



**THE MAGICAL STATE: HISTORY AND ILLUSION IN
THE APPEARANCE OF VENEZUELAN DEMOCRACY**

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an interpretation of the transition to democracy in Venezuela by examining the orchestration of several coups d'état which were instrumental in the consolidation of dictatorial rule between 1948 and 1957 and in its overthrow in 1958. A critique of the application of the concept of Bonapartism to Venezuela by social scientists and local actors is used to highlight the distinctive ideological forms and social relations that characterize politics in a neocolonial rentier society. By exploring the interplay between forms of representing political power and of organizing economic activity, the author develops the argument that the democratization of Venezuelan political life was intimately related to the transformation (Gómez period onwards) of Venezuela into an oil nation.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo ofrece una interpretación de la transición hacia la democracia en Venezuela al examinar la orquestación de varios golpes de estado que fueron instrumentales en la consolidación del régimen dictatorial entre 1948 y 1957 y en su derrocamiento en 1958. Una crítica de la adaptación del concepto de Bonapartismo al caso venezolano por científicos sociales y actores locales es usada para destacar las formas ideológicas y las relaciones sociales distintivas que caracterizan la política en una sociedad neocolonial *rentier*. Al explorar la interacción entre las formas de representar el poder político y de organizar la actividad económica, el autor desarrolla el argumento de que la democratización de la vida política

venezolana estuvo íntimamente relacionada a la transformación de Venezuela (del período de Gómez en adelante) en una nación petrolera.

We never had to build many theaters in this country. Why should we? The normative structure of power was always our best stage... Where did we get our public institutions from? From a hat, from a routine trick of prestidigitation... With oil a cosmogony was created in Venezuela. The state acquired a providential hue. A candidate in Venezuela cannot talk about reality, that would be suicidal. Because the state has nothing to do with reality. The state is a magnanimous sorcerer, a titan who fills with hopes the bag of lies that are our government plans. Oil is fantastic and induces fantasies. Oil wealth had the power of a myth. "The Great Venezuela." Carlos Andrés Pérez was not a president. He was a magician. A magician capable of shooting us towards a hallucination that made the exhibitionism of Pérez Jiménez seem pale in comparison. Pérez Jiménez decreed the dream of Progress. The country did not progress, it got fat. Pérez Jiménez was a *début*, Carlos Andrés Pérez was a reprise, but more sensational.

José Ignacio Cabrujas—Venezuelan playwright

Magic has such authority that a contrary experience does not, on the whole, destroy a person's belief. In fact, it escapes all control. Even the most unfavorable facts can always be held to be the work of counter-magic or to result from an error in performance of the ritual. In general, they are seen to stem from the fact that the necessary conditions of the rite were not fulfilled.

Marcel Mauss

THE EIGHTEENTH BRUMAIRE OF PÉREZ JIMÉNEZ

The characteristic of Venezuela—as that of most Latin American countries in the nineteenth century—was the tragic contrast between social reality and the false covering of laws, constitutions, and institutions imported or translated from Europe through which we mask, more than remedy, our backwardness and our neglect.

Mariano Picón Salas

The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.

Marx

Images of History

If we were to look at 20th century Latin American politics through the combined gaze of novelists and social scientists, we would suffer from split vision. In one half we would see an elusive continent whose history unfolds as the wild offspring of a unique merger of the real and

the magical.¹ In the other we would recognize pale replicas of canonical First World nations,² societies not so much different as incomplete, whose history, while traversing thwarted paths, evolves towards familiar ends.³ The clash between these images points less to two different ways of seeing the same reality, than to the distorting optics of each viewpoint. If a more compelling vision is to be achieved, a perspective must be sought that avoids both the tantalizing lure of a cultivated exoticism and the comforting appeal of an assumed familiarity—one capable of grasping the extraordinary within the quotidian making of a history that still remains to be written. The following analysis of the transition to democracy in Venezuela seeks to develop such a perspective and to apprehend this distinctive history.

The death of Juan Vicente Gómez in December 1935 brought the end of his twenty-seven year dictatorship and the beginning of a process of democratization. Under the regimes of Generals Eleazar López Contreras (1936-41) and Isaías Medina Angarita (1941-45), changes in the institutions of the state reflected and facilitated the increasing participation and representation of social groups in national politics. This process was accelerated by Acción Democrática (AD) after the 1945 coup that launched it into power and the election of Rómulo Gallegos in 1947, the first popularly elected president in Venezuelan history. On 24 November 1948, nine months after Gallegos's election, a military coup interrupted this process, leading to a ten-year dictatorship which was consolidated by a palace coup on 2 December 1952. On 23 January 1958 the dictatorship, in turn, was ended by another military coup, this time backed by massive popular support. Thereafter, Venezuela has experienced thirty years of democratic rule, including four transfers of power between competing political parties.

During the same period that saw the consolidation of Venezuelan democratic institutions, older Latin American democracies abruptly ended in violent coups. Between 1964 and 1976 the

¹ The literary references are numerous, but perhaps the essential texts are Sarmiento's *Facundo* (1845), Rulfo's *Pedro Paramo* (1955), Asturias' *El señor Presidente* (1946), García Márquez' *El Otoño del Patriarca* (1974), Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo* (1949) and *El Recurso del Método* (1974), and Roa Bastos' *Yo el Supremo* (1974).

² I use this term with the necessary caveats. For a historically informed and culturally sensitive critique of the three worlds taxonomy, see Pletch (1981).

³ In different ways, this view permeates the works produced from the otherwise competing frameworks of modernization, dependency, and Marxist theories.

democratic regimes of Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina fell to the military. Recently this trend has been reversed, and a process of redemocratization has begun in Ecuador (1979), Peru (1980), Argentina (1983), Brazil (1985), Uruguay (1985) and, within severe constraints, in some Central American nations (El Salvador, Panama, Guatemala, and Nicaragua). Venezuelan democracy, which had struck foreign observers as an enigmatic exception during the authoritarian phase of Latin American politics, has been recently hailed as a potential model for the democratic regimes that are emerging from military dictatorships which failed to achieve “progress” through the harsh medicine of political “order” and economic orthodoxy. Until now regarded as an exception, Venezuela has come to be seen as an example:

For me, then, the key issue is this: to what extent do the conditions which made for the restoration (indeed, virtually the creation) of bourgeois hegemony in Venezuela exist in these countries today? What we have at present is perhaps no more than a situation which makes such an outcome possible, and the beginning of the emergence, from country to country, of the elements of the “Venezuelan syndrome”: restored legitimacy for bourgeois politicians, elite consensus, the definition of democracy in procedural terms, the shelving of conflictive issues, the marginalization of the left, and the deliberate strengthening of the executives over legislatures, and leaders over parties... There is a discernible trend, in other words, towards “self-limiting democracy” of the Venezuelan type (Cammak 1986: 1944).⁴

For Venezuelans, accustomed to over a quarter century of political stability, it is not the democratic period but the 1948-1958 dictatorship that seems anomalous. Most analysts reproduce this view, regarding the dictatorship as a dark parenthesis undeserving of scholarly

⁴ Cammak’s exceptionally insightful characterization of Venezuela’s democracy is at once a succinct description of its accomplishments and a sobering—and unusual—critique of its limitations. However, his understanding of its potential significance for other Latin American countries seems to be based on Levine’s interpretation (included in the journal issue edited by Cammak) which minimizes the role oil resources have played in the making of Venezuelan democracy (1986: 52).

attention; the understanding of democracy is sought through the study of the democratic period itself. Yet the 1948-1958 dictatorship was a time of fundamental changes. If we want to unravel the mystery of Venezuelan democracy and assess its significance for other Latin American nations, we must examine it in the light of the changes that Venezuelan society underwent during the dark dictatorship that conditioned the reemergence and consolidation of democracy after 1958.

The following interpretation, however, does not pretend to be a comprehensive analysis of the 1948-1958 dictatorship. Rather, this is a detailed study of the particular orchestration of coups d'état during this period. I analyze them as transitional junctures during which established political forms were contested and new ones formulated and instituted. Although coups generally initiate the establishment of a new order, they are, like the liminal moments of relatively stable societies (Turner 1967: 95-106), reflective and transformative occasions, when axiomatic values are invoked even as they are questioned and reformulated. In expressing and reshaping basic structural relationships, these interstructural situations illuminate a society's underlying organizational principles. Thus, I do not analyze the coups d'état in isolation, but within the context of both the Pérez Jiménez period and, more generally, the longer process of Venezuela's transformation into an "oil nation." By focusing on the interplay between these particular events and that general process this investigation seeks to apprehend the distinctive modes of thought and action that characterize Venezuelan political life. And by examining the shifting ground between the staging and the deployment of state power, it seeks to initiate an exploration into the dialectics of the representation and constitution of political power in Latin America.

In this respect this study addresses the relationship between events and structures in history, an issue sharply posed by Sahlins in his recent work (1985). Yet, if for Sahlins the distinction between structure and event "is really a pernicious distinction," for "all structure or system is, phenomenally, evenemential," it is because he views "structure" as a virtual "symbolic system," and event as "the empirical form of system" (Sahlins 1985: 153). Here I do not treat events as real "practice" and structure as abstract "culture," but both as different temporal and spatial levels of a unitary historical process that is at once practical and symbolic, the contingent expression of many determinations. From this perspective, the aim is to grasp the interaction

between structured events and evenemential structures—the mutual constitution of events and structures in a historical dialectic of becoming.⁵

In pursuing this aim, this investigation seeks to contribute to the ongoing theoretical discussion about the current processes of redemocratization in Latin America. If the rise of authoritarianism led to studies which sought to show, in Hirschman's words, how a "specific turn of the political tide" originated in "a precise feature of the underlying economic terrain" (1979: 68),⁶ the reemergence of democratic regimes has stimulated two distinct areas of research, one focusing on politics or action, the other on culture or meaning, which nevertheless share a tendency to approach each area as a relatively independent realm. From different perspectives, these lines of inquiry mark a shift from the study of interactions between "levels," "instances," or "subsystems" within society, to that of political action—from the problematic of society to that of the human subject. While they are a welcome corrective to the one-sidedness of earlier frameworks (which left little place for human agents as political actors or as culturally constituted subjects), they in turn show a tendency to recreate the old one-sidedness at another level, by failing to locate actors in their formative social contexts.

Accordingly, two biases seem to be converging in recent studies: while an outworn liberal voluntarism is being resurrected to account for intentional political action, a fashionable post-structuralist treatment of free-floating discourses is being brought to illuminate the constitution of human intersubjectivity. Perhaps against the grain, this study persists in seeking significant relations between patterns of accumulation, forms of political rule, and modes of thought and action.⁷ In particular, by exploring the interplay between forms of representing political power and of organizing economic life, it pursues the argument that the democratization

⁵ For an insightful discussion of Sahlins's earlier work which has helped my thinking on these issues, see Rafael Sánchez (1985: 51-65).

⁶ Hirschman was of course referring to the seminal work of Guillermo O'Donnell (1972: 57;1975).

⁷ These remarks refer only to *tendencias* in the contemporary literature. The focus on politics can be seen in the recent work coordinated by O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead (1986), who privilege political conflict within authoritarian regimes in their explanation of the forces leading to the transition to democracy. For a criticism of this view, see Cardoso (1985: 5). The emphasis on discourse in the study of the constitution of political identities characterizes some of the work on Argentinian democratization, for instance Portantiero and Ipola (1981).

of Venezuelan political life was intimately related to the transformation of Venezuela into an oil nation that began during the Gómez period.⁸

⁸ This argument is more fully developed in Coronil (1987).

1948: A Terrifying Solitude

The administration of President Rómulo Gallegos lasted only nine months. Although AD had managed to thwart several plots against the government since the Junta took power in 1945, and its leadership was aware of a growing conservative conspiracy, by the end of 1948 it had failed to control the anti-regime forces. On 24 November 1948 the military coup took place. Surprisingly, there was no significant opposition to it. According to the standard historical account of these events, a highly politicized populace somehow acquiesced passively to its own demobilization. A closer examination reveals that by the time the military took over, “the people” had been disarmed by AD’s top leadership.

AD’s overwhelming electoral victory in 1947 (75 percent of the vote) reflected the popularity of its policies, but also the political advantage it had derived from its control of a wealthy state during a boom period. As promised, AD had not taken over the state in 1945 by the force of arms to hold it by force, but to speed the transition to an electoral system and the implementation of social reforms. But during this period, AD ruled alone. It excluded other parties not only from positions in the government, but, through state intervention, from influence in the expanding worker and peasant organizations. The government’s achievements in collective welfare—the increase in rural and urban wages, improvements in public health and education, the impetus given to economic diversification—were appropriated as triumphs of AD, not of a modernizing Venezuelan state. Even AD’s former political allies—the groups that had supported democratization—were increasingly alienated by its excessively partisan control of the government. When in 1948 three out of four Venezuelans elected Gallegos president of Venezuela, these groups came to fear that in a new form state power would again be the monopoly of a clique, that through the electoral system AD would replace the rule of one man by the rule of one party. Even conservative forces drew on the democratic discourse AD had helped consecrate—it’s critique of personalistic, exclusionary government—to counter AD’s rule.

In this context, the focus of both political struggles and economic competition, for those who felt excluded from power, shifted toward gaining control over the government itself. Despite AD’s significant concessions and overtures to the private sector, many local businessmen felt threatened by its social reforms and support of workers and peasants; for them, the party’s socialist origins and rhetoric resurrected the specter of an uncontrolled popular onslaught on property and order. The Church was increasingly alienated by AD’s secular orientation in

education. The Christian democratic party COPEI (Comite de Organización Política Electoral Independiente) and social democratic URD (Unión Republicana Democrática) feared that they could not compete with the party that controlled the state apparatus. Oil companies, seeing their power reduced and their profits threatened under AD's rule, were willing allies of dissatisfied local groups which offered them better conditions. Despite the massive flow of money that AD poured into the military, the military leaders who had engineered the 1945 coup against Medina resented being excluded from power and wanted a larger role in government. The military, the ultimate locus of state force, once again became the agent of political change.

Initially the military leaders, following their preferred practice of negotiating settlements from above, sought a compromise. Acting as representatives of excluded interest groups, they asked President Gallegos to include non-AD civilians as well as military leaders in the cabinet, and to exile Betancourt, who was seen as the main architect of AD's sectarian policies. AD would still have a majority in the Congress. Betancourt was willing to compromise, feeling that in time AD would regain control over the Executive. But President Gallegos, who was a distinguished novelist and an educator, understood politics as the play of principles, not the battle for power. Objecting to any form of unconstitutional participation of the military in politics, he sternly refused to compromise, arguing that if he acceded to the demands of the military, he could not go home and face his wife Teotiste. While Gallegos denied the political existence of the military in the name of what Marx once called "forceless principles" (1981: 88), the same men who had thrust AD into power in 1945 were readying themselves to gain control over the state by recourse, once again, to principleless force.

In response to this military conspiracy against Gallegos, middle-level AD leaders attempted on their own to prepare their followers for resistance. Against the threat of a coup, they sought to present the threat of the organized masses. In their plan, while a national strike paralyzed the nation, party militia would directly confront the military.⁹

AD's top leadership, however, was committed to avoiding social conflict by all means. Although in October Betancourt threatened the conspirators with a strike of oil workers if a coup were ever attempted, he and AD's upper echelons strongly discouraged attempts by middle-level party leaders to mobilize popular organization. In their view, AD had organized the masses in

⁹ Armed with weapons captured from military garrisons during the 1945 coup against Medina Angarita.

order to obtain electoral support, not to unleash a process of radical social transformation. Once in power, they sought to forge an alliance with local and foreign propertied interests and to build AD as a multi-class, reformist national party. AD defined itself as the “Party of the People” (“El Partido del Pueblo”), but by “the people” its leaders increasingly meant either the whole population (excluding the Gomecist clique), or the popular sector directed by the party—not autonomous popular forces, but either a totalizing abstraction or a controlled group.

Given their concern with strengthening this reformist alliance, AD’s top leadership sought to neutralize the plot by negotiation from above, not mobilization from below. The coup was planned at the top by the military and did not involve the popular sectors. One of AD’s promising leaders at that time, Domingo Aberto Rangel, later referred to the Gallegos’s overthrow as a “Golpe de teléfono”—a coup by phone—whose implementation was “no more difficult than a military parade.” (1966: 9). The coup was planned at the top by the military and did not involve the popular sectors. To avert the coup, AD relied on the support of key military figures, including the Minister of Defense Delgado Chalbaud, a friend and former student of Gallegos’s who promised the government unswerving loyalty. When these men turned against Gallegos, AD was left defenseless. As an analyst of this period has noted, AD’s priority was to preserve “social peace”:

Maintaining “la paz social” constituted the main tenet of AD’s political strategy during the trienio. Incorporated in the party’s rhetoric was the idea that national economic development depended on the elimination of social conflict. Acción Democrática was especially proud of its success at having reduced strikes to a minimum. The leadership of AD was tied down by this strategy during the decisive months of 1948. They hesitated or avoided completely to trust the massive popular support the party had out of fear of igniting social tensions. Instead, they sought a solution from above, negotiating with military figures who had no interest in maintaining Venezuelan democracy. Thus, when the conspirators gave their coup, the streets were empty for the military troops: a popular government was overthrown because of the lack of popular resistance (Ellner 1980: 141).

When the coup took place in November 1948, President Gallegos made an abstract appeal to the masses to “fulfill their duty.” The threat of a general strike circulated—through a radio announcement and rumors—but the strike was not organized and never materialized. An attempt to set up a provisional government in Maracay ended with the arrest of its leaders. In essence, AD’s leadership accepted the coup as a fiat accompli, one that could not be altered by popular resistance.

Symptomatically, Betancourt chose political asylum rather than clandestine struggle; his “Palacio de la Moneda”¹⁰ was the Colombian Embassy. But the leader of the “Party of the People” felt that his escape from the field of battle had to be explained, that his image as a combative popular leader had to be sustained. He asked his party, in a letter written from his embassy haven, to present to the public his personal decision to leave the country as an order from the party. As an exile he would organize the masses for the long-term opposition to the government. His request was accompanied by a veiled threat: if the party refused, he would never come back to Venezuela. The party complied (Fuenmayor 1982: 42).

