through independently monitored 'free and fair' elections. However, Barczak argues that the 'tools' of participation have been exercised in an authoritarian fashion (2001: 51). The creation of a new constitution perhaps

best demonstrates this oddly close relationship between democracy and authoritarianism. In an initial referendum the electorate resoundingly accepted Chávez's proposal to give the constituent assembly (the body which would write the constitution) free reign to decide its own powers. In a second referendum to elect members to the assembly, over 90 percent of the seats went to Chávez's supporters. Unsurprisingly the constitution eventually 'reflected essentially all the changes the neophyte politician had desired' (Barczak: 2001: 51). In referendums one has a stark choice to vote either *for* or *against* an issue. In the context of a polarised society they suggest a sense of democratic legitimacy whilst, in reality, empowering the leader who sets the agenda to a far greater degree than civil society itself.

Through a process of threats and last-minute compromises Chávez also managed to shape major institutions (such as the Congress, Supreme Court, Judicial Council and National Electoral Council) into compliant bodies (Ellner, 2001: 12). Predictably the army too was vigorously transformed -purged of 'opposition sympathisers' and filled with those loyal to Chávez himself (Gunson, 2006: 60). It's also alleged that the government 'persistently' undermines freedom of speech and commits human rights abuses at anti-government protests (Buxton, 2005: 332).

Within this broader atmosphere the 'Bolivarian Missions' have been launched; ostensibly a series of social justice, educational and anti-poverty programmes. However, the degree to which they have fostered civil, political and socio-economic citizenship in the long-term is debatable. This is primarily because of the central contradiction 'between the notion of participation from below' and the reality of 'absolute and unchallenged' authority from 'the charismatic leadership of one man' (Gunson, 2006: 61; also McCoy, 2005: 120). Projects such as the 'The Miśión Vuelvan Caras' (which trains people without jobs and employees them on cooperatives) generate a workforce 'with no labour rights' whose livelihoods are completely reliant on Chávez's oil-fuelled state subsidies (Gunson, 2006: 62). In this context, people lack political agency and are therefore vulnerable to propaganda, military recruitment and clientelist politics. Instead of the activism and accountability facilitated by Brazil's participatory budgets there is dependency on both a volatile leader and an unpredictable international oil market.

I have argued that Chávez's manipulation of democratic tools to create a direct and hierarchical relationship between himself and the people can be contrasted to the PT's use of participatory budgeting to foster civil, socio-economic and political citizenship. However, I will now suggest that the leaders' approaches bear similarities in that, to a degree, both have sought to maintain (and profit from) a status quo already present in their respective countries.

Citizenship in Venezuela and Brazil – A Change for the Better?

Cannon argues that polarisation and the authoritarian suppression of 'the other' have been characteristics of

Venezuela since it first formed (2004: 287). In this sense, Chávez's leftist government represent not a radical change, but a continuation of the norm. Buxton summarises that although 'there has been a revolutionary shift in the distribution of power' there remains 'a remarkable permanence in the art of its practice' (2005: 329).

Whilst Chávez's politics undoubtedly emanated as a response to the exclusion of the poor, his policies have not seen processes of marginalisation eradicated, but rather displaced (Gunson, 2006: 60). For the elites which previously held power, Chávez's confrontational discourse and aggressive policies not only threaten their positions and influence but also deny the possibility of regaining political agency in the future. The consequence is a polarised society which leaves social, political and economic rights at risk. Whilst any economic progress that has been achieved by the poor should be understood as positive, the continuation of a 'politics of exclusion' (Buxton, 2005: 329) is a worrying pattern which is unlikely to bring citizenshipin the long-term.

Developments in Brazil can also be understood in terms of a continuation of exclusionary politics, but in a different sense. Chaui wrote in 1994 that Brazilian society was 'verticalised and hierarchised' to such an extent that 'equality of rights' was entirely absent (in Pereira, 2000: 221; also Branford and Kucinski, 1995: 19). The PT was elected because of its promise to narrow this social and economic gap, specifically through one of its 'core constituents', the opposition of neo-liberal agendas (Nylen, 2000: 138).

However, Hunter and Power argue that Lula's relatively 'meagre social-policy achievements' have been coupled with a willingness to follow and even intensify his 'predecessor's macroeconomic policies'. They note that even the most prestigious projects were sacrificed 'when nearly US$2 billion in social spending needed to be cut in order to stay within IMF fiscal-surplus targets' (2005: 131-132). Koonings observes that despite some local successes, 'inequality and social exclusion' remain culturally embedded problems. (2004: 79-80). This has led one economics professor at Sao Paulo University to assert that 'what is being done, unfortunately, is not sufficient. What we have here is the maintenance of the status quo' (BBC, 2005). Other academics have come to a similarly worrying conclusion, noting that 'the continuities that [Lula's] government has overseen are more striking than the changes that it has generated' (Hunter and Power, 2005: 138). The contrasting receptions received by Chávez and Lula in Porto Alegre during the 2005 World Social Forum suggest that it is not only academics who feel more radical policies are necessary in Brazil (Vidal, 2005). In this sense, the emergence of the left in Brazil has also seen a continuation of exclusionary politics.

Conclusion:

In this essay I have argued that contemporary citizenship in Venezuela and Brazil is experienced very differently. Whereas Lula has sought to accommodate and include all sectors of society, Chávez's policies have alienated previous elites who feel stripped of their citizenship rights and political agency. Consequently, a zero-sum game emerges in Venezuela in which dialogue is abandoned in favour of conflict. This will further undermine civil, political and socio-economic citizenship as it creates a fertile environment for human rights abuses.

Participatory budgeting has been a relative success in Brazil, fostering community activism, contributing to the dismantling of hierarchical divisions within society, legitimising the state and playing an educational role regarding citizenship rights and political processes. In contrast, Venezuela's 'Bolivarian Missions' exist within unaccountable and hierarchised relationships which lend legitimacy only to Chavez himself thereby entrenching dependency and suffocating political agency.

Finally however, I have argued that (in different ways) both countries have witnessed a continuation of the status quo. Politics of exclusion continue to dominate; Venezuela has seen processes of polarisation persist and Lula has failed to meet expectations in challenging the neo-liberal orthodoxy. Real progress will be made when citizenship rights become wholly inclusive.

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