The party members, left on their own, did not occupy the political space their leaders left vacant. There were no spontaneous social protests, no riots, no strikes, no public demonstrations, and therefore no repression. Not a weapon was fired. In the words of Guillermo García Ponce, who as a Communist Party leader became one of the major underground leaders of the resistance against Pérez Jiménez: “The Government fell without a shot, without serious resistance, without a massive protest in the streets, in the midst of a terrifying solitude, before a country that turned its indifferent back to everything that happened” (García Ponce 1982: 37).

The military had feared popular opposition and took steps to suppress civil resistance. It occupied the main streets of Caracas, restricted movements within and between cities, and proclaimed through the media that it held the nation under control. But the show of force alone was enough to make its claims true; in hours the military effectively controlled the nation.

Thus the first democratic regime in Venezuela, established through universal suffrage granted from above, passed away without protest in streets, factories, or fields. The display of force broke the brittle democratic shell without injury to the social body.

¹⁰ “El Palacio de la Moneda” was the name of the presidential building where Chile’s Salvador Allende was killed while defending his regime.

The 1948 coup did not signal the beginning of a counter-revolution, for the 1945-48 period had not been a revolution. As an analyst of this period observed, "AD's much-vaunted attack on the country's basic social and economic problems did not represent a fundamental 'social revolution,' as Adecos and pro-AD writers have insisted, but rather represented an invigorated and expanded policy of domestic reform that had already been accelerating over the 1936-1945 decade" (Burggraaff 1972: 81). For this observer, "... the real revolution was political: for the first time in Venezuela the political base of the ruling party now resided in the middle and lower classes, not in the elite" (Ibid.).

It is true that from the vantage point of 1948, the middle and lower classes during the 1935-45 period might look like excluded political actors. But from the standpoint of 1935, when the Gómez dictatorship ended, they appear as emerging social forces, both as central referents of the emerging political discourse and, increasingly, as legitimate participants in the democratizing process. If after 1945 the lower and middle classes occupied the expanded political space opened up by AD, their political force was increasingly defused by a centralized and hierarchical party which sought to monopolize control over these emerging political actors. The state acted as a center of gravity for political life. For AD's top leaders control over the government granted mastery over the party as a whole. While it is true that during the "trienio" AD's social base expanded dramatically, its political power came more and more from the top—from AD's control over the state apparatus itself. Paradoxically, AD built upon and promoted the presence of new political sectors in national politics, but harnessed their force through tight party control. While unions rapidly expanded, they were devoid of autonomy and subordinated to national political command. Thus, this political "revolution," made in the name of the people but only partially by them, remained the illusion of a revolution, the sparkling new dwelling that both protected and contained a dependent populace.

Carved by the flow of oil wealth, a strange social edifice was being built in Venezuela, one with the ideal Western façade—a productive civil society and a representative state—but with inverted structural elements: the top supported the base. With the continuous expansion of the oil industry, an increasingly wealthy state, financially independent from domestic agents, was making them dependent on it. The middle and lower classes, possessing limited economic strength and rudimentary political organization, were quickly turned from AD's source of power into a vehicle for legitimating it. AD had been launched into power by the military in 1945 because of its wide popular support, and its rule was consolidated by the elections of 1947. But once in control of the state apparatus, AD expanded its political base and popular support by full use of state institutions and resources. In 1948 the military overthrew AD not by attacking the

masses, but by dislodging AD's anchorage in the state itself, its new source of power. As soon as it seemed clear that the Junta controlled the state, its rule was uncontested.

1948: In The Name of Democracy

The same officers who had participated with AD in the 1945 coup against Medina to install a civilian government, this time established an all military three-man Junta: Commander Carlos Delgado Chaulbaud and Lt. Colonels Marcos Pérez Jiménez and Carlos Llovera Paez. On 25 November the newspapers carried the Junta's first statement: it depicted the Gallegos government as incapable of solving the "national crisis" or controlling "extremist groups"—a clear reference to Betancourt's influence in Gallegos's government. AD's incorporation of popular sectors in national politics was presented as a source of chaos. The coup was justified in the name of securing order; the Armed Forces had taken "total control of the situation" so as to achieve the "final establishment of social peace in Venezuela" (*El Universal*, 25 November 1948).

As head of the new Junta emerged Carlos Delgado Chaulbaud, President Gallegos's Defense Minister. Reportedly, Delgado Chaulbaud had expressed discomfort at being both the ex-Defense Minister of the old regime and a prospective ruler of the new one. But upon being urged by Pérez Jiménez he agreed to join the Junta on the condition that, because of his superior rank, he be its President. Pérez Jiménez agreed. As Gallegos's Defense Minister, Delgado Chaulbaud was already invested in the public eye with a certain degree of legitimacy. The Caracas social elite considered him one of its own and trusted him. In addition, it is widely believed that he was also the favored candidate of the U.S. military attaché, Colonel Adams, who on the day of the coup had been observed in the Presidential Palace busily conferring with various military leaders (García Ponce 1982: 34).¹¹

¹¹ On this basis President Gallegos wrote President Roosevelt and accused the U.S. of having promoted the coup. In his reply, President Roosevelt assured Gallegos that his government had not taken a role in the coup. His Ambassador in Venezuela had informed him that Colonel Adams had acted on his own accord, that he had gone to the Presidential Palace only to get information first hand. This delicate matter came to a rest, and no definitive light has since been shed upon this dark episode.

The coup was presented by its leaders as an attack against AD's perversion of democracy. From the outset, Delgado Chaulbaud identified himself as a supporter of democracy. On 25 November he told foreign journalists in Caracas that the Armed Forces did not intend to suppress political parties, that they "... had not acted against AD, but against its leaders," and that they had taken over power "... not to act against democratic principles, but to preserve these principles" (*El Universal*, 26 November 1948). On the evening of 26 November, when he addressed the nation for the first time, he reiterated the Junta's commitment to what at that time was regarded as the only system imparting legitimacy:

The Military Junta wants to state categorically that this movement is not in any way directed towards the restoration of a military dictatorship either openly or underhandedly... Power has been taken over not so as to violate democratic principles, but to obtain their effective application and to prepare an electoral contest where all citizens could participate on equal terms. (*El Universal*, 27 November 1948).

The following day, the front page headline of the conservative newspaper *El Universal* reported Delgado Chaulbaud's announcement under the large headline, "It Is Not Directed Towards Any Dictatorship."

After the coup, AD's limited opposition to the regime was controlled by swift repression. News of the arrest of AD's leaders, often presented together with photographs of arsenals of weapons and bombs, were prominently displayed in the media as part of an ongoing process of "actively cleaning up the city" (*El Universal*, 28 November 1948). The preceding regime's social mobilization was presented as having polarized society and threatened the consolidation of democracy by creating "chaos" and "disorder." AD's call to a general strike on November 24 (which never materialized) was portrayed as proof of AD's disruptive tactics. The imposition of "order" was presented as a condition for a democratic restoration.

Since at this time "extremism" was identified with AD's efforts to organize the labor sector, the Junta did not claim that the Communist Party had influence in the fallen government, as AD had done when it overthrew Medina in 1945. Immediately after the coup when foreign journalists asked Delgado Chaulbaud about his position concerning the Communist Party, he replied laconically that the party had "legal existence in Venezuela" (*El Universal*, 26 November

1948). At this point the Communist Party did not oppose the coup. The Junta presented AD as the only extremist party, as the sole source of “chaos,” and the Armed Forces as the natural guarantor of peace and order.

There was a general acceptance or at least tolerance of the coup. During the “trienio” a sharp antagonism had grown between AD, which had sought to represent itself as the harbinger of democracy, and other political parties, which had also promoted democratic institutions but found themselves without influence over the new state. In order to legitimize its rule, the Junta appealed to the general resentment against AD’s monopolization of power.

While AD members were not sufficiently organized to resist the coup, non-adecons had been too alienated by AD to oppose the new rulers. Not just Medinistas, who understandably resented AD, but also the leaders of COPEI and URD and distinguished “independent”¹² professional and intellectual figures supported the new rulers in the hope that the Junta would open up the political system and promote the establishment of a less sectarian democracy. For them there was no contradiction between supporting democracy and backing the coup. As early as 25 November, URD’s Jovito Villalba declared his trust in the patriotism and selflessness of the Armed Forces and urged the civilian population to avoid acts of violence (*El Universal*, 26 November 1948). COPEI too chose to endorse the new rulers. According to COPEI’s newspaper *El Gráfico*, the Junta had saved the state from the “chaos” and “horrible nightmare” identified with the “sectarian and hegemonic” rule of AD and of its leader, the “hooded” communist, Rómulo Betancourt (García Ponce 1982: 36).

For Mariano Briceño Iragorri, a respected man of letters, AD’s sectarianism had left it alone in power. Many “honest politicians” truly believed in 1948 that “all the mistakes of the government rested on the shoulders of AD members” and that the new regime would promote the institutionalization of democracy blocked by the “sectarian politics of Acción Democrática” (1971: 40-41). For them, the new regime was to be judged not by its origins, but by its achievements. Just as AD had justified in 1945 the use of the military coup as an instrument to speed up the transition to democracy, the supporters of the 1948 coup against AD presented it as a means to put democracy on the right track.

¹² “Independientes” is a term used in Venezuela to designate individuals who participate in politics but are not affiliated to any political party.

On the other hand, for Vallenilla Lanz the fact that supporters of democracy were ready to embrace the coup confirmed his view of the opportunism of Venezuelan politicians. With evident glee he noted in his memoirs that URD's Jovito Villalba and COPEI's Rafael Caldera voiced support for the Junta in 1948 and sought positions for themselves in the new government while their followers "... filled the hallways of the government palace hunting for government jobs" (Vallenilla 1967: 291).

However, many of those who initially supported the regime and even accepted positions in the government turned against it when the Junta took no steps to restore democratic rights. Others, less able to reject public jobs or to take an open stand against the government, opposed it privately. When there was a crack in the mantle of control, this repressed resistance erupted into public view. For example, at the time of General Medina's death in 1953, thousands of "caraqueños," spontaneously and without partisan distinction, carried Medina's coffin from his home to the cemetery, in effect transforming his burial into an eight-hour political demonstration, which at once honored a military leader who had respected the Constitution and protested the Junta that had violated its promises to do so—an event eloquently described by Briceño Iragorri.¹³

Underlying both notions—that the population acquiesced to the coup in the principled defense of true democracy or, alternatively, out of unprincipled self-interest—lies the reality of a society increasingly dependent on the state, in which the definition of individual interests had become encompassed within the demarcation of the state's ends.

¹³ See in this regard the vivid description of Briceño Iragorri's own change of heart concerning the Junta (1971: 41).

Dictablanda: 1948-1950

Once the Junta took control of the state apparatus, it declared AD illegal, and progressively dissolved the Congress, Municipal Councils, the National Electoral Council, and most trade unions. As in other Latin American coups, the dismantling of democratic institutions was presented as only a stage in the process of building democracy on stronger foundations.

In this case, however, there were significant differences of opinion within the Junta with respect to the role of parties and of elections in Venezuela. Carlos Delgado Chaulbaud, who headed the government, leaned towards an eventual return to democratic forms and sought to reinstitute general elections with the participation of most political parties. Pérez Jiménez, who controlled the Armed Forces, favored the consolidation of a military regime and wished to restrict the role of parties in politics. More than their political stance separated them. While Delgado Chaulbaud belonged to an upper class family, received his military training in France, and had wide support within the social and economic elite, Pérez Jiménez was brought up in a poor Andean town, was trained in Peru's Military Academy and had a large following in the Armed Forces. Both men needed each other and they avoided a confrontation. They defined the Junta's immediate tasks as the establishment of order and the promotion of major public works; toward this end their efforts converged.

On 13 November 1950 Delgado Chaulbaud was murdered, allowing Pérez Jiménez to control the Junta.¹⁴ He decided to name a civilian as president; he did not wish to appear as a beneficiary of the murder of his fellow officer, and he wanted to retain a representative of Delgado Chaulbaud's social class and ideological position in the Junta. Two of his civilian ministers refused to play the role of figurehead. Roberto Gabaldón, a widely respected public health doctor, who had greatly reduced malaria infestation in rural areas and was a political independent, accepted the post.

¹⁴ There is no definitive explanation of this political murder. Because Pérez Jiménez benefitted it was widely believed that he was the mastermind behind it, but there is no evidence of his complicity.

But Gabaldón accepted it because he mistook for drama what was only farce. Perhaps believing that the 1948 coup was indeed the midwife of an authentic democracy, he entered the political stage playing a part written for a different play. He behaved like the head of state even before he was proclaimed its nominal president. Without yet occupying the seat of power, he tactlessly announced his government program and his plan for elections and, most important, his cabinet appointments—creating either panic or hope among those who, like him, mistook appearance for reality. Backstage, there was no need for a guillotine, and Gabaldón's head fell with the stroke of a pen; he was told he no longer had the part. The role was given to Germán Suárez Flamerich, ambassador to Peru, an undistinguished member of the “generation of 1928”—who thus, as Vallenilla cynically commented, “even had a democratic background” (1967: 325)—for he understood the play for what it was. With civilian Suárez Flamerich as President of the Junta, Lt. Colonel Pérez Jiménez took command. Beneath the civilian cloak of its figurehead, the government took shape as a military dictatorship.

The 1952 Elections: Illusions of Power

The men who had held power since 1948 were not politicians and in the following years acquired only limited political experience. They gained control of the state during a boom period and were not compelled by economic and political conditions to seek support from other social groups. As a consequence of their sense of self-sufficiency, they grew distant even from the Armed Forces, their original basis of support. They sought to avoid “politics” and to concentrate on visible achievements.

For these men the emphasis on public works became a way of eradicating partisan politics and redefining political life. Politics was now restricted to the management of the nation's resources by the state. Just as the Armed Forces were entrusted with the defense of the national territory, its top representatives in the Executive were now in charge of safeguarding the “nation's wealth.” Rather than allow the “noisy” voices of political parties to speak in the name of the people while pursuing partisan interests, they sought to make the Executive express the single voice of the nation.

The ease with which they had carried out their coup, the concentration of political power in their hands, their command of financial resources derived from constantly expanding oil rents, the presence of tangible accomplishments, the lack of public criticism—all combined to make

them both overconfident and unrealistic. They increasingly lost touch with reality. In the context of silenced or acquiescent political forces, the men in power came to hear only their own voice.

Thus, the Junta came to believe its own rhetoric. By 1952 it thought that by means of its public works program the “rational transformation of the physical environment” had also successfully eradicated “the irrational political sentiments” of the people (Vallenilla 1967: 242).

Therefore the Junta felt there was no longer any reason to postpone an election. With the reestablishment of constitutional rights the small local opposition and the bothersome foreign critics would be neutralized, and the government could continue to fulfill unhindered its twin tasks of transforming the environment and uplifting the people. The rulers, convinced that the government’s deeds had won the people over to their side, sought to transform rule by force into rule by consent; the quiet legitimation of the vote was now to be permitted.

The regime that had denied political freedoms now wanted to ensure that every adult Venezuelan would vote so that it could claim to have full support. In April 1951 a new Electoral Statute made suffrage compulsory for all citizens over the age of 21. (Under AD’s 1947 electoral law, voting was a voluntary right of citizens over 18.) According to this statute, the electorate would choose a Constituent Assembly whose main functions would be to elect a new Provisional President within forty days and to write the Constitution. The election of a Constitutional President by universal suffrage would follow. In May 1951, a party was created to back Pérez Jiménez, the Frente Electoral Independiente (FEI). The electoral campaign would be allowed to start a year later, in May 1952.

AD was still illegal, as was the Communist Party. During this period, AD repeatedly attempted to organize a coup against the Junta. But these efforts failed, bringing death or imprisonment to its leaders. AD’s most serious loss was the murder in the streets of Caracas of Leonardo Ruiz Pineda (on 21 October 1952). Widely respected as a capable and courageous man, he had been Gallegos’s Minister of Communications and had secretly returned from exile to lead, together with Alberto Carnevalli, AD’s underground movement.

The elections were scheduled for 30 November 1952, a month after the murder of Ruiz Pineda. Despite many instances of violent repression during the preceding year, the Junta insisted that the election results would be respected. Most political leaders took for granted that the general state of repression and political restrictions forestalled the possibility of a fair contest; for them “... a government-perpetrated fraud in the election of November 30 was a foregone conclusion” (Kolb 1974: 109). The standard set by the 1947 election, which took place in the

context of ample democratic freedoms, made even more evident the limitations of the present one. While AD originally ordered its members not to vote,¹⁵ COPEI and URD decided to occupy the political space opened up by the election in order to have a forum for their views, and hopefully to gain positions in the elected bodies of the state and expand their sphere of influence.

The electoral campaign began on May 1952. The opposition organized successful rallies attended by people from a wide political spectrum opposed to the dictatorship. By contrast, the FEI failed to reach the populace; it had no organizational base or ideological appeal. The rulers attributed their failure in this field not to their politics, but to their lack of experienced speakers. After giving a typically unsuccessful speech in a FEI rally, Laureano Vallenilla Lanz, always contemptuous of Romulo Betancourt, confessed that for once he wished he had the ability to speak to the masses like AD's charismatic leader (Vallenilla 1967: 313). The Junta's typical response to the problem was to pour state money into it:

Interior Minister Llovera Paez sent large sums of money and instructions to the governors of states and other local authorities for the enrollment of citizens in the regional parties allied with the FEI. Much of the money was passed out in small amounts as direct bribes for votes; in other cases, farmers were given credits for the purchase of agricultural equipment, or were presented with clothing, powdered milk, and other small gifts. Priests in rural towns were bribed to speak from the pulpit on behalf of the FEI candidates, some of them allegedly advising the country folk to remember on election that the regime's voting ticket was round "like the host in the Holy Sacrament" (Kolb 1974: 110).

The opposition predicted electoral fraud, the government promised absolute honesty. In a sense, both were right. The Junta, believing it had conquered the hearts of most of the people, was sure of its victory; it saw no need to prepare a fraud. As Herbert Mathews reported in 1952, the government planned to hold honest elections because it believed it would win them (*New*

¹⁵ Reportedly, although AD planned to boycott the election, the murder of Ruiz Pineda a month before prompted its members to cast a protest vote against the government (Luzardo 1963: 170-171; Kolb 1974: 115).

York Times, 16 April 1952). The Junta's optimism at that time was fed by reports it received—echoes of its own voice—indicating that Pérez Jiménez could count on massive popular backing, and it predicted his landslide victory. For this reason, according to Vallenilla Lanz, they thought their triumph was certain.

On 30 November the government was unexpectedly proven right in its claim that it would hold an honest election, but wrong in its prediction of the outcome. The first returns showed URD in the lead. The Junta had made no provisions for altering the electoral results, and had no plans for responding to a victory of the opposition. Previously certain of its victory, it was shocked by the indications of its imminent defeat.

The Eighteenth Brumaire of Pérez Jiménez

Historical Events

Upon receiving news of the early vote count, Pérez Jiménez left a celebration with close friends at his home to attend an emergency meeting with his advisers at the Defense Ministry. There the mood was gloomy. As time passed, the electoral results indicated a clear defeat.

The men in power found themselves at a historical juncture: either accept the authority of votes, or exercise the power of force. Pérez Jiménez's top partners had believed their own rhetoric and were caught in the web of their words. Vallenilla's memoirs include an account—from an insider's and clearly partisan perspective—of how they broke free from this web, from the promises they had made, from their commitment to return to electoral politics.

While at the Defense Ministry some argued that "all was lost, that the nation had rejected them," others felt that a compromise with URD's Villalba (who had won the election) had to be arranged (1967: 346). But Colonel Carlos Pulido Barreto told the men around him, "All is not lost. We have 'el Poder'¹⁶ and the arms. We are not going to turn them over" (Vallenilla 1967: 343). Then, meeting secretly in a bathroom, Colonel Pulido Barreto, Commander Tamayo Suárez, and Laureano Vallenilla agreed that "... the result of the election does not matter. What matters is that we stay united and disposed to retain command." They decided to overturn the election. Vallenilla, appealing to the traditional image of the caudillo, assured the officers that rule by force could easily be presented as rightful through the manipulation of law. "The civil formula, the legal solution can be easily fabricated when we can count on the backing of machetes" (1967: 345). They agreed that the military should remain in power, supporting Pérez Jiménez as the sole head of state. A coup was in the making.

However, at this turning point Pérez Jiménez "... was filled with anxieties and doubts." According to an analyst, he was a "tireless schemer and meticulous plotter," but was "... invariably assailed with fears and misgivings when confronted by unanticipated situations demanding immediate and decisive action" (Kolb 1974: 113). Laureano Vallenilla claims to have swayed him by presenting a convincing justification for the coup. "This a difficult, dramatic

¹⁶ "El Poder," literally "the power," refers to the state.

moment. We will have to choose between the electoral results and the development of the country. In a civilized nation there would be no dilemma.” But in Venezuela, he explained, if power were handed over to URD’s Villalba, development programs would be dismantled, and “chaos” again would take over the life of the nation. General elections would be held, and Romulo Betancourt, “the most astute” of all the party leaders, would win. Apparently possessing visionary powers, Vallenilla predicted, “... less intransigent after his last exile, he would form a coalition government in order to distribute public jobs among adecos, copeyanos, and urredecos.” He added that, “... bureaucracy would grow to satisfy the budgetary voracity of all parties. The Junta’s accomplishments would fall in ruins” (Vallenilla 1967: 346).¹⁷

The next and decisive event was the arrival at Pérez Jiménez’s office of a large group of military officers (between 30 and 40) who had been informed by Colonel Pulido Barreto of the decision to back Pérez Jiménez. Reportedly, they urged him to remain in charge of the state. “You must keep ‘el Poder,’ Colonel. We support you.” They insisted that he should rule alone, attributing the present crisis to the lack of a unified leadership. “The problems and difficulties arose from divisions within the Executive...” (Vallenilla 1967: 347). Vallenilla reports that Pérez Jiménez was moved. He told them, “If you support me, I’ll stay... I could go abroad, but I think that Venezuela still needs me...” Then he added, “I have no personal ambitions... If I decide to stay here it is because of the country, exclusively because of the country” (1967: 347). With Pérez Jiménez now convinced to play the role of national savior, the conspirators set out to ensure military support for the coup in the interior of the country, which they expected to secure easily.

There was still uncertainty as to how civilian political forces would react to the coup. In order to reduce possible opposition to the “military solution,” Vallenilla masterminded the “civil formula, the legal solution.” He proposed it to Pérez Jiménez in the following terms:

The Junta, in a letter, should present its resignation to the Armed Forces since the power you exercise emanates from them. They accept it and choose you as Provisional President of the Republic until a Constituent Assembly meets. All that is needed is to write a certificate that will be signed by the heads of the

¹⁷ It should be noted that this report was written in 1961, after Betancourt’s 1958 coalition with URD and COPEI.

different military branches. Then you occupy your post, designate a new cabinet, and deliver a radio message to the nation (1967: 348).

The coup d'état was orchestrated in these simple terms on the evening of election day, 30 November 1952. The morning newspapers of 1 December reported the following returns as of 7 p.m. election day: URD 294,573; FEI 147,528; and COPEI 89,095. These results were accurate. Since it had expected an electoral triumph, the Junta had not taken precautions to censor the news or to alter the results. On the evening of the same day, the *New York Times* learned by 'phone that URD was leading with 450,000 votes, followed by COPEI with 206,000, but the call was cut off before figures could be given for the trailing FEI. No more electoral results were allowed to be given or published.

But the coup's leaders were confident. Military support at regional bases had been secured. And equally important, the U.S. Ambassador had also privately expressed his support for Pérez Jiménez (Vallenilla 1967: 358).¹⁸ Thus, they turned their attention to ordinary affairs. Even as Vallenilla composed the Junta's statement of resignation the day after the election, he noted that deposits had risen at the Industrial Bank, which he headed—all was normal. He felt that soon the nation too would return to normality, and he prepared to be back at work in his bank in two days. The assumption was that this palace coup would not be challenged, that in Venezuela, since the advent of Gómez, control over the state's administrative and military centers by a few leaders could bring control over the nation.

After approving Vallenilla's document, Pérez Jiménez informed him that the ceremony for the military to nominate him Provisional President of Venezuela had to be postponed until the next day, 2 December. Vallenilla noted his satisfaction with this change, for it made Venezuelan events coincide with the chronology of European history—over a hundred years earlier:

¹⁸ It is unlikely that without this support the coup would have taken place or that it would have taken the form it did. As the *New York Times* reported on 12 October 1955, "It is an open secret that if the United States had expressed its displeasure at the robbery of the Venezuelan election by partisans of Col. Pérez Jiménez in November 1952, the latter would have retreated, or at least would have come to an agreement with the opposition. By keeping ourselves strictly outside the conflict, and quickly recognizing the Pérez Jiménez regime, we, in a certain sense, intervened."

I am pleased. The second of December is a favorable date for coups d'état. Exactly a century and one year ago took place that of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte. Besides, the Great Napoleon thought that 2 December brought good luck. The battle of Austerlitz occurred on this date. I am superstitious, Colonel ... and I have a hunch that things are going to turn out all right for us (1961: 350).

The legal formula was framed without much effort to make it convincing or coherent. This façade was designed to induce compliance not through the power of persuasion, but through the persuasiveness of power. On 2 December, Pérez Jiménez sent a telegram to URD leaders accusing them of having worked in alliance with outlawed parties. Clearly, this accusation was only an excuse to attack both URD and the electoral results. In this telegram Pérez Jiménez, indifferent to inconsistency, acknowledged URD's electoral victory, revealing once again that power, not truth, was the issue:

The Armed Forces, so ill treated by you, are not disposed to permit the damaging, through vile agreements, of the prestige and progress of the nation, seriously compromised by the *electoral triumph* [my emphasis] of Acción Democrática and the Communist Party, which URD has propitiated (Kolb 1974: 114).

Thus Pérez Jiménez recognized that URD (backed by AD and the CP) had won the election, but asserted that it had done so only through an unacceptable alliance with illegal parties. Hours later, however, when Pérez Jiménez was proclaimed Provisional President in a widely publicized ceremony, the Electoral Council proclaimed that the partial electoral results were sufficient to indicate a victory for Pérez Jiménez. According to the altered results, FEI led with 578,000 votes, URD followed with 463,708, and COPEI was a distant third with 138,003. Not having anticipated a fraud, the Junta had earlier chosen an honest man as President of the Electoral Council; he refused to sign the electoral certificate. Yet for the new script in this play any signature would do, and another member of the Electoral Council signed it.

At this time, however, votes were not to be the source of Pérez Jiménez's legitimacy. According to the new script, since the popular vote had been polluted by the illegal participation of AD and the Communist Party in the elections, the Armed Forces, as defenders of the integrity of the nation, were the ultimate source of power. This fact, in accordance with Vallenilla's design, had to be ceremonially represented. Thus, the Junta, presided over by Suárez Flamerich, submitted its resignation to the Armed Forces. And the Armed Forces then named Pérez Jiménez Provisional President.

Vallenilla must have been pleased. Not only was the coup successful, but it took place on 2 December, as he had wished, 101 years after Louis Napoleon Bonaparte's coup. Fortune also favored him personally; he was appointed Minister of the Interior, the nation's second most powerful political post. From that position Vallenilla could also expect to expand his material personal fortune. He unabashedly relates that just after his appointment, a vendor tried to sell him a lottery ticket. A bystander dissuaded the vendor, commenting that Vallenilla "had already won the big one" (1967: 359). It had become commonly accepted that the state was a source not just of power, but also of wealth.

Historical Analogies

The coup was elevated by the men in power into an epoch-making event. When the force of circumstances made them face an untrodden path, Vallenilla brought his knowledge of European history to guide them in their making of Venezuelan history. It is precisely in periods of change, when people "... seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, ..." Marx noted, that "... they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language" (1981: 15). In summoning the spirit of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, Vallenilla contrived to divorce the 1952 coup from its family of Latin America military "golpes" and to establish its affinity with France's coup of 2 December 1851. By the alchemic power of historical analogies, he sought to bring local events from the wings to the center stage of history, to transmute Marcos Pérez Jiménez and Louis Napoleon Bonaparte into kindred spirits enacting a common historical mission. But Pérez Jiménez and Louis Napoleon were related only by their shared banality and distance from the ancestor whose power they both invoked.

"Hegel remarks somewhere," Marx wrote, "that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce" (1981: 15). In his classic analysis of the Eighteenth Brumaire, Marx saw Louis Napoleon as the main actor of the farce of 2 December 1851 only because "... the class struggle in France created circumstances and relationships that made it possible for a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero's part" (1981: 8). He regarded the depiction of Louis Napoleon as the hero who saved France from the chaos of factional disputes as a dramatic construct, the illusion of a society in crisis. It is fitting that Laureano Vallenilla conjured up the spirit of this particular French saviour, a phantasm in his own time, in an effort to transmute another grotesque mediocrity into another saviour, and his petty "coup dans l'état" into an epochal coup d'état.

It is appropriate as well that a Venezuelan historian and ex-communist leader, Juan Bautista Fuenmayor, also turned the 1952 coup into an instantiation of the "general historical law," best expressed in the Bonapartist coup of 2 December 1851, according to which an autocratic ruler would come to govern with the support of the bourgeoisie and in defense of its general interests whenever this class proved incapable of exercising direct political rule. But since Fuenmayor knew that Vallenilla had modelled the Venezuelan coup after Louis Bonaparte's takeover, he had to account not just for lawful historical events, but for events that were engineered as the conscious imitation of another's lawful history. Unable to resolve this dilemma,

in his multi-volume interpretation of contemporary Venezuelan history, he asserts, "It makes no difference whether he (Vallenilla) devised Pérez Jiménez's strategy, or whether the historical process unfolded blindly, spontaneously, fulfilling historical laws. What is important is that events took place in this, and not another, way" (Fuenmayor 1982: 397).

These transformations show that at times historical facts and personages occur more than twice, that in some places history may follow, as it were, the labyrinthine paths of Jorge Luis Borges rather than the spiraling dialectic of Hegel, that its stages are made up also of unending mirrors and props, not only of functional structures, that on occasion its characters may parade not as the agents of history, but as its impersonators. Or perhaps it shows that these historical twists occur more often when "facts and personages" do not seem to have "great importance," when inhabiting marginal spaces in the shadows of "World History," they appear to lack force to become historical forces, and find light not in original deeds but in their imitation, in Victor Hugo's "Napoleon le petit," not in the Great Napoleon of Austerlitz, in the nephew not the uncle. Having force only to imitate imitators, in times of crisis they conjure up the imitation.

But all imitators—whether of the original or of the copy—share a certain kinship. Unlike revolutionaries, they conjure up the dead not for the purpose "of glorifying the new struggles," but "of parodying the old"; not of "magnifying the given task in imagination," but "of fleeing from its solution in reality"; not of "finding once more the spirit of revolution," but "of making its ghost walk about again" (Marx 1981: 17).

Vallenilla knew that he was parodying the old. A member of the Caracas social elite, after receiving a classic education in France he returned to Venezuela at a time when, in the name of "the people," middle class politicians, younger military officers, and profit-seeking businessmen were replacing the old oligarchic order with democratic institutions. He distanced himself from what he felt were the unexamined convictions of his Venezuelan contemporaries. "I belong to that nihilist generation formed in France between the two world wars. I believe in practically nothing, but I am reflective" (Vallenilla 1967: 97). He knew he had to settle for a life of compromise. "Contemptuous of both the lower classes and of professional politicians, he favored a Platonic government of philosophers, but settled for its vague Venezuelan approximation of lower middle class army officers and creole oligarchs" (Burggraaff 1972: 139).

A few days after the takeover, the new Minister of the Interior told Pérez Jiménez that his knowledge of Venezuelan history and people allowed him to know what many Venezuelans

thought “of this drama, or ‘sainete,’ that you and I are representing in this sunny showroom that is Venezuela.”¹⁹ Then he added, “Besides, I hope with all my heart that this is a ‘sainete’. I hate drama. I prefer the small genre” (1967: 362). In this instance Vallenilla was proven accurate, for compared to the full-blown farce of the 1851, that of 1951 could only qualified as an abridged approximation. Yet a brief comparison between both coups may help us understand the society whose rulers sought to model after these alluring European images.²⁰

On 2 December 1851, Louis Napoleon took power after prolonged struggle within and outside Parliament had produced a political stalemate among the basic contending social forces of French society: Legitimists (landed property); Orleanists (industrial capital); the proletariat; the lumpenproletariat; the peasants; the middle classes; and the Army. When the National Assembly rejected in November 1851 Napoleon’s decision to restore universal suffrage (he relied on peasant support), it “once more confirmed the fact that it had transformed itself from the freely elected representative of the people into the usurpatory parliament of a class; it acknowledged once more that it had itself cut in two the muscles which connected the parliamentary head with the body of the nation” (Marx 1981: 113). But just as through this refusal the parliamentary bourgeoisie had disowned the people it claimed to represent, the extra-parliamentary bourgeoisie, through protracted conflicts, had come to disown its representatives in the National Assembly. By December 1851 it was ready to embrace, as were other groups, Louis Napoleon as its representative.

Thus, the 1851 coup came as the response to a stalemate of conflicting social forces. It could only occur because the alliance between different sectors of the middle and upper classes had fallen apart, and the lower classes had been neutralized—workers, through repression (during the 1848 June uprisings more than 3,000 workers were killed and more than 15,000 were deported); peasants, through their own disorganization and delusion (they saw in their ownership of smallholdings the key to their salvation and not a cause of their stagnation); and the lumpenproletariat, through their inclusion in the spoils of power. (The Parisian lumpenproletariat had been granted material benefits through the December 10 movement.) The National Assembly represented this fragmented body. In trying belatedly to gain power of its own, and recognizing the Army “... as the decisive state power” (Marx 1981: 113), it attempted to form a

¹⁹ A “sainete” is a one-act farce.

²⁰ This discussion is based on Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

parliamentary army. But "... by debating its right to requisition troops, instead of requisitioning them at once, it betrayed its doubts about its own powers" (Ibid. 112). Because of its fragmentation, "... the National Assembly had become incapable of transacting business. Its atomic constituents were no longer held together by any force of cohesion; it had drawn its last breath; it was dead" (Ibid. 114). It was in this context that Louis Napoleon took power.

The "sainete" of 1952 took place on the narrow stage of the Presidential Palace while the rest of the nation watched. The coup was the outgrowth not of the conflictual participation of social groups in political life, but of their lack of participation; not of the fragmentation of political power, but of its concentration. In Venezuela there was no National Assembly claiming to represent the nation by mediating its multiple but clashing interests, but an autocratic Executive claiming to embody the national interest in a silenced society. The coup resulted not from a social stalemate, a threat from below, or a conspiracy, but from the delusions engendered by absolute state power. Pérez Jiménez had believed he would win a general election, and he thus organized one. The coup was the response of those in power to the unexpected and intolerable reality of their electoral defeat.

True, the fact that the military government organized an electoral contest indicates, if not the pressure of democratic demands, at least the preference of the ruling Junta to present its rule within the accepted framework of democratic institutions. And the fact that the majority of the electorate voted against the government shows that the population was willing to take an oppositional stand in the public arena. But the ease with which the coup was organized and the electoral results dismissed reveals the weakness of the social bearers of democratic demands. The real locus of power remained entrenched in the state apparatus itself, not in civil society. The people had the power to vote, but their votes carried little power.

As the elections led to the coup, the opposition was proven right, but for the wrong reason. There was electoral fraud, but only post-mortem. Given the obvious evidence of fraud, its purpose was less to forge the illusion of legitimate power than to adorn arbitrary power. Once the coup was decided, Pérez Jiménez openly made a mockery of the elections. The initial tally was disregarded, the final count was altered, and the FEI was made into the winner. The electoral forgery left visible the marks of its own making. It was clear that Pérez Jiménez was in power by the force of arms, that these votes were only an ornament for the rifle butt. In a menacing combination of elements, the choreographers of the coup recreated the procedures of legality but did not hide signs of their crude manipulation, as if to communicate the warning that power could be exercised nakedly by those who controlled the state.

Vallenilla's response to criticism of the coup reveals the spirit of the coup as well as the cosmetic character of the electoral forgery. A few days after the coup a friend, whose honesty he respected, told him, "You should have thought things out before acting. Modifying the electoral results is something very serious" (Vallenilla 1967: 362). Vallenilla's own reported reply was:

This accusation does not bother me. I know the worth of votes in Venezuela. Votes are obtained through deceit, falsehood, slander or coercion. Each side uses the means at its disposal. Demagogues appeal to suffrage. The others, to arms in order to impose their will. In both cases the origin of Power is spurious and can be purified only by an efficient and intelligent government performance. I do not fear what is attributed to us, but the use that we will make of the Supreme Command. If during the next five years we accelerate the process of transformation of Venezuela and at the time we create wealth and raise the standard of living, then blessed be the "golpecito" [little coup] of 2 December! (1967: 362).

In a recent interview, Pérez Jiménez reiterated this view. "For us, democracy was not a question of the popular vote, it was enough to reach the Presidency with the authority of that vote so as to be able to have free rein to do whatever one felt like" (Blanco 1983: 186). Instead, "For us, democracy was the result of the government's actions, not of its origin" (Ibid.). He insisted that he never cared about labels, only about deeds. "For me, it did not matter whether the government was called 'dictadura,' 'dictablanda,' 'protodemocrático,' 'predemocrático.' For the essential thing was that the government benefit the Venezuelan nation" (Blanco 1983: 187). And when asked about his government's apparent concern for respecting certain democratic forms, he replied:

Yes, we did that for appearance's sake, to fulfill that formality. But not because we gave it the full importance we gave to other things. The achievements of the government continued to be of capital importance. Since I understood that if the parties were once again given full powers, the exceptional undertaking the government was carrying out in Venezuela would be truncated, I decided to use a democratic form in order to extend my government for one more period. Just

one more period, so as to then withdraw from the field, because I knew that within this period of time it would be possible to accomplish a sum of works which have been impossible to achieve in twenty-five years of democracy (Blanco 1983: 187).²¹

The Eighteenth Brumaire of Marcos Pérez Jiménez was staged at the top by men who held state power. These men could say, like Vallenilla, that "... without bloodshed, with a few measures, we have twisted the course of history and avoided a catastrophe" (Vallenilla 1967: 368). On this stage the Army appeared as "the decisive state power." But if the force of arms held the state, the state, with the force of money, held society. With the violent expansion of this independently wealthy state, all major social groups had come to see it as the source of their security or fortune. More fundamentally, their very identity was bound up with the state, for they had been formed or transformed by its expansion. Before it they stood in awe. To the extent that they were offspring of the new petrostate, their historical formation as social forces was too recent, their political experiences too were narrow, their reliance on the state's financial and political resources was too great, for them to follow an independent course of action. True, there had been opposition to the regime before the 1952 coup—student unrest, workers strikes, constant political conspiracies. But these movements, not sufficiently rooted in society, ultimately sought support in the state itself; most civil opposition effort became entangled in a military conspiracy. There were no independent mass uprisings, no significant alliance of interest groups or social classes against the regime. Just as the 1948 coup to overturn President Gallegos occurred without significant resistance, the 1952 coup to overrule the November elections took place uneventfully.

The government was again surprised; its leaders had lived their illusions, even their delusive fears, as reality. When Vallenilla informed Pérez Jiménez that the coup was successful, that there had been no resistance, Pérez Jiménez reportedly asked, almost with disbelief, "¿Entonces nadie se ha alzado?" ["Then nobody has rebelled?"]. Vallenilla's answer is revealing. "No, Colonel, but we cannot cry victory yet. The coups of force sometimes have

²¹The question referred mostly to the 1957 plebiscite, but Pérez Jiménez's answer expresses his general attitude towards democratic forms as well as his position in 1952 concerning the electoral forgery and his decision to stay in power for five more years.

unpredictable repercussions. A century ago in Paris all seemed to go well. Suddenly, problems started on 4 December. There were deaths. We will have to remain watchful" (1967: 358). Venezuelan events were again viewed in the light shed by French history. But in Venezuela the fourth of December passed uneventfully. This was a "sainete."

II

CONSTRUCTING THE NATION: THE NATION AS A CONSTRUCT

In this house I have poured all my disillusion. My house
is the image of the country I wanted to build.

General Marcos Pérez Jiménez

“The New National Ideal”

Once installed as the Constitutional President for the next five years, Pérez Jiménez no longer depicted his administration as leading toward the reestablishment of the party system. The Junta, under his command since the murder of Delgado Chalbaud in 1950, had hardened. Repression had been severe against the leadership of trade unions and political parties from the outset, but it now increasingly affected the growing middle class opposition to the regime's delay in restoring civil liberties. The government's tougher posture was identified as a change from the “soft” dictatorship of 1948-50, to the “hard” dictatorship that began after 1950—from “dictablanda” to “dictadura.”²² After the coup, the legalized “dictadura” sought to appropriate “democracy” for itself by redefining it.

While in 1948 the Military Junta presented itself as defender of a betrayed democracy and after the death of Delgado Chalbaud the Junta still promised to restore a party system, by 1953 the dictatorship was claiming to represent “true” democracy: not the pseudo democracy of political parties and votes, but the real democracy of the government's material deeds. Like his

²² In Spanish “dictadura” means dictatorship, while “blanda” means soft and “dura” hard.

admired friend Juan Domingo Perón, then the military ruler of Argentina, Pérez Jiménez derided “politics” and its language of deceit, which only betrayed the “people’s” interests (Portantiero and de Ipola 1981: 14). He offered instead material benefits, in return for which he asked for the acceptance of his authority as leader of the nation.

Democracy now was to be judged by its “practical accomplishments” rather than by its origins or methods. Political activity was outlawed. The aim of the regime now was to rid Venezuela of the scourge of partisan politics and concentrate national energies on material progress, carried out in an atmosphere of political stability (Burggraaff 1972: 130-31).

This notion of “material progress” involved the physical transformation of the landscape as a means to shape and discipline the social body. Politics would no longer be a “disorderly” struggle among competing groups, but rather the harmonious “construction” of the nation by the state. While this concern “to build” the nation was expressed in terms of a modernizing discourse, its content was quite traditional. Despite the significant economic growth which in fact occurred during this period, the regime’s ideological framework was closer to positivism as interpreted in Venezuela at the outset of this century than to the industrial developmentalism which took root in the major Latin American countries during this period. The discourse of material progress was employed to highlight not the technical complexity of development, but its simplicity in the absence of partisan conflict; it was the legitimizing discourse of enlightened military despotism, not of modernization theory or of bureaucratic authoritarianism.²³

An unusual dialogue which reportedly occurred between Interior Minister Vallenilla Lanz and his prisoner Alberto Carnevalli, AD’s top underground leader, allows us to see how this concept was used by the regime’s main ideologue. When Minister Vallenilla visited his prisoner in 1953, they engaged in a heated exchange, clearly made possible by their common social background, concerning the theories of Vallenilla’s father (of the same name), a noted positivist historian and political figure under Gómez. In his book *Cesarismo democrático*, Vallenilla Lanz had argued that Latin American countries were not ready for democratic institutions because of their lack of social development due to a history of civil strife, the persistence of fragmented economies, their racial mixture, and the lack of educational institutions. Consequently, they would be better served by democratic caesars, enlightened despots who would monopolize

²³ For a discussion of bureaucratic authoritarianism and its typical forms of discourse, see O’Donnell (1973), and Collier (1979).

political power in order to create the conditions for democracy, and eventually remove the causes which had made their own rule necessary.²⁴

As reported by Vallenilla, Carnevalli—whom he considered “the best of the adecos” (1967: 381)—pressed him to explain how he planned to eradicate “cesarismo.” His answer was a brief but telling formulation of the dictatorship’s credo: “I am committed to achieving a program of vast scope, a revolution in the physical geography of Venezuela, which, if completely realized, will extinguish forever the causes of cesarismo” (1967: 383). Through Vallenilla Lanz “hijo” [junior], an elitist interpretation of Venezuelan history was used once again to justify and guide a dictatorial regime.

The government promised to make rational use of the nation’s resources. If the nation’s wealth had been privately appropriated by the ruling elite under Gómez and squandered during AD’s democratic rule, it would now be used efficiently by the military leadership to transform the nation. The focus of state action was no longer the reform of social relations, a source of waste and disorder under AD, but the construction of public works. On the dominant ideological map, the “physical geography” advanced to the foreground, while “el pueblo” receded to the background and ultimately turned from the main character of democratic discourse to mere spectator of the military regime’s “revolution” in the political geography.

The coup of 1952, so thinly disguised, was now depicted as the founding moment of a new era. Through the annual ritual inauguration of grandiose public works projects each 2 December, Pérez Jiménez attempted at once to validate the coup and to present his administration as the expression of the national interest. The deeds spoke for themselves. As spectator, “el pueblo” was invited silently to applaud them.

As I have shown elsewhere, with the expansion of the oil industry and of state income during the first half of this century, “the nation” was construed in the dominant discourse as an entity made of both a social and natural body. The nation’s wealth, which during the nineteenth century had been identified with its agricultural productive capacity, became defined as residing directly in the materials of nature. To this transformation in the locus of wealth—from the cultivated soil to the untransformed subsoil—corresponded a change in the social basis of

²⁴ Although often dismissed as an apologia for the Gómez dictatorship, which he supported, his work constituted an innovative sociological interpretation of Venezuelan history whose merits have been widely recognized (Salazar 1966; Caballero 1966).

political power, from regional caudillos and their armies to the oil-financed state and political parties representing “the people.” In the context of expanding oil revenues, the principle of national ownership of natural resources gave material support to the institutionalization of popular sovereignty (Coronil 1987). Just as the promotion of democratic politics was bound up with this manner of conceiving the nation, the demobilization of society under Pérez Jiménez went together with a reorganization of the elements that were taken to be its constituent parts. The “social body” of the nation now became the passive beneficiary of its “natural body.” In political discourse, historical agency shifted from “the people” to the government’s “public works.”

This redefinition took place by deemphasizing political discourse and focusing instead on “public works” or “material achievements.” The term “material achievements” referred to certain physical elements of advanced societies which the government regarded as embodying the very essence of capitalist development. These concrete tokens—luxury hotels, freeways, a steel mill, a grand university campus—were seen at once as symbols of progress and as its cause. Upon being transplanted from the international realm where modern values originated to the internal national domain, these veritable fetishes carried the power to “modernize” the nation.

Pérez Jiménez avoided political rhetoric, which he identified with the parties he abhorred, and ideological discussion, which he distrusted. His vision of Venezuela was not articulated programatically, but enacted pragmatically. It was only in response to mounting foreign criticism that he attempted to formulate the goals guiding his government.²⁵ Although he now held constitutional power, and still sought to build his identity as the restorer of order and an efficient administrator, he was called on to give purpose to his rule and to define the proper links between citizen and state.

As if faced with a distasteful assignment, Pérez Jiménez pieced together a doctrine and called it the “New National Ideal,” first introduced in 1955 at a celebration commemorating the tenth anniversary of the overthrow of President Medina—revealingly positing a continuity between the coups of 1945 and of 1948. Government brochures articulating the doctrine

²⁵ During the International Petroleum Conference held in Caracas in April 1955, the labor representative of the International Labor Office (ILO) criticized the regime and demanded it permit a free trade union movement. Pérez Jiménez retaliated by expelling the delegate from country, which led to a wider confrontation (Kolb 1974: 149-153).

revealed a simple patchwork of the ideas that had always guided the regime adorned with vague rhetorical expressions alluding to “progress” and “modernization.” Thus, the “New National Ideal” was an “ideological composite” of Venezuelan liberalism, positivism, traditional militarism, and democratic party rhetoric (Avendaño Lugo 1982: 342). To explain the regime’s purpose, this doctrine asserted that the military’s higher “destiny” was to eliminate political strife and channel social energies towards the “material construction of the fatherland ... A clear demonstration of our national consciousness is the materialization of the abstract concept of Fatherland in works of great scope, whose importance will be self-evident” (Pérez Jiménez 1956: 27).

In “materializing” the “abstract concept of the Fatherland,” the nation was turned into a visible construct, a concrete appearance. With “nature” understood as “the physical environment,” and the “people” as the passive beneficiaries of this revolution in the physical geography, the nation was transformed into a terrain to be molded in the shape of “progress” by the state. The nation’s wealth was viewed less as riches lying in its entrails, whose value could be expanded by state action, than as a reality directly embodied in oil money. The role of the state was no longer to maximize the value of internal “wealth” on behalf of the “people,” but to turn oil money into public works and thus change the nation’s “physical geography.”

In this new political landscape, democracy meant not political rights, but material deeds. As an analyst has observed, “... democracy in the political sense, involving freedom of speech and press, and the formation of political parties competing for the power to govern, is specifically excluded as prejudicial to the national interests” (Kolb 1974: 153).

While elements of earlier elite ideology clearly were present in this doctrine and were incorporated into its military developmentalist discourse by Vallenilla Lanz and others, Pérez Jiménez claimed personal responsibility for its creation. During his rule he sought to control the regime’s doctrine as much as he did its actions, and has since vehemently refuted the claim that he was persuaded by Vallenilla to adopt this program. Pérez Jiménez recently emphasized in an interview, “The paternity of the philosophical ideas that guided the regime belonged exclusively to Marcos Pérez Jiménez” (Blanco 1983: 347). Distancing himself from the traditional elite, he insisted that he wished to be identified only with his material accomplishments and not with ideologies, saying of Vallenilla’s doctrine of “cesarismo,” “I do not understand it now and did not understand it then” (1983: 257).

For Pérez Jiménez, a program of material achievements was the philosophical foundation of his regime. Having silenced the opposition, he sought to restrict political language

altogether; the language of order was tangible deeds, not ephemeral words. Twenty-five years after his overthrow, at the end of a book-length interview, he asked his interviewer to include in the book a photo of his home in Spain, a house that he had largely designed. He explained the reason for his request. “In this house I have poured all my disillusion. My house is the image of the country I wanted to build” (Blanco 1983: 410). His ideal image of the nation as the house he built—as a monumental construction, a patchwork of several European styles—is emblematic of a patriarchal conception of politics and a fetishitic view of progress. By redefining politics as the activity of turning the nation into a physical construct, and treating the tangible tokens of modernity as potent civilizing forces, Pérez Jiménez sought to domesticate the barbarous populace that had occupied the public space, to discipline its movements, speech, and opinions within the imposing walls of the nation to be built, the dictator’s castle writ large.

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Oil Boom and Dictatorial Policies

Pérez Jiménez's government, without a clear program for economic development but having abundant monetary resources, set out to purchase economic progress. Its "shopping list" had no particular coherence; investments in infrastructure, in industry, or in the service sector were part of a development plan only in the sense that they fit into the regime's fetishistic vision of modernity as a collection of grand material achievements. The projects held in common a tendency toward spectacular display, and a disregard for the project's utility or their impact upon the social and natural setting.

The concern for appearance, coupled with the outward orientation of the regime, was expressed in the government's goal of transforming Caracas into an international tourist center and conference site. The capital city received a major portion of government income in the form of projects designed largely to attract and impress foreign businessmen and the diplomatic community, as well as the affluent traveler.

For this highly commercially oriented regime, buttressed by foreign capital and diplomatic support, the transformation of Caracas into a glittering tourist and commercial center symbolized the regime's mediating role between the local, backward society, and the international, modern world. Pérez Jiménez's pet project, the Humboldt Hotel (named after the German 19th century traveler), a glass-encased skyscraper set atop the Avila mountain ridge, was emblematic of the state's two-directional role in the circulation of oil rents, perched on top of Venezuelan society. The hotel commanded a view of the sea to the north and of Caracas to the south, was equipped with an ice-skating rink, and could only be reached by a long ride in a funicular—small suspended cars which lifted the visitor out of the city until it became a scenic outline in the valley's landscape. The hotel, built without an adequate study of its viability as an economic concern, never became a profitable enterprise and had to be closed down.

But luxury was for the regime an essential dimension of the ideal to be attained. It was a visible sign of social ascent and a means to achieve the public recognition so fervently sought by the military elite and its nouveau riche associates. Through the conspicuous display of luxury, the military regime sought to impress not just foreign visitors, who represented a superior external

world, but also the traditional dominant elite, from which it felt excluded, and the “people,” whom it sought to control.

The government attempted to buttress the military’s sense of identity by building a social club for officers which was intended to surpass the luxurious settings that the Caracas elite enjoyed in its exclusive clubs. *Time* magazine found in this club a symbol of the oil-rich nation to which U.S. businessmen flocked:

Nothing in Venezuela—or outside of it, for that matter—can compete with the palatial *Círculo de las Fuerzas Armadas*, the social club for military officers and top government officials. It has a hotel (television in every room), restaurants, bar, cocktail lounge, nightclub, two swimming pools, stable, gymnasium, fencing court, bowling alleys, library, and theater. Some notably sumptuous touches: marble floors, blue Polaroid windows, Gobelin tapestries, Sèvres vases, Tiffany clocks, a glass-walled conservatory housing a living, blooming chunk of the Venezuelan jungle. To the grander dances at the club, some colonels’ wives wear \$1500 Balmain gowns (February 28 1955).

Behind its spectacular appearances lay the unresolved tensions of a socially marginal but aspiring military elite unversed in the amenities of the upper class, and disconnected from and contemptuous of the popular classes.

Within this vague framework, political alliances and constraints helped define the government’s economic policy. With the Army as the basis of its power and businessmen (both local and foreign) as its primary allies, the government sought to contain “el pueblo” by neutralizing the middle class-led parties that in the recent past had “manipulated” the masses, captured the state, and upset the social order. The wealthy military government claimed to embody the national interest—to rule not in the name of the people but on its behalf.

For the rulers, having power meant being able to stand above particularistic interests, not to harmonize them; their capacity to resist demands confirmed their power. “The fact can be stated simply: the armed forces had no intention of responding to demands made by autonomous interests of any kind. The military seemed more confident about the possession of bureaucratic power than ever before in the country’s history” (Taylor 1968: 37). Pérez Jiménez

treated his local allies not as partners in policy making but as subservient supporters. His policies required no discussion, negotiation, or compromise. Pérez Jiménez attempted to rule alone.

This political framework helped orient the government's economic policy along the following interrelated lines: (1) increased openness to foreign capital; (2) repression of domestic labor; (3) economic growth through state investment in infrastructure, services and basic industry; and (4) promotion and yet containment of the local bourgeoisie. Around these four orientations there evolved an economic program, centered on the state and exclusively defined by the executive. While this program at first consolidated the regime, its consequences eventually undermined it, paving the way for a regime change. In order to understand this process, I will briefly present a summary of the major developments in these four areas.

Openness to foreign capital

The regime's willingness to provide highly favorable conditions for foreign capital (i.e. low taxes, free currency convertibility and profit remittances) was evident in every economic sector, but was most blatant in the oil industry. While the government accepted the basic framework it inherited, its policies represented a retreat from the increasingly nationalist policies of previous regimes. The regime reaped the benefits of past policies, did not promote new gains, and in some areas simply regressed.

This was a period of local economic expansion. International conditions fueled the rising demand for Venezuelan oil: the rebuilding of Europe; the U.S. arms build-up; the spread of U.S. multinational corporations overseas; the Korean War; the attempted nationalization of Iranian oil; and especially the Suez crisis. During this boom period (1947-57), domestic oil production expanded at a stable yearly rate averaging 9.4 percent, prices at 7.4 percent, and exports at 17.4 percent (Hausmann 1981: 208). Between 1949 and 1957 ordinary oil income increased at an annual growth rate of 11.6 percent, total oil income at 15.4 percent, and government income at 13.9 percent (Ibid. 317).

In this context, the military government felt no need to pressure one of its major allies, the oil companies. On the contrary, it was particularly receptive to a campaign orchestrated by the oil industry and the State Department that portrayed cheaper Middle Eastern oil as a threat to Venezuelan oil exports in order to discourage the continuation of Venezuela's assertive oil policies (Rabe 1982: 122-124). In response to these pressures, the government abandoned the policy of developing mechanisms of national control over oil pricing and local capacity to manage

oil industry affairs. It also dropped plans to develop a national petroleum company, did not encourage the oil companies to reinvest profits in the non-oil economy, and let them declare sales revenues beneath their real level. It has been calculated that between 1949 and 1954, the "... 'tax adjust-ments' of the Pérez Jiménez regime cost Venezuela a whopping Bs.4,508 million in revenue losses" (Baloyra 1974: 48). The 1955 Hydrocarbons Law, the only one decreed during this period, did not address fundamental issues, only minor technical details. "The oil policy of Pérez Jiménez was passive. The former aggressive tactics to increase the nation's share in oil profits were replaced by a policy of friendly cooperation" (Hassan 1975: 18). In short, the oil industry was treated simply as a source of immediate revenues.

Concerned only with expanding immediate government revenues without antagonizing or restricting the oil companies, the regime failed to develop a long term oil policy. Since it was unable to interpret the significance of the shift in petroleum investment towards low-priced sources in the Middle East, it accepted the oil industry's interpretation of these changes. Pérez Jiménez reversed the policy of increasing the nation's income by raising taxes and instead expanded production. "Between 1950 and 1957, oil production rose from 547 million barrels a year to over one billion as predictions of a glut of oil on the world market proved premature" (Rabe 1982: 129). Taking a short-range commercial approach, the government rendered itself even more vulnerable to the industry's control of oil prices and production.

Thus, when the government needed additional revenues in 1956 as a result of administrative mismanagement and over expenditure, it obtained them not by asserting its power as landowner and demanding more rent, but by commercial means—by selling concessions to oil companies. This reversal of AD's "no more concessions" policy gave the oil companies 821,091 hectares of land and brought the government almost Bs.2,115 million in extra revenues between 1956-57 (Vallenilla 1973: 219).

This policy shift corresponded to a change in the social basis of the dictatorial regime. The post-Gómez administrations, which increasingly relied on popular support to secure political legitimacy, had sought to maximize state income by augmenting the domestic share of oil profits, that is, by demanding more rent. The military men who took power in 1948, who relied on the support of private and foreign capital to buttress their power, sought to expand state income by increasing the total level of oil production. Not counting on popular support, Pérez Jiménez tried to maximize the backing of his foreign allies, and was satisfied with the level of revenues produced by his "low risk" stance:

The military, especially Pérez Jiménez, seemed to have followed a line of contentment with whatever level of resources were generated by a modest, “low risk” governmental share in the profits of the industry. Impressed with the argument that the industry had to remain “competitive” and that the companies could not shoulder a heavy tax burden, the military converted the arguments and protestations of the industry into government policy most of the time... In contrast, the adecos assumed that the companies would always find the business profitable and that, short of nationalization, they would resist but finally accept larger and larger tax rates and more governmental regulation (Baloyra 1974: 51).

The military regime took the sale of concessions seriously. Bidding was competitive (in part because of the emergence in the U.S. of new oil companies interested at this time in securing oil fields overseas) and the government obtained terms ten times better than in 1943 (\$388 per hectare as opposed to \$38).

The oil companies felt secure in Venezuela and reciprocated. During this period they expanded their activities considerably. The number of producing oil wells increased yearly, jumping from 6,031 in 1948 to over 10,124 in 1957 (BCV 1977: 69). The companies' total investment during the 1948-57 period, however, grew at a moderate pace, only 11.8 percent in real terms, equivalent to 1.2 percent average compound rate per year, but it represented over 20 percent of total investment during a period when non-petroleum investment grew 70.3 percent in real terms (Salazar-Carrillo 1976: 108). And in 1956-57 there was a considerable increase of investment, not only in oil production, but also in transport, refining and marketing. Between 1950 and 1957 oil industry profits in Venezuela amounted to \$3.79 billion dollars; nearly half of the dividend income of Standard Oil of New Jersey (EXXON) came from its Venezuelan subsidiary, Creole Petroleum (Rabe 1982: 129).

Pérez Jiménez also opened Venezuela's doors to foreign investors in the non-oil economy at a time when U.S. manufacturing corporations were expanding their direct investments abroad. Intending to make Venezuela a choice location for foreign investment, in the summer of 1953 he instructed consulates to promote Venezuela to business. Soon afterwards, *Time* magazine responded with this vivid description:

One place where U.S. businessmen abroad can still flourish in a climate of high-riding free enterprise is the oil-boom republic of Venezuela... Since 1948, when the government and the foreign-owned companies... worked out a mutually satisfactory deal that calls, in effect, for a 50-50 split of all profits, production has shot up to 1,000,000 barrels a day, flooding the sparsely-populated country with \$700 million in oil income. The gratified government has thrown the door wide open to foreign enterprise, and the biggest colony of U.S. businessmen overseas is happily at work making money in one of the world's most profitable markets.

Venezuelan law lets the foreigner operate freely, and U.S. firms, which own two-thirds of Venezuela's \$2.3 billion foreign investment, take their profit out in dollars, with no red tape. Yanquis residing in Venezuela pay no U.S. income taxes, and the Venezuelan tax is downright benign (cited by Kolb 1974: 130).

Between 1951 and 1957 foreign investment more than tripled, with the U.S. accounting for almost 70 percent of the total (BCV 1958: 81). In this period, foreign capital investment in industry increased from Bs.165 million to Bs.411 million—from 10.7 to 14.8 percent of total investments in this sector (Aranda 1977: 163).

Given Venezuela's delayed industrial development and booming economy, this flow of foreign investment into manufacturing did not displace existing local capital from industry. Nor did it discourage commercial activity. Trade between the U.S. and Venezuela also expanded during this decade, reaching a value of over one billion dollars in 1957; with only seven million inhabitants, Venezuela became the U.S.'s sixth largest commercial market in the world (Rabe 1982: 128).

Thus, transnational capital paved the way for the movement of local capital into industry, either by the force of its example or by becoming its partner in joint ventures. Out of this convergence of interest in industrial development came a nascent alliance between the leading sectors of local and foreign capital in support of state-promoted industrialization.

Repression of domestic labor

During this period trade union activity was curtailed and strikes were not permitted. The Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV) was dissolved on 25 February 1949, and after the 1950 oil workers' strike (directed against the regime's political restrictions), the government attacked the petroleum workers union. Since the Venezuelan labor movement had been primarily organized by AD and the PC, when these parties were repressed, the trade union movement was practically dissolved. In its place the government installed a captive organization named "Movimiento Sindical Independiente," which orchestrated contracts favorable to the companies.

Given the strategic importance of the oil industry for the U.S., the State Department and U.S. oil companies felt that control of Venezuelan workers could not be left in Venezuelan hands. The FBI and the CIA were allowed to conduct surveillance activities in Venezuela to help eradicate communist influence in the worker's movement:

The oil companies cooperated by submitting their employees' finger-prints to the FBI to determine if they were communists or "fellow travelers." In addition, they increased surveillance of their property and accepted the offer of the Central Intelligence Agency to watch for subversives and saboteurs among Venezuelan oil workers (Rabe 1982: 121).

By the end of the regime, "... while some Pérez Jimenista unions continued to exist, the union movement had in effect been destroyed" (Fagan 1977: 177). Thus, despite the booming economy, labor demands—which never ceased—were blocked, and the steady expansion of real wages that had begun in 1945 came to an end.

A second element in the regime's labor policy that served to contain local labor was its promotion of European immigration. By encouraging selective immigration the government brought in relatively skilled labor—almost 800,000 workers, mainly from Spain, Italy, and Portugal. These workers, most of them scarred by World War II and the Spanish Civil War, came to Venezuela in pursuit of security in a booming economy. Thus, European labor, instead of exerting a radicalizing influence on the working class, as in other Latin American countries in the

early 20th century, helped demobilize it by displacing less skilled local labor, lending political support to the regime,⁵¹ and opposing other workers' demands in their work sites.

Given Venezuela's capital intensive industrialization, most urban job creation took place in the commercial and service sectors; manufacturing employment only amounted to 18.1 percent of the total (and of this, one half was in artisan enterprises), in contrast to a Latin American average of 27 percent by 1960 (Hassan 1975: 87). Between 1950-57, agricultural employment declined from 44.1 percent to 38.3 percent of total employment (Aranda 1977: 171). At a time when the concentration of oil revenue expenditures in the major cities attracted peasants and agricultural workers, factors such as a rural/urban wage differential of over 400 percent in many areas (Hassan 1975: 82), worsening conditions for traditional agricultural production, and the expansion of commercial agriculture, helped undermine already weak social ties in the countryside.

Thus, while at this time the transformation of traditional agriculture in neighboring Colombia caused intense rural violence, in Venezuela it took place without overt political conflict. In one of the most rapid processes of urbanization in modern times, the percentage of labor employed in agriculture shifted from 71.1 in 1936 to 36.5 in 1961 (Hassan 1975: 81). The traditional hacienda declined drastically. During this period most rural workers were employed by large commercial farms or cultivated subsistence plots. During the fifties the control and repression of labor became fundamentally an urban problem; Venezuela had ceased to be a rural country.

Economic growth through state investment in infrastructure, services, and basic industry

Using budgets as indicators of policy priorities, Baloyra's close comparison of budgets under military regimes (1938-45, and 1949-57) and democratic administrations (1946-48, and 1958-69) has shown that that they were strikingly similar in terms of percentage distribution among categories (Baloyra 1974). AD spent a somewhat larger share of its budget on health and education and Pérez Jiménez more on communications (largely as a result of the partial

⁵¹ Before the 1957 plebiscite, Pérez Jiménez granted foreigners with two years residence in Venezuela the right to vote. This measure was widely seen as opportunistic, and fueled the growing opposition to the regime.

completion of highway construction and railroad plans initiated under AD), but even here the differences are not considerable. At this macro level the basic difference is that AD actively sought to increase state revenues and spent more in every ministry (except Justice), while Pérez Jiménez spent what he had available, but did not seek to maximize state income (Baloyra 1974: 59-61).

Thus, the distinguishing feature of Pérez Jiménez's investment program—his concern for constructing his image of modernity—cannot be discerned at the level of statistical aggregates. Rather, it requires a qualitative examination of his projects. In this respect, even his investments in steel, petrochemicals, telephone, sugar mills, electricity—which some analysts have seen as signs indicating the development of a productive state (Aranda 1977: 141)—have been shown to have been essentially conceived in the same spirit as other non-productive public works. As a careful analysis of the state's decision to undertake steel production shows, by establishing state control of several prestigious and strategic economic activities, Pérez Jiménez sought primarily to buttress his clique's control of the state and prevent the creation of alternative centers of power within the private sector, not to lay the foundations for industrial development (Skurski 1985). What appeared as economic policy was the medium of a highly personalistic political policy.

These projects were ill-conceived either as profit-making ventures or as catalysts of growth, although they clearly were a source of enrichment for those associated with their promotion. The latter consideration played a role in the way they were planned and carried out (Ibid.; Luzardo 1963: 177; Bigler: 1980). The petrochemical plant was the most notorious case in point. Located in a remote and inappropriate area on land purchased from a military friend of Pérez Jiménez's, the severely flawed project (even now largely inoperative and still unprofitable despite repeated efforts to salvage it) was directed by unqualified military cronies. But Pérez Jiménez and his friends were enormously enriched through their involvement with the construction of this industrial façade for corruption.

Promotion and yet containment of the local bourgeoisie

In the 1945-60 period Venezuela experienced the highest growth rate in real GDP in South America, and one of the highest in the world (Hassan 1975: 10). In the period between 1950 and 1957, ordinary oil revenue grew an average of 11.6 percent and government income of 13.9 percent annually, while the total value of oil exports increased 250 percent and treasury

reserves 400 percent (Salazar-Carrillo 1976: 98). The money supply doubled and demand rose sharply.

This was a period when local businessmen both expanded their investments in “traditional” areas—banking, construction, commerce—and diversified their activities in new areas—commercial agriculture and industry. But this expansion, the product of the oil boom, was limited by Pérez Jiménez’s policies, which sought simultaneously to promote economic growth, and to impede the development of an independent private sector, to encourage economic entrepreneurship and yet to contain it within crippling and often arbitrary limits.

The banking sector grew rapidly during this decade in response to the explosive expansion of fiscal income, government spending, and commercial activity. In 1947 private bank assets amounted to Bs.779 million, their loans and investments to Bs.445 million, and their deposits to Bs.72 million. By 1957 these assets reached Bs.5,386 million, Bs.3,658 million, and Bs.1,501 million respectively (Hassan 1975: 55). However, they were ill-equipped to finance industrial growth, for they were legally prohibited from making long-term loans (over two years), and there were as yet no investment banks or savings and loan banks through which funds could be channelled for productive ventures. Consequently, local funds went toward commerce and short-term projects, and long-term financing was sought abroad.

Although in comparison with this explosive growth of the money supply and of the banking system local production developed little, prices remained stable. Given the availability of foreign exchange, the increased demand fueled by the injection of money was met by a sharp expansion of imports, from \$557 million in 1947 to \$1,776 million in 1957 (BCV 1978: 238). “The high increase of Venezuela’s imports up to 1957 reduced the inflationary pressure resulting from the increased quantity of money and of effective demand in a time when the productive capacity of the economy was limited” (Hassan 1975: 66).

At a time when balance of payments constraints spurred local industrialization, and inflation was an increasing problem in most of Latin America, Venezuela had the lowest change in the cost of living in Latin America, with an annual increase of only 1.7 percent between 1950-59 (Hassan 1975: 66). Both these factors were to shape public policy as well as business and consumer expectations and behavior. A high level of imports became an essential element of Venezuela’s economy and of state policy. At this early stage of industrialization, just as consumer demand was satisfied by imports, production requirements were met by imported material and equipment. But the facility with which consumer demand was satisfied through imports helped strengthen business interest in maintaining the existing low level of protection,

thereby limiting the possibility of continued industrialization, particularly by local capital. In the name of defending the public's access to high quality and reasonably priced goods, the government sided with commercial interests and with U.S. exporting manufacturers. Thus, in 1952 the government signed a revised version of the U.S.-Venezuelan Commercial Treaty of 1939, which maintained highly favorable conditions for imported U.S. manufactured goods. The failure of nascent local industrial interests (which were also prevented at this time from creating a privately owned steel mill) to gain tariff protection for products they sought to produce created a split between elite commercial and industrial interests, which was eventually to have political consequences (Skurski 1985).

But while oil revenues helped form a market of consumers, which stimulated commercial expansion, they also created conditions which promoted some industrial production. The construction boom stimulated significant industrial growth among related industries having comparative advantages because of transportation costs—cement, paints, wood, and nonmetallic minerals, which comprised 12 percent of industrial production by 1955. At the same time, the expansion of demand in the area of final consumer goods encouraged the domestic production of certain lines of textiles, shoes and clothing that did not compete with foreign imports, amounting to 12 percent of local industrial production by 1960 (Hanson 1977: 66-67).

In contrast to the experience of earlier "late" industrializers in Latin America, during this period of expansion of transnational corporations into direct investments overseas, foreign capital did not displace less efficient local producers but rather encouraged the development of state protection and private investment in industry. Pioneering local capitalists began to discover that behind the mantle of industrial protection they could prosper and avoid the strong competition that prevailed in the commercial sector.

Without a coherent industrial policy, the state granted protection to industries in a piecemeal fashion, oftentimes responding to individual requests. Many of these industries were basically final assembly operations that were given not only free access to imported inputs, but also protection against imports, either through tariffs—when not in violation of the U.S. trade agreement—or through import quotas. Since only a few firms were given protection in each productive line, they were de facto granted a virtual monopoly. This policy helped shape the oligopolistic structure that still characterizes Venezuela's industrial production. When private capitalists sought to invest in large or strategic productive projects (as in the steel industry), the government appropriated these projects for itself. In practice, then, the dictatorial regime began to establish an import-substituting industrialization policy.

In the period between 1950 and 1957 gross fixed investment increased at an average annual rate of 8.4 percent and averaged 27 percent of gross domestic product (Hassan 1975: 44). During the same period, government investment in the industrial sector increased from Bs.35 million in 1950 to Bs.527 in 1957; the ratio of government investment in the industrial sector to government saving increased from 3.8 percent in 1950 to 15.6 percent in 1957 (Harris 1967: 52). Total gross fixed investment doubled during this period, from Bs.3,313 in 1950 to 6,041 in 1957; while public investment in industry almost tripled, from Bs.1,054 million to Bs.2,748, private investment increased by 50 percent, from Bs.2,259 million to Bs.3,293 million (Falcón Urbano 1969: 101).

As a result, industrial growth expanded at an average rate of 11.4 percent a year—a high rate, but approximately the same as the rate of expansion of the rest of the economy. Given the extremely low level of industrialization at the outset, this high growth statistic is somewhat misleading; by 1957 the role of industry in the economy was still relatively low. This industrial expansion took place in areas where Venezuela had comparative advantages—capital intensive manufactures—or in relation to non-traded items such as construction, beer, and cement (Hanson 1977: 69). Particularly telling of structural limitations was the slow increase of industrial employment, that grew only from 188,000 in 1950 to 242,000 in 1957 (Aranda 1977: 160). Agricultural output lagged, but still reached a moderately high rate of 4.5 percent a year during this period (Hanson 1977: 69).

The bourgeoisie grew in wealth and size during the economic boom of the fifties, but its expansion through new paths was blocked by limits defined by an increasingly arbitrary and unresponsive state. Major entrepreneurs who had sought to go beyond these limits by investing in steel, metal products, and petrochemicals, and by securing more active state promotion of industrialization, encountered stern opposition from the military government (Skurski 1985). Having grown under the protection of the state and the support of the oil economy, they lacked self-reliant economic strength and were not organized as an independent political force. But when in 1957 a set of political and economic factors converged to undermine the regime, these businessmen withdraw their support from the dictatorship and turned into advocates of democracy.

III

THE JANUARY TWENTY-THIRD OF DEMOCRACY

No se asuste, compañero,
de ver la revolución;
asústese del gobierno
que es más traidor y ladrón.⁵²

Raimundo Vivas

The Overthrow of the Dictator

Between 1945 and 1957, government income increased eight times and oil income eleven times; by 1957 it constituted 70.7 percent of total fiscal income (Aranda 1977: 141). During the dictatorship this unprecedented abundance of fiscal resources had fueled wasteful overspending and business expansion on the basis of easy credit. But with a downturn of this expansive cycle by the end of 1957 there developed a spiraling fiscal contraction which left the business sector pressed by creditors and smaller enterprises on the verge of bankruptcy. Even the construction industry fell into a slump. Most analysts have attributed the fall of Pérez Jiménez to this “economic crisis.”⁵³ But grave as this situation was, it was all the more serious for being unnecessary, its severity caused less by financial, than by political, factors.

⁵² “Don’t be scared, ‘compañero,’/at the sight of revolution;/be scared of the government/it’s more of a traitor and thief.” A popular verse, circa 1900.

⁵³ Helena Plaza (1978) is critical of this view, and highlights the political factors of the crisis.

Reportedly, ever since the height of the boom in 1955 the government had made it a practice to postpone paying its debts to the construction companies which it contracted for projects, issuing notes that could not be immediately redeemed in banks, but which these companies used in order to obtain loans, often from foreign banks. In effect, these government notes constituted forced interest-free loans for the government "... that hard-pressed firms in need of cash were forced to sell ... at a dis-count" (Kolb 1974: 167; see also Burggraaff 1972: 144). By 1957 this practice had escalated until government debt was estimated at over \$1.4 billion (Alexander 1964: 60), of which the domestic debt was only \$150 million (Vallenilla 1967: 452-53).

In Pérez Jiménez's view it was the private sector, not the government, that had incurred this debt. According to him, private contractors obtained financing on the basis of government contracts. These contracts included schedules that tied payments to the completion of distinct phases of the work. When contractors did not finish their work as planned, the government delayed payment to them, but they had to pay their creditors on time (Blanco 1983: 163). The debt thus resulted from the private sector's inability to meet its commitments on time.

Given the available evidence, it is difficult to assess the merits of these views. But it is clear that during the 1957 downturn creditors were more inflexible in their demands and contractors more hard-pressed to meet their financial obligations. What remains unclear, and for some "inexplicable" (Burggraaff 1972: 144), is why Pérez Jiménez refused to pay government contractors, if only in order to buy political support. According to Vallenilla Lanz, Pérez Jiménez refused his pleas to begin payments on the \$150 million domestic debt (despite having a surplus of over \$700 million in the national treasury) out of sheer stubbornness. Even when the military publicly expressed concern over his policies, he cut off dialogue by denying the existence of debts, asserting that "... they are not debts, but obligations" (Vallenilla 1967: 451).⁵⁴

As the government's indifference to private sector demands aggravated the effects of the financial shortage, and the business sector, made increasingly uneasy by the economic climate, exaggerated its ailments in frustration with the state's unresponsiveness, an economic downturn was construed as an "economic crisis." If the difference between "economic problems" and an "economic crisis" is that "problems can be lived with," but a crisis questions "the viability of the

⁵⁴ Two decades later he maintained the same position (Blanco 1983: 163).

system” and “entails inevitable change,” (Smith 1984: 12),⁵⁵ then at this time in Venezuela the “crisis” was not economic, but political. It was the political system that no longer seemed viable.

These economic troubles coincided with a political juncture, also the product of political mismanagement. The 1953 constitution stipulated that presidential elections should be held every five years. While in 1953 those who drafted the Constitution anticipated that within five years the government’s programs would have won popular support for Pérez Jiménez, by 1957 it was evident that they had been overly optimistic. Reportedly, Vallenilla, as if sensing that power had been excessively concentrated in the executive, explained to Pérez Jiménez that public works were not perceived as belonging to the collectivity, “They were too much ours. They have a first and a last name, this is our greatest sin. They (the people) will not forgive us” (1967: 449). Ironically, by 1957 the dictatorship faced the prospect of being forced by its own constitution to support an electoral contest it was likely to lose.

Another Coup d’Etat: The 1957 Plebiscite

Apparently, Pérez Jiménez initially sought to organize an electoral contest between two parties, his own, and COPEI, the only other legal party. Yet afraid that COPEI could become a channel for other political groups to express their political opposition to the regime—as had happened in the 1952 elections—Pérez Jiménez pressured COPEI’s leader Rafael Caldera to reject support from the illegal parties. Caldera refused and was arrested (Plaza 1978: 82). This attack on a leader having intimate connections with the Church hierarchy and with the social and economic elite further isolated Pérez Jiménez.

Obsessed with retaining power, Pérez Jiménez had at this point no alternative but to create an electoral fiction. Once again he sought to illuminate the present with the light of the past. In 1952, taking his regime’s claims for reality, Pérez Jiménez had held an honest election. In 1957, mindful of his former delusion, he sought to create the public illusion of popular support.

Given his ideal conception of the polity as a passive and silent body, only the most restricted participation by the “people” would be sought in the construction of this illusion. Thus,

⁵⁵ Smith makes this argument in relation to England, but it is applicable to Venezuela.

on 4 November he announced to the nation that he had designed a plebiscite—a flagrantly unconstitutional move—which he defined as “a form of universality through which the opinions held about the current regime will be expressed” (Plaza 1978: 66). On 15 December the question was presented to “the people” for a yes or no vote as to whether they accepted the regime’s public works program and agreed that “the person presently occupying the Office of the President should be reelected” (Herrera Campíns 1978: 94).

The President’s public works were his record and his platform—he avoided political rhetoric. Words could only lead to the slippery terrain of interpretation, to the detachment of fact from opinion, and thence to the corrupt world of lies fabricated by politicians. But public works spoke for themselves in the simple language of objective reality, a democratic language which met the authentic needs of the people. And conveniently, votes, like public works, could be produced.

On 15 December, just when the first ballots were being counted, Laureano Vallenilla Lanz announced to the international press the results of the elections. The pretense was evident. The electoral returns, altered to an unknown degree, showed an 81 percent vote of support for Pérez Jiménez (a higher percentage than any president in Venezuelan history). Overnight, in an overproduction of appearances, Pérez Jiménez construed himself as a “popular” dictator.

Between 1952 and 1957 Pérez Jiménez had not become more realistic; he had just traded one illusion for another. In 1952 he thought he had the support of the people, in 1957 that of the military. In the first instance, support that only existed in the government’s rhetoric was imagined to be real; in the second, support that was once real, was imagined to be eternal.

After five years of absolute power, Pérez Jiménez no longer held the illusion that he possessed, or that he could ever easily obtain, popular support. Having failed to win over the people, he had also come to treat his allies as if they too belonged to the ranks of the untrustworthy, the subordinate, those who must be ruled rather than rule. In this respect his regime represented a revival of caudillo repressive control over those regarded as possible challengers to power. Unlike traditional caudillo rule, however, repression was directed not against loose coalitions formed around rival military leaders, but against members of the increasingly professionalized Armed Forces. This control also affected members of the business sector and professional groups, which had diversified under the stimulus of an expanding economy. Counting perhaps on the elite’s historic fear of popular mobilization, Pérez Jiménez dismissed signs of dissent from the Church, business, and even the Armed Forces, certain that these sectors would prefer to support him over facing the threat of the unknown. But above all,

he counted on the adhesion of the Armed Forces to his continued personal leadership of the country. And it was about this that he was most seriously deluded.

An Escalating Opposition

In reality, despite the much claimed “unity of the Armed Forces,” by 1957 the military was deeply divided. Many factors had eroded its unity, but underlying them all was the excessive centralization of power and of benefits in the Executive. The military hierarchy felt excluded from both the responsibility and the rewards of rule. Pérez Jiménez made arbitrary appointments on the basis of personal loyalty, not merit, often removing qualified officers he saw as potential rivals from positions of power. He favored the Army (his own branch) against the Navy and the Air Force; relied for internal security on Pedro Estrada’s secret police (the dreaded “Seguridad Nacional”), which came to extend its control over the military itself; and blocked the advancement of junior officers who felt they were better qualified because they had been trained in the U.S., the world’s military leader after World War II. Pérez Jiménez had promised the modernization of strategically important sectors of the military and its involvement in different areas of the economy—from communications to industry—yet ascendant officers could not expect to have a role in the government’s projects or trust the viability and realization of the projects themselves. In time, the very defense capacity of the country came to be questioned.

Moreover, for those officers outside the inner circle of power, the boom was largely a phantom. While they received fixed salaries of moderate size, civilian businessmen and professionals prospered, and government leaders—particularly Pérez Jiménez—flaunted lives of luxury (Rangel 1977: 58). A confidential report of the U.S. Embassy on the military situation during 1957 stated that the problem was not that too much of the state’s money was finding its way into Pérez Jiménez’s purse, but that not enough of it was trickling down to the pockets of the military hierarchy (Burggraaff 1972: 150). Thus, the disparity between the benefits received by the ruling clique and the rest of the officer corps was accentuated by Pérez Jiménez’s disdain both for sharing the spoils of power with his main supporters and for constructing the image of the selfless statesman.

But the breakdown of military support remained hidden in the barracks, waiting for an appropriate political juncture to emerge into public view. When during 1957 “the breakdown of political channels of communication,” which resulted from the dictatorship’s centralization of

political power and decision not to have an open election, "... merged with a breakdown of market channels of communications..." (the state's refusal to pay its debts; Skurski 1985: 44), a series of escalating signals from multiple sectors, each reinforcing the other, began to converge in opposition to Pérez Jiménez.

In this context, the Junta Patriótica, a multi-party and multi-interest group organization, founded in June 1957 by middle-level URD leader Fabricio Ojeda and Guillermo García Ponce of the PC, sought to turn political disaffection from the regime into coordinated opposition to it. From its foundation, the Junta Patriótica's objectives were to ensure respect for the Constitution and the conduct of free elections, to avoid the reelection of Pérez Jiménez, and to struggle for the establishment of a democratic regime.

The Junta Patriótica's many manifestos—which were printed by the hundreds of thousands and distributed throughout the nation—called on Venezuelans to set aside partisan interests and unite in a common struggle against the dictatorship. It defined the struggle against the Pérez Jiménez regime as part of a civilizing effort to bring Venezuela out of a barbarous state. In its first manifesto, dated 10 July 1957, the Junta Patriótica stated that "... the majority of Venezuelans of different ideologies agree that as a civilized nation Venezuela must prove to the world that it is a country politically and economically strong, one capable of exercising its sovereignty in its broadest democratic expression" (Plaza 1978: 80). In another manifesto issued in August, it proclaimed that in demanding free elections it "... neither sought nor defended power for the sectarian benefit of any one group" (Stambouli 1980), a statement that was a critique not only of Pérez Jiménez's rule, but also of AD's.

When the plebiscite was announced by Pérez Jiménez on 4 November, the Junta Patriótica defined it as "another coup d'état" (Plaza 1978: 84). In a manifesto addressed to the "National Armed Forces" dated 8 November, it denounced the government's violations of the Constitution and asked, "Are the Armed Forces to protect the violation of the Constitution, or to defend it? Is the military to act in a servile manner, like the Congress has done, made up of men without dignity and patriotic consciousness?" (Ibid.). After the plebiscite of 15 December, the Junta Patriótica called upon all Venezuelans to set aside differences and join in a united front in the struggle against the dictatorship.

Throughout 1957 the Church, sensitive to the changing times—both the growing local opposition to the regime and Pope Pious XII's call for a more socially responsible Church—and more protected from the regime's retaliation, took the lead in openly criticizing the government's social policies. On 1 May, a Pastoral Letter written by Caracas Archbishop Rafael Arias was

published and read during masses throughout the nation. Revealingly, the whole Letter was framed in terms of the disparity between the wealth of the nation and the poverty of the people; the deficiencies in the institutions created to support the working class were attributed to the misuse of the nation's wealth:

Our country is getting richer impressively quickly. According to a United Nations economic study, per capita production in Venezuela has increased to \$540 (five hundred and forty dollars), which places Venezuela first among its Latin American sisters, and above Germany, Australia and Italy. But then, no one will dare to affirm that this wealth is distributed in such a way that it will reach all Venezuelans, since an immense mass of our people live in conditions which cannot be regarded as human (Plaza 1978: 74).

The Letter criticizes unemployment, low wages, lack of social services, deficiencies in public welfare institutions, and even condemns the "frequency with which the Labor Law and the legal instruments created to defend the working class are violated" (Plaza 1978: 74).

This Pastoral Letter was not an isolated act. At this time the editorials of the Church's newspaper *La Religión* took to criticizing the regime, which resulted in the persecution of the paper's director, Padre Hernández Chapellín. This shift in the Church's position was read as a signal indicating a withdrawal of support from the regime at the highest levels of Venezuelan society.

Even the U.S. government, which in 1955 had awarded Pérez Jiménez the Legion of Merit medal, had grown concerned about the political unreliability of his personalized power, as exemplified by his proposal to develop a multilateral aid agency presented to the 1956 Panama Conference of American Presidents, a proposal the U.S. strongly opposed. A Venezuelan analyst suggests that a decline in U.S. support encouraged the business elite to change its position towards the regime by 1957 (Rangel 1977: 42).

The turnaround of private sector leaders was a crucial factor in consolidating the opposition to Pérez Jiménez. In 1948, as well as in 1952, most business leaders, alienated by AD's populist policies during the "trienio," strongly supported Pérez Jiménez. Yet by 1957 members of the business elite, particularly those promoting industrialization, had become critical

of the state's unresponsiveness to their concerns and mismanagement of the economy (Skurski 1985). Thus, by the end of 1957 they were conspiring with AD, URD, and COPEI (but not the PC). While the Caracas Chamber of Commerce and Industry issued a public critique of the regime, in December two leading business leaders—industrialist Eugenio Mendoza, and banker Mario Diez (a top executive of the First National City Bank's subsidiary)—met with the leaders of these parties in New York to discuss the organization of the opposition and to set the ground rules for establishing an electoral regime (Blank 1973: 25). Their New York meeting's agreement "... symbolized AD's recognition that majority electoral support could not justify a one-party government" (Lombardi 1982: 229). Equally important, it symbolized AD's recognition that party rule could not justify the exclusion of the private sector from active participation in the government.

An essential catalyst in this chain of reciprocal transformations was the withdrawal of the military's support from the regime. Given the conspiratorial nature of military politics and the repressive character of the regime, discontent within the military was kept from public view; sanctions against officers who expressed differences with the regime were swift and often harsh. But in a small country it was difficult to keep the bright flashes of discontent in the dark. Already in a manifesto of 10 September the Junta Patriótica had informed the public of discontent within the Armed Forces concerning Pérez Jiménez's plan for reelection (Plaza 1978: 81). After the plebiscite, rumors of "golpe" circulated cautiously but ever more frequently. People with "contacts" anxiously offered "datos" or "bolas" ("facts" or "rumors"), whose source, it was generally claimed, was always a well placed friend or relative, a captain or colonel "in the know." Through gossip, a crack in the military edifice had become visible.

The Twenty-Third of January

While by the end of 1957 the soft murmur of gossip, quietly announcing discontent within the military, eroded a sustaining tenet of the regime's identity—the belief in "the unity of the Armed Forces"—it was the harsh sound of an air battle during the 1 January uprising that shattered this dogma. Still dazed by the firecrackers and parties of New Year's festivities, the Caracas population awoke to the startling spectacle of a battle between rebel Air Force planes and Army artillery, the former attacking, the latter defending, the Presidential Palace.

The defeat of the hastily executed uprising (originally planned for 4 January) was brought about by the leaders' failure to act at the crucial hour; the insurgents, "by an appalling lack of coordination" (Burggraaff 1972: 155), failed to implement a planned chain of simultaneous uprisings in strategically located military garrisons. Without much effort, two loyal supporters of Pérez Jiménez, Colonels Casanova and Villate, managed to subdue the insurgents. By the next day the government controlled the situation.

Yet in shattering the myth of the unity of the Armed Forces this attack transformed the context of political action—it both intensified the opposition against the regime, and undermined the regime's capacity to suppress it. It revealed that the crack in the military edifice reached its very foundations.

As if no longer contained by the regime's sustaining myth, opposition against Pérez Jiménez surfaced in the major urban centers, widening further the crack that this illusion had concealed. Intellectuals, professional associations, and interest groups began to voice publicly their opposition to the regime. Even one of its leading beneficiaries, the Engineer's Association, issued a statement criticizing the regime's chaotic public works program. In the streets of Caracas students clashed daily with the police, and several large demonstrations, including one by women in front of the Seguridad Nacional, took place in the first two weeks of January.

But the civil opposition leaders felt that only the military could overthrow Pérez Jiménez. Thus, in this escalating flurry of manifestos, an appeal was made to the military to pronounce the decisive word. In a manifesto issued in January, the Junta Patriótica praised the military for having taken up arms and urged it to overthrow the "'triumvirate' of Pérez Jiménez, Vallenilla Lanz and Estrada" (Burggraaff 1972: 159). By identifying the rulers as a triumvirate—which included two civilians—the Junta Patriótica sought to dissociate the military as an institution from responsibility for the regime's debacle. In a desperate effort to appease the Armed Forces, Pérez Jiménez fired Vallenilla and Estrada, gave their key posts to military men, and increased to seven the number of officers in his cabinet. But this move only brought closer to home the struggle for power.

After the abortive uprising, conspiracy within the military intensified, but without Vallenilla and Estrada, the dictator found difficulty in identifying and utilizing loyal officers to police the rebellious officers. As he set one branch of the military against another—the Army took ammunition from the Navy, the Air Force was held in check, suspect garrisons in the interior were rendered powerless—discontent within the military grew, fueling the hopes of ambitious generals. Pérez Jiménez's own Minister of Defense, General Rómulo Fernández, orchestrated an

unsuccessful coup. Not trusting anyone else for this key post, Pérez Jiménez decided to take charge personally of the Ministry of Defense, claiming that this step would “assure the maintenance of the unity of the Armed Forces” (Burggraaff 1972: 161). Yet, this concentration of power in the presidency heightened Pérez Jiménez’s isolation and ultimate vulnerability.

On 14 January, major private sector associations responded to this political crisis by proclaiming in a manifesto the need for the government to guarantee the full exercise of constitutional rights in order to secure “the institutional and democratic restoration of Venezuela.” The manifesto also stated that it was necessary “... to regulate and dignify the administration of public monies, so that our natural resources be channelled towards the benefit of the whole collectivity, without personal advantages derived from official action” (Stambouli 1980: 131). The next day the Engineers Association demanded “the full restoration of human rights” as well as “a better and more honest investment of the nation’s resources” and a “free and healthy critique” of the use of “public monies” for sumptuous public works (Ibid.). Once again, constitutional rights were inseparably linked to the right to benefit from the nation’s wealth; the demand that democratic rights be respected was fused with the demand that the nation’s collective resources be properly administered.

A committee created by the Junta Patriótica coordinated the civilian and military opposition to the government. It planned to topple Pérez Jiménez by combining a general strike with a military uprising. Once victory was achieved, a three-man provisional Junta (headed by Navy Commander Wolfgang Larrazábal together with two civilians, economist Manuel Egaña, and engineer Pedro Emilio Herrera) was to organize the replacement for the deposed dictatorial regime.

Although on 21 January a strike paralyzed Caracas, the military uprising failed to materialize. By the next day the insurgency seemed under control. On the eve of 22 January, Pérez Jiménez relaxed playing dominoes in the Presidential Palace. “The public,” he reportedly said, “had spent its fury and must now subside (sic)” (Kolb 1974: 176). Yet two phone calls on the night of 22 January were enough to complete the turn of events. The first brought Pérez Jiménez from his reverie back to reality: Rear Admiral Wolfgang Larrazábal, in the name of the Chiefs of Staff of the Armed Forces, phoned to demand his resignation. The civil insurgency had subsided, but the military had turned against him.

Larrazábal’s unexpected move must have indicated to Pérez Jiménez the unsuspected scope of the military opposition. He was known as a quiet man, more a conformist than a conspirator. Although Larrazábal was the Navy’s top officer, Pérez Jiménez had relegated him to

the minor post of head of the Officer's Club, an affront that created discontent within the Navy but that Larrazábal seemed to have accepted with resignation. In fact, he only joined the insurrection when he failed to persuade younger officers to seek a compromise.

Hoping to negotiate an agreement, Pérez Jiménez asked to meet with the insurgent officers at midnight. Larrazábal agreed. While Pérez Jiménez went to his home to ready his family for any eventuality, Colonels Roberto Casanova and Romero Villate (who had stifled the 1 January uprising and were regarded as loyal supporters) stayed in the Presidential Palace to defend the government. The second 'phone call turned Colonels Casanova and Villate, his loyal defenders of 1 January, into insurgents. When Larrazábal urged them by 'phone to join the insurrection, they agreed—on the condition they be included in the new Junta. He accepted their demand.

Thus, when Pérez Jiménez returned to the Presidential Palace, they informed him that he had to leave the country immediately. In the end Pérez Jiménez had no loyal supporters. He had no choice but to leave. For this reason no fighting was necessary.

At 3 a.m. he left in the presidential plane to the Dominican Republic, which was ruled by his friend the military dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. With him escaped his close relatives and friends. Accidentally left on the airfield remained a suitcase containing over \$1 million in cash and records of personal profits on government projects involving close to \$10 million.

Once again civil resistance ended as military conspiracy. But although without the insurgence of the military the civilian opposition would have been unable to topple Pérez Jiménez, without the ever increasing, broad-based civilian opposition to the regime, the military would not have turned against its leader. The "1958 revolution" was neither a traditional military coup nor a mass uprising from below. Rather, it was, in a peculiar but real way, the crystallization of collective discontent—from different classes, sectors, and bulwarks of power, including the military—against the increasingly arbitrary and personalistic rule of Pérez Jiménez. Peculiar, because these groups were not organized on the basis of a common social practice or related by a web of interdependent interests. Real, because they were nevertheless united in the demand that the state become responsive to their needs and the nation's fiscal revenues be turned into tangible benefits. An imagined community of interests and ideals was founded on a real common orientation towards the state as a source of collective and individual welfare.

Although the fall of Pérez Jiménez took place because there was general opposition to the regime, it was quickly interpreted as a direct consequence of massive popular resistance—as

if the overthrow were not a military coup, but the collective triumph of a united people. At this transitional juncture, on the public stage of national politics, differences among social groups—differences of interest, position, ideals—were subsumed ideologically within a common identity. The “people” were depicted as having reemerged as the active subject of the nation’s history, acting with a single will to free themselves from oppression. It was this interpretation of experience which invested with new meaning the process of political democratization; it seemingly marked a disjuncture between the past—politics as elite maneuvers—and the present—politics as representation of the popular will. If pacts and agreements were now made by democracy’s leaders, they were no mere pacts, but an expression of the “spirit of the 23rd of January,” a concretization of a transcendent collective accord. Thus the “history” of the popular overthrow of Pérez Jiménez became, even as it was lived, the story of democracy’s foundation.

The Spirit of the Twenty-Third of January

On the dawn of 23 January, masses of people took over the streets of Caracas in celebration of the advent of a new political life. They fought against the jailers in the Seguridad Nacional, freed political prisoners, and looted the homes of the most hated “pérezjimenistas” (e.g. Pedro Estrada, Luis Vallenilla). Each new victory became part of a drama that was celebrated just as it was enacted. But when it became known that day that the five-man military Junta included Colonels Casanova and Villate, it suddenly seemed as if the democratic coup which many groups had orchestrated had been overturned by the military right-wing.

In order to avert the threat of continued military control, the Junta Patriótica called for public demonstrations and pressured the new Defense Minister Colonel Castro León (who had participated in the 1 January uprising against Pérez Jiménez) to remove the despised Colonels. In response, they were replaced on 25 January by two civilians: business leaders Eugenio Mendoza and Blas Lamberti, who had been among the first members of the economic elite to seek a broad-base alliance to overthrow the dictatorship. Again, the “people” seemed to have exerted their will. Thus the participation of the bourgeoisie in the Junta was defined as a triumph of popular pressure, as another confirmation that the Junta represented a homogeneous totality—the unified people.

Probably at no other juncture in this century had so many Venezuelans been drawn together by the force of historical events and experienced, however illusorily, a sense of national

community. This sense of the transformative power of collective unity came to be captured in the expression “the Spirit of the 23rd of January,” a slogan which was constantly invoked during the difficult days of institution-building, when the contradictions concealed within this ideal threatened to tear the fragile fabric of a democracy in the making.

Constructing Democracy

Eugenio Mendoza, together with many people who had upheld Pérez Jiménez during his rule, heralded the banner of democracy in 1958. Vallenilla recalled that in 1952, after Pérez Jiménez’s coup, Mendoza had told him (they had been friends since childhood), “Business has never been better—keep it up, brother!” (Vallenilla 1967: 376). Thus it is with bitter irony that Vallenilla closes his memoirs by referring to a New Year’s telegram from Mendoza he had found in his pocket as he began his exile in France, just as Mendoza had emerged as a representative of a bourgeoisie which had discovered its democratic vocation. It wished him and his wife “All the best for 1958” (Ibid. 478).

But this political juncture was a crucible not only for democratic institutions, but also for new political roles. Actors did not appear on the stage of national politics with fixed identities but were changed by the historical events in which they participated. Their transformation, including their shifts of loyalties, was accepted not just as a matter of fact, but as a necessary condition for the construction of democracy. Only those who had been intimately associated with the regime’s repressive apparatus were ostracized.

The challenge facing the democratic opposition to Pérez Jiménez was to turn generalized discontent with the dictatorship into support for democracy. The solution devised was the orchestration from the top of a multi-political party and interest group alliance which would seek popular support for an essentially centrist program. Betancourt had been preparing for this strategy. In 1956 he had proposed to the party leadership in exile that AD cooperate more closely with the private sector as well as with the “democratic parties,” COPEI and URD. This distanced AD middle-level leaders, many of them younger and ideologically closer to socialism, who had worked with the PC within the country during the resistance, and who had formed the Junta Patriótica. Despite their opposition, at Betancourt’s insistence, the PC was excluded from the nascent alliance. This move was justified by depicting the PC as a party committed to an eventual dictatorship (of the proletariat), and thus at odds with the construction of Venezuelan democracy. By this means the parties associated with the democratic project could present

themselves as moderate forces to the private sector as well as to the U.S. government. Thus, the PC's exclusion was depicted as an action directed at preserving, rather than fracturing, national unity.

Although formally excluded from these pacts, throughout 1958 the PC was a major backer of the ruling Junta and of the efforts by the new alliance to ensure unified support for the transition to democracy. This support was ratified at its 1958 national assembly, where the PC vowed to "give everything that it is capable of, to make all the sacrifices, to preserve this unity" (Plaza 1978: 138). Although the PC defined itself as Leninist, it did not follow the principles enunciated by Lenin in his 1917 April thesis, when he argued that the struggle for socialism need not wait for the consolidation of bourgeois rule. Largely under the influence of Browderism (originating with the U.S. Communist Party), the Venezuelan PC accepted a staged conception according to which socialism in backward countries should occur after the consolidation of capitalism—a notion closer to the Mensheviks than to Lenin. Just as the war effort in advanced capitalist nations had encouraged a politics of alliance among all democratic forces to oppose fascism, the fight against Pérez Jiménez had led the Venezuelan PC to define post-1958 politics in terms of a conflict between the threat of a military dictatorship and the consolidation of democracy.⁵⁶

By means of pacts and agreements, the major representatives of the "democratic" parties sought to avoid what were represented as the twin dangers of sectarian party politics—in Betancourt's words a "suicidal path"—and of military rule—widely regarded as a "homicidal path." They decided to join efforts to secure a harmonious transition to a democratic regime by means of a free electoral contest. All parties, it was agreed, would have a share of power, its responsibilities and benefits, regardless of which candidate won. The private sector would have significant participation in the government and voice in its policy making.

The top military leaders endorsed these decisions. Part of this collective movement themselves, and caught up in its momentum, they sought to reinstitute the role of their institution

⁵⁶ As early as 1959, the Communist Party became critical of its 1958 position. Helena Plaza's pioneering exploration of the PC's position in 1958 and of its decision to join the armed struggle during the Betancourt regime (1959-63) remains an essential source on this controversial topic (1978). Ellner's work provides the most informative account of the influence of Browderism on the Venezuelan Communist Party (1980).

as guardian of the Constitution. While much blame fell on the military and its image had been damaged during the dictatorship, the military felt it had actually been excluded from its rightful role by Pérez Jiménez. In the opinion of Rear Admiral Larrazábal, Pérez Jiménez had ruled alone. "We thought that he was not ruling in the name of the Armed Forces, because he did not have military men close to him" (Blanco 1980: 190). To regain legitimacy and dispel fears that the Junta would try to remain in power, its leaders decided to hold elections promptly. The personal ambitions of military leaders were to be contained in the interest of the institution as a whole.

Pacts and the Spirit of Democracy

The Spirit of the 23rd of January took tangible form in several pacts and agreements. On 24 April 1958, all political parties (including the Communist Party) signed the "Reconciliation between Labor and Capital" ("El avenimiento obrero patronal"). This pact subordinated workers' demands to the need to create the climate of stability then deemed necessary for the consolidation of democracy, and established collective bargaining as the only permitted mechanism to exert labor pressure. Predictably, by containing labor demands, this agreement made workers pay the price of political stability (Lopez and Werz 1981: 11-14). Despite its demobilizing character, Communist leaders endorsed this agreement, for they wanted to preserve the organizational unity of the workers movement ("el comité sindical unificado"), which AD and COPEI had threatened to disrupt (Croes 1973: 175).

Two Venezuelan analysts have commented that "this highlights the top priority given to democratic stability as a common objective of all parties..." as well as the "inconsistency or lack of strategic and tactical clarity of the elites of this party (the PC)" (Lopez and Gómez 1985: 80). But whether it was the product of inconsistency and political blindness or not, both aspects of this policy—the priority given to the support of democracy and the willingness to curb labor demands—were rooted in tacit assumptions about Venezuelan society, the notion that oil was the basic source of wealth in Venezuela, and the belief that workers would do better by supporting a regime that would redistribute oil rents, than by demanding higher wages thereby risking destabilizing the emerging democracy.

A second pact was even more fundamental, for it coordinated the relations of parties around a common political program. This pact followed the failure of negotiations, supported mostly by the Junta Patriótica, to produce a single candidate of "national unity" for the 1958

elections. By means of the Pact of Punto Fijo, signed by AD, URD, and COPEI on 31 October 1958, the parties agreed to respect the results of the elections and to form a coalition government whose program would be previously established and accepted by the contenders. Just before the elections were held, in December 1958 the outline of a “Minimum Government Program and Declaration of Principles” was signed by the presidential candidates.⁵⁷

Essentially, this program defined a project of capitalist development, sponsored by a reformist democratic state and with the active participation of local and foreign capital. The Church and the Military, through this pact and other formal and informal agreements, were given ample reassurance that their respective roles in society would be respected, and that their positions would be materially improved. This agreement has been seen as emblematic of the forms of solidarity that had evolved in the struggle against Pérez Jiménez. In Levine’s words, the spirit of the 23rd of January “took concrete form” in the Pact of Punto Fijo (1973: 43).

AD’s Rómulo Betancourt won the December 1958 election with 1,284,042 votes, followed by Wolfgang Larrázabal (supported by URD and the Communist Party) with 903,479 votes, and by COPEI’s Rafael Caldera, with 423,262 votes. Once in power, Betancourt kept the pre-electoral agreements, and established a coalition government in which the reformist parties and the private sector were represented, thus initiating a period of uninterrupted democratic rule which, with some modifications in the original agreements, persists until today.

Democracy in History and in Theory

Most analysts have attributed to “politics” a crucial role in bringing about and maintaining democracy in Venezuela. According to the prevailing viewpoint, while oil affluence in a small country without deep ethnic divisions and with a relatively small and homogeneous upper strata created favorable conditions for democracy, it was the political skills of leaders which brought it about. From this perspective, Venezuelan democracy is the outgrowth of a particular political

⁵⁷ Ever since the 1930s Betancourt, influenced by European social democracy, had proposed the development of a minimum program, against the more anti-capitalist position of the more radical left (Sosa and Lengrand 1974).

style characterized by the avoidance of conflict and the pursuit of consensus around procedural forms rather than substantive issues. ⁵⁸

Politics is thus treated as an elite activity that reflects the negotiating skills, flexibility, and, above all, learning capacity of Venezuelan leaders (mostly politicians and entrepreneurs, but also military officers, the Church hierarchy, and the representatives of other major interests, including labor). In a country bereft of democratic traditions and torn by a violent history, its leaders are seen as having been particularly receptive to the lessons of the recent past. Just as AD's "trienio" taught them to avoid sectarian party politics, the dictatorship warned them of the dangers of personalistic military rule. The representatives of major sectors learned to circumvent conflictive issues, to exclude certain basic issues from political debate, to conciliate differences, and to trade disruptive ideological programs for the workable arrangements of incremental reform. It is as if a harmonizing "ethos" animated Venezuelan political actors.

While politics, thus construed, is invoked to explain the construction of Venezuelan democracy, little effort has been made to account for politics itself, except tautologically. Instead of explaining the "spirit" or the skills of political actors, their stated ideals or "natural" abilities are used to explain their actions.

Typically, the next step has been to portray these actors as setting in motion a process whose basic dynamic is explained by recourse to theoretical schemes originally devised to account for the historical experience of other nations. Thus, the diversification of industrial production and the growth of the middle class are seen as processes that intrinsically generate opposition to authoritarianism and support for democracy. Since this interpretation coincides with that of the main local ideologues, social theory and local ideology join hands in the representation of the turn to democracy as the outcome of the growth of a young capitalist nation which has matured to the point of revolt against dictatorial rule.

58 This viewpoint is particularly present in works influenced by the conventional wisdom of U.S. political science, Levine (1973), Alexander (1964), Stambouli (1980), Blank (1973), Karl (1981), Sosa Lopez and Gomez (1985), and Urbaneja (1985), but it is also present in the more structural interpretations of Plaza (1978), and Hellinger (1985), where the political cunning of elites is seen as setting in motion the structures shaped by the oil economy. For a recent review of interpretations of Venezuelan democracy, see Abente (1986).

For instance, a recent interpretation portrays the turn to democracy in 1958 as the result of a combination of “structural” factors—the “ripening” of the “ conditions” for democracy as a result of industrialization—and of human will or “statecraft”—the orchestration of a compromise through which the bourgeoisie, in a “classic exchange of ‘the right to rule for the right to make money,’” supported the establishment of a democratic party system (Karl 1981: 10; 20).

Two illusions are thus brought together in this explanation of Venezuelan democracy. First, the chimera of modernization ideology as a theory of history—what O’Donnell has called the “optimistic formula: more economic development = more likelihood of political democracy” (Larsen 1983: 17).⁵⁹ Second, the recurrent use of Bonapartism (“the classic compromise”) as an analogy that illuminates Venezuelan history, this time deployed to explain the role of statecraft in arranging the alliances and pacts that led to Venezuelan democracy.

Understanding the origin and use of Bonapartism as a theoretical construct may help us appreciate its scope and dispel the illusions it has engendered. Although initially devised to explain the rise of Louis Napoleon’s imperial rule, and often employed to explain authoritarian regimes in general,⁶⁰ Bonapartism has also been regarded as a general phenomenon expressing the “relative autonomy” of all capitalist states. According to Poulantzas, Marx’s concept of Bonapartism should not be applied only to a “concrete form of a capitalist state” but must be seen as a “a constitutive theoretical characteristic of the very type of capitalist state” (1973: 258). It is in this sense, one suspects, that Karl applied it to the Venezuelan transition to democracy. From Poulantzas’s discussion, however, it seems clear that he had in mind the state of societies where the “dominance” of the capitalist mode of production—seen as a homogeneous type—“is already consolidated.” As he says, “... we are concerned here with a political form belonging to the phase of expanded reproduction ...” (1973: 260). Poulantzas is

⁵⁹ A classic formulation of the modernization view can be found in Lipset (1960). Therborn offers a sound review of the turns to democratic institutional forms in Europe and America (1977; 1979). For a thorough discussion of the relationship between development and democracy in Europe and Latin America based on a development of Barrington Moore’s model, see Stephens (1987) and Stephens and Stephens (1987).

⁶⁰ Thus, Schmitter has suggested that Latin American military regimes could be seen as forms of “Bonapartism” through which a bourgeoisie that has been unable to impose its hegemony upon society “exchanges its ‘right to rule’ for its ‘right to make money’” (1973: 187).

thus seeking to relate political forms to specific economic structures of capitalist societies. Yet an understanding of the rentier nature of Venezuelan capitalism suggests that the application of the Bonapartist model to Venezuelan democracy exemplifies not the historical instantiation of a theoretical scheme, but the recurrent theoretical misrecognition of a distinctive history.

Ironically, Marx, whose *Eighteenth Brumaire* inspired the Bonapartist construct, cautioned in that book against the decontextualized use of theoretical categories. His work directly criticized the misuse of historical analogies, and in particular of “Caesarism.” Fashionable in France at that time, this notion attributed to isolated individual figures (in this case Louis Napoleon) a determining effect upon history.⁶¹ “Lastly, I hope that my work will contribute towards eliminating the school-taught phrase now current, particularly in Germany, of so-called Caesarism” (1981: 7). His reasons provide a framework for discussing the distinctiveness of the Venezuelan situation:

In this superficial historical analogy the main point is forgotten, namely, that in ancient Rome the class struggle took place only within a privileged minority, between the free rich and the free poor, while the great productive mass of the population, the slaves, formed the purely passive pedestal for these combatants. People forget Sismondi’s significant saying: the Roman proletariat lived at the expense of society, while modern society lives at the expense of the proletariat. With so complete a difference between the material, economic conditions of the ancient and the modern class struggles, the political figures produced by them can likewise have no more in common with one another than the Archbishop of Canterbury has with the High Priest Samuel (Marx 1981: 7-8).

⁶¹ Earlier in this essay I indicated that several authors had used the concept of Bonapartism to explain events in Venezuela. It is likely that Laureano Vallenilla Lanz, senior (the author of *Cesarismo democrático*), who received a European education, was influenced by the outlook that Marx criticized. Communist leader and historian Juan Bautista Fuenmayor, who turned this analogy into a law, was directly influenced by Marx (and perhaps by Gramsci). In the case of Karl, her use of this concept is related to the work of Schmitter and perhaps Poulantzas.

In seeing the organization of a democratic regime after 1958 as an instance of Bonapartism the main point is also forgotten, namely, that in Venezuela class struggle centered on the state, that its focus was not the appropriation of domestically produced surplus value, but the capture of state mediated oil rents, that in pursuit of their interests classes sought less to use the state against each other than to use each other to gain access to the state—the primary source of money.

As the petrostate took shape, the right to rule and the right to make money became intimately intertwined. The political compromise orchestrated in Venezuela involved social classes whose relationship to each other was conditioned by their fundamental dependence on the state; it was therefore a different type of compromise. Paraphrasing Sismondi, one could suggest that in a Bonapartist compromise the state lives at the expense of society, while in a “rentist compromise” society lives at the expense of the state.⁶²

From the Eighteenth Brumaire to the Twenty-Third of January

In light of these considerations, the coup against Pérez Jiménez and the transition to democracy may be better understood. The economic measures the Pérez Jiménez regime took served to transform the economy in unplanned ways, and to alter the political demands of various social groups. Despite the regime’s mercantilist orientation, its actions stimulated the growth of industry and commercial agriculture, and drew foreign industrial capital, once limited to the oil enclave, directly to the center of the domestic economy. These rapid changes occurred in large part because the latifundist landholding class and the oligarchic ideology associated with it had already been dismantled, allowing the emergent modernizing political-business elite and the reformist development ideology of the “trienio” to delimit the terrain within which the military regime could define and legitimize itself. The Pérez Jiménez regime, while working within the framework of oil-rent financed economic growth, sought to depoliticize the ascendant reformist

⁶² If Bonapartism *à la* Poulantzas were seen as a “constitutive feature of the very type of capitalist state,” one should posit the existence of “subtypes” of capitalist states, and distinguish between what might be called “classical Bonapartism” and “rentier Bonapartism.” The former would express the relations of a capitalist society structured around the extraction and distribution of local surplus value, the latter those of one organized around the appropriation and distribution of international rents.

model of development. It sought to construct the physical edifice of modernity upon a quiescent social landscape. In so doing, it sought as well to favor the expansion and strengthening of propertied interests.

But this process brought out increased tension within the rent-based dynamic of growth, for which the state was the central agent and object of activity. The tendency for oil rent distribution to concentrate power in the state was increasingly countered by the diversification of the economy and of social classes. In a related development, the once extreme predominance of import-based commercial and financial activities in the economy, under the stimulus of the oil enclave and state revenue distribution, was now challenged by the conflicting demands of domestic capitalist production directed to the local market. These conflicts were barely addressed in the movement to bring down the Pérez Jiménez regime. They were subsumed within cross-class appeals for freedom, democracy, and constitutional rights. But they helped bring about the shift in political forces and rapid rise of anti-military regime collective sentiment which coalesced at the end of the regime, and were referents in terms of which new definitions of political goals and actors were contested after its overthrow.

After the 1 January military uprising, the breakdown of the dogma of the unity of the Armed Forces ignited an escalating opposition. But it was not the lack of unity of the Armed Forces that led to Pérez Jiménez's downfall. He had undermined his regime not only by closing down the channels of political communication throughout his rule, and trying to silence in 1957 the voice of the market, but also by weakening the military, his fundamental source of support. He transformed the autonomous and secret Seguridad Nacional into both the watchdog of the military and the agency effectively in control of the use of force. In so doing, he turned his back on the increasingly professionalized military—for which he had stood—and embraced instead a caudillo-type personal force headed by Pedro Estrada. When in January 1958 the military demanded that Pérez Jiménez restore its power, he had no recourse but to behead the Seguridad Nacional, the agency that had usurped it. By relying on a privatized police institution for the use of force, Pérez Jiménez lost the support of the official representatives of force.

Pérez Jiménez was left alone only when signs of his weakness became visible, which led to a spiraling devaluation of his political currency. In panic many of his followers shifted loyalties or left the country during the first three weeks of January. Suddenly old backers of the regime in the military and the private sector turned into advocates of democracy. His quick downfall, without resistance from any group or sector, revealed the volatility of political actors whose power did not inhere in a world of their own making but derived from the state itself.

With the replacement of the two “perezjimenista” officers by two wealthy business leaders—representatives of a bourgeoisie in the making—the Junta symbolized the marriage between the right to rule and the right to make money. To guarantee this, Eugenio Mendoza and Blas Lamberti played a crucial role in organizing the alliance business and the dominant political parties. It was based on a three-part agreement by the parties: they would share political power among themselves; grant the bourgeoisie a significant voice in policy decisions and participation in the state apparatus; and distribute rather than monopolize public wealth. If the bourgeoisie agreed to exchange its “right to rule” for its “right to make money,” the parties consented to limit their “right to take public money” in exchange for “the right to rule.”

The pacts signed by the political parties should be situated as ideological formulations within the wider cultural and social world from which they derived their significance and efficacy. As the development of the oil industry helped refashion a political and cultural world in which the state and oil money came to mediate social relations, the institutional expression of these relations became the focus of political struggles. Their underlying cultural matrix, however, was increasingly taken for granted.⁶³ While conflicts centered on the role and form of specific institutions—of the state apparatus, of political parties, of interest associations—basic understandings concerning their character as part of Venezuelan society became accepted as a framework that was assumed. This underlying web of understandings and

⁶³ Adam Przeworski has argued that pacts appear on the political agenda only when the conditions for a spontaneous democratic class compromise are absent or threatened (1987). What all democratic advanced capitalist nations have in common, he seems to be arguing, is not pacts, but advanced capitalism itself plus “electoral and institutional conditions which generate “a spontaneous compromise that supports the coexistence of capitalism and democracy” (1987: 3). Short of these conditions, democracy cannot emerge spontaneously. But what seems “spontaneous” in a particular society—what people experience as “second nature,” what Bourdieu calls “habitus”—is really sedimented historical experience. Przeworski’s model assumes a model of capitalist society wherein wealth is generated by, and distributed between, capitalists and workers within a national domain. The Venezuelan case shows the historical development not of classic market “spontaneity,” but of a different “second nature”—the “spontaneous” recognition of the need to control state intervention as a result of the formation of a capitalist society whose major source of monetary wealth rests not on the local production of surplus value, but on the international capture of ground rent. In each case, what needs to be accounted for is the historical nature of apparently “spontaneous” political behavior.

orientations—concerning the nature of Venezuela as an oil nation, the collective character of oil wealth, the rights of citizens to benefit from oil revenues—was the conditioning context within which Venezuelan democracy acquired definite form. The “Spirit of the 23rd of January” was an expression of these implicit understandings. While this spirit “took concrete form” in the pacts, the pacts helped give institutional form to Venezuelan democracy, and consolidate as natural givens the assumptions that supported it.

Accordingly, what these pacts took for granted was as significant as what they explicitly regulated. Their fundamental premise was that the promotion of individual and collective welfare would best occur through the expansion of the oil economy and the distribution of oil revenues by a democratic state. Thus, they were built around an agreement to respect the basic political and economic relations that sustained the oil enclave and that, in turn, were sustained by it. The explicit orchestration of alliances and the formulation of a common political and economic project presupposed an implicit accord to maintain Venezuela’s international role as a major oil producer economically and politically tied to U.S. geopolitical strategy in the hemisphere. It also assumed a commitment to contain the lower and working classes within a centralized system of limited reforms and benefits. The new political institutions would be built upon existing power relations, not against them. In these arrangements the U.S. was a crucial, although invisible participant.

The exclusion of the Communist Party from the pacts meant the denial not just of a particular political group but of a leftist tendency that had wide currency within the ranks of the reformist parties themselves, especially AD and URD. These sectors were soon radicalized by the Cuban revolution and its move towards socialism, and by Betancourt’s increasingly conservative domestic and international policies. As political divergences grew within the rapidly changing national and international context, the pacts could no longer contain the opposing forces. First URD left the coalition government in protest against Betancourt’s attempt to impose hemispheric sanctions against Cuba at the Organization of American States meeting in Costa Rica. Then AD underwent its first division, when on 8 April 1960 most of the younger leaders and youth of AD (who in 1958 had sought to designate a non-partisan candidate of “national unity” and who later became critical of Betancourt’s social policies), founded MIR (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria), and joined a sector of the PC in armed struggle for socialism. From

their perspective, Betancourt had transformed the party “of the people” into the party of the bourgeoisie. ⁶⁴

Thus, the fundamental pact was actually the agreement to make pacts. This accord entailed a commitment to avoid political conflict as well as structural change. The pacts therefore served to control the transformation of political identities during a transitional period. They were not not just about what to do, but who to be. ⁶⁵

Colonial Dramas

It is somehow fitting that the “sunny showroom” several times became the stage for a representation of the “classic” Bonapartist seizure of power in 1851, either as a dramatic masquerade (Vallenilla 1967), or as a scientific construct (Fuenmayor 1982; Karl 1982). Paradoxically while the ill-fitting costumes of the farce illuminate the illusions of historical actors, the procrustean costumes of science, by making believe that they properly fit them, fix their identities ever more firmly as impersonators of a foreign drama on the stage of the sunny showroom.

Lest this spectacle be taken for reality, we must look beyond the colonizing imagination which casts domestic politics in terms of the alluring images of “civilized” others. In this the aim is not to reveal true faces behind fantastic masks but to explore the constitution of political identities in the historical terrain of neocolonialism, where the old struggle between barbarism and civilization continues in new forms. If ever since the discovery the destiny of Latin America has been “to define as its own, in a land that belongs to it, a history that it did not live” (García Ponce 1974: 141), the aspiration to overcome underdevelopment has often turned this common fate into

⁶⁴ For a revealing testimony of their efforts to avoid Betancourt’s candidacy in 1958 and their reasons to leave the party and join the armed struggle, see the interviews with Lino Martínez, Moisés Moleriro and Américo Martín in Blanco (1982).

⁶⁵ As Lechner suggests, the transition to democracy involves the reformulation of collective and individual identities. The quest to understand political transitions must be intimately related to the effort to understand the state (1985).

an insidiously tragic means of continuing the conquest and colonization by its own hand, of recognizing itself in other histories, and therefore of misrecognizing the history that unfolds in its own land.⁶⁶

In Venezuela, the contest between democracy and dictatorship has been cast as part of this nightmarish colonial struggle between civilization and barbarism. Ghosts of the past and specters of the future mingle in the daily battles of political actors, animating their interests and ideals. In their dreams as much as in their daily battles, the state became a powerful stage for the performance of illusions and the illusion of performance, a magical site where the symbols of civilized life—metropolitan commodities, steel mills, freeways, constitutions, “histories”—were transformed into potent tokens that could be purchased or replicated, a place possessed with the alchemic power to transmute liquid wealth into civilized life.

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⁶⁶ For a discussion of this issue in relation to the interplay between popular and elite cultures, see Coronil and Skurski (1977).

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**Non-Petroleum Gross Domestic Product
1948-57**

Year	Non-Petroleum GDP
1948	5,462
1949	6,443
1950	7,249
1951	8,185
1952	8,541
1953	9,776
1954	11,205
1955	11,869
1956	12,288
1957	13,854

Source: Salazar-Carrillo (1976: 119)

**Growth of Output in Manufacturing
1948-57**

Year	Index
1948	350
1949	413
1950	538
1951	650
1952	760
1953	880
1954	1,000
1955	1,165
1956	1,273
1957	1,446

Source: Salazar-Carrillo (1976: 119)

**Share of Petroleum in Total Public Revenue
Including Foreign Exchange Taxes on Oil
1948-57**

Year	Oil Foreign Exchange Tax (millions of bolívares)	Share of Oil Taxes (percent)
1948	155	68.0
1949	153	65.9
1950	120	36.5
1951	140	45.5
1952	171	49.6
1953	173	49.2
1954	176	42.0
1955	196	43.2
1956	301	55.2
1957	403	58.3

Source: Salazar-Carrillo (1976: 104)

**Import Capacity, Net Barter Terms of Trade,
and International Reserves, 1947-57**

Year	Import Capacity (index)	Net Barter (index)	International Reserves (millions of dollars)
1947	--	--	234
1948	68.2	141.8	362
1949	61.6	132.5	424
1950	78.0	148.9	342
1951	80.9	136.5	379
1952	87.4	136.8	448
1953	91.8	146.4	494
1954	96.8	142.4	492
1955	111.7	144.5	539
1956	120.9	136.0	927
1957	137.5	137.9	1,396

*1959 = 100.

Source: Salazar-Carrillo (1976: 99)

**Petroleum Gross Domestic Product, Value of Oil Production, and Retained Value of Total Expenditures in the Petroleum Industry
1948-57 (Millions of Bolívares)**

Year	Value of Oil Production	GDP	Retained Value of Total Expenditures in the Petroleum Industry
1948	3,564	2,920	3,167
1949	3,141	2,505	2,385
1950	3,716	2,973	2,451
1951	4,420	3,584	2,809
1952	4,681	3,803	2,990
1953	5,020	3,896	3,329
1954	5,348	4,335	3,542
1955	5,885	4,940	3,542
1956	6,840	5,784	3,806
1957	8,604	7,249	4,840

Source: Salazar-Carrillo (1976: 111)

**Share of Petroleum in Gross Domestic Product
1948-57**

Year	Petroleum (millions of bolívares)	Total (millions of bolívares)*	Share of Petroleum in Total GDP (percent)
1948	3,503	11,225	31.2
1949	3,448	11,726	29.4
1950	3,851	12,593	30.6
1951	4,469	14,270	31.3
1952	4,730	15,202	31.1
1953	4,780	16,257	29.4
1954	5,192	18,222	28.5
1955	5,909	19,645	30.1
1956	6,543	21,281	30.8
1957	7,249	24,295	29.8

*Constant 1957 bolívares

Source: Salazar-Carrillo (1976: 112)

**Share of Petroleum Gross Fixed Domestic Investment in Total Gross Fixed Domestic Investment,
and Investment Rate, 1948-58**

Year	Gross Fixed Domestic Investment			Share of Petroleum (percent)	Investment Rate (percent)
	Total (millions of bolívares)*	Non-Petroleum (millions of bolívares)*	Petroleum (millions bolívares)*		
1948	4,304	2,706	1,598	37.1	38.3
1949	4,458	3,272	1,186	26.6	38.0
1950	3,234	2,570	664	20.5	25.7
1951	3,573	2,775	798	22.3	25.0
1952	4,379	3,328	1,051	24.0	28.8
1953	4,797	3,790	1,007	21.0	29.5
1954	5,822	4,587	1,135	19.5	32.0
1955	5,363	4,277	1,086	20.3	27.3
1956	5,584	4,232	1,352	24.2	26.2
1957	6,429	4,607	1,822	28.3	26.5

*Constant 1957 bolívares

Source: Salazar-Carrillo (1976: 107)

Petroleum Gross Fixed Domestic Investment by Type, 1948-57

Year	Petroleum Gross Fixed Domestic Investment (millions of bolívares)	Investment in Produc- tion (millions of bolívares)	Share of Production (percent)	Investment in Transport (millions of bolívares)	Share of Transport (percent)	Investment in Refining (millions of bolívares)	Share of Refining (percent)	Investment in Marketing (millions of bolívares)	Share of Marketing (percent)	Investment in Other Activities (millions of bolívares)	Share of Other Activities (percent)
1948	1,630	921	56.5	163	10.0	347	21.3	14	0.9	185	11.3
1949	1,127	563	50.0	101	9.0	401	35.6	12	1.1	150	4.3
1950	561	340	60.6	36	6.4	122	21.7	11	2.0	52	9.3
1951	727	508	69.9	107	14.7	54	7.4	4	0.6	54	7.4
1952	967	725	75.0	129	13.3	56	5.8	7	0.7	50	5.2
1953	901	709	78.7	70	7.8	63	7.0	14	1.6	45	4.9
1954	933	689	73.8	67	7.2	104	11.1	14	1.5	59	6.4
1955	928	790	85.1	40	4.3	65	7.0	12	1.3	21	2.3
1956	1,232	779	67.2	121	9.8	233	18.9	14	1.1	13	3.0
1957	1,822	1,204	66.1	274	15.0	268	14.7	18	1.0	58	3.2

Source: Salazar-Carrillo (1976: 109)