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Introduction

There is growing recognition across the political spectrum, from Liberals, Conservatives and Marxists, that the dominant model of democracy “is in the doldrums” (Tormey 2014: 2). Pateman (2012) expresses this consensus with her observation that, “in Western countries popular confidence in old-established institutions is fading, voters are disaffected, trust in government is declining and a very wide gap has opened up between citizens and governments and political elites more generally”. While there is general agreement that there is a malaise of democracy, the causes of this “democratic deficit” (Norris 2011) are often obfuscated.

The dominant narrative has centred on the emergence of “populist” leaders who challenge the liberal model of democracy. For these authors, the issues facing democracy revolve around how such leaders or governments have challenged democratic norms, which they consider the greatest threat to contemporary democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Democracy is thus subverted by “elected autocrats” who “weaponise” the courts, buy off the media and the private sector and rewrite the rules of politics to tilt the playing field against opponents (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Mounk 2018). While such analyses raise genuine concerns, they fail to offer any distinction between the new “populist” leaders. As such any challenger to the political status quo is marginalised regardless of their ideological position or programmatic proposals (Cannon 2017). Furthermore, there is insufficient analysis of the social and economic environment in which politics and democratisation occur, and as a result the emergence of “populist” leaders is treated as the cause of the crisis of democracy rather than a symptom.

The actual crisis of democracy today should be understood as a “crisis of too little democracy” whereby the liberal model of democracy

has been captured by neoliberal rationality, leading to what may be described as “market democracy” (Kohl 2006). Citizenship has been commodified and elements that were once considered rights such as education, health, housing, welfare, and water must now be bought and sold on the market (Sader 2011: 132). Furthermore, as Rodrik (2018) states, “liberal democracy is ... being undermined by a tendency to emphasise ‘liberal’ at the expense of ‘democracy’”, whereby “rulers are insulated from democratic accountability by a panoply of restraints that limit the range of policies they can deliver. Bureaucratic bodies, autonomous regulators, and independent courts set policies, or they are imposed from outside by the rules of the global economy” (2018). In a globalised era dominated by neoliberal pressures the “balance between the market and the state shifted to the disadvantage of the regulatory state and hence to the disadvantage of democracy” (Merkel 2014). Compounding matters, centre-left parties have capitulated to neoliberal logic leading to a “consensus of the centre” (Mouffe 2018), opening the door for the far-Right to make political headway amongst disenfranchised citizens.

Responding to the above concerns, this article proceeds by calling for an alternative model of democracy that boosts the political and social citizenship of popular sectors. A brief discussion of how economic elite forces will seek to prevent democratisation is then offered, thereby raising questions as to the compatibility between liberal democracy and equality. An overview of Left-led efforts to construct an alternative to market democracy in Venezuela is then offered from which general lessons for radical-substantive democratisation processes are drawn.

A radical-substantive alternative to market democracy

While liberals see democracy as a set of rules, procedures and institutions, “thick theorists” on the other hand see democracy as a process that must be continually reproduced, a “way of regulating power relations in such a way as to maximize the opportunities for individuals to influence the conditions in which they live, to participate in and influence debates about the key decisions which affect society” (Kaldor and Vejvoda 1997: 67). As such, democracy should be understood as the name of a struggle, or collection of struggles, for the democratisation of democracy, whereby the goal is the preservation of, or advancement of, rights (Balibar 2008: 526). Democratisation then involves two components; a deepening and an extending (Roberts 1998). The logic of deepening democracy involves “intensifying popular sovereignty in the political sphere, that is, moving from hierarchical forms of elitist or

bureaucratic control to forms of popular self-determination by means of more direct participation in the decision-making process or more effective mechanisms for holding elected representatives and public officials accountable to their constituents" (Roberts 1998: 30). Extending democracy meanwhile "pertains to the scope or domain of the social units and collective issues to which democratic norms are applied; that is, it refers to efforts to extend the democratic norms and procedures of collective self-determination from the formal sphere of state institutions to new spheres of social and economic relationships" (1998: 30). Extending democracy is important because "social and economic inequality can easily be translated into concentrations of power in the political sphere that skew the articulation of popular interests and block the exercise of popular sovereignty" (1998: 29). Such a perspective suggests that "social equity is not a substantive outcome that is external to the functioning of democratic procedures but a prerequisite for equal access and unbiased democratic contestation and thus a vital indicator of procedural fairness" (1998: 30).

However, Roberts (1998) postulated that where attempts to deepen democracy are accompanied by efforts to extend democracy, a strong reaction from domestic and international economic elites who seek to defend their privileges is likely. This backlash may take multiple forms depending on the specifics of each case, for example lobbying of government officials, threats to withdraw investment or lower credit-ratings, using political parties beholden to economic elites to block the legislative process, smear campaigns, etc. Whatever the tactics used by elites, in all scenarios the goal will be the same: the protection of the status quo and impediment of any process or policy that seeks to redistribute political and economic power.

As such, we must ask whether "an entrenchment of socio-economic privilege is still the price that must be paid for liberal democracy" (Grugel and Ruggirozzi 2018: 561). While protecting minority rights from the "tyranny of the majority" is an essential component of democracy, describing economic elites as minorities, despite the fact that they wield sufficient power to prohibit a more equitable distribution of political and economic resources, means that democracy in its market-liberal incantation has come to be understood - at least by those excluded from participation - as a veil to maintain elite privilege. Market democracy has thus become a "tyranny of the elite minority". This is the real crisis of democracy. A crucial conundrum thus arises; retain liberal democratic standards thereby maintaining the scope for economic elite forces to capture the democratisation project and prevent any change to the grossly unequal distribution of political

and economic power, or reform elements of the liberal model so as to grant the executive power to quell elite resistance and to engage in an extending of democracy that allows for the boosting of social citizenship, and consequently political citizenship, of popular sectors.

Lessons from Latin America: the case of Venezuela

While the “developed” democracies face a citizenship crisis as a result of a convergence around market democracy, Latin America experienced a similar crisis in the 1980s and 1990s. The efforts to respond to this crisis in the region should therefore be examined to identify lessons for what progressive forces should, and should not do, as they seek to boost popular sector inclusion. In particular, the more “radical” cases of Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela sought to offer an alternative to market democracy which boosted both the popular capacity to influence decision-making processes and the socio-economic citizenship of erstwhile excluded popular sectors (see Munck 2015). A brief overview of the Venezuelan process is now offered.

Hugo Chávez, elite destabilisation, and progressive centralisation

Following a fiscal and current account crisis in the 1980s, neoliberal doctrine became hegemonic across the political spectrum – that is, both Right and erstwhile Left parties accepted the underlying superiority of the market vis-à-vis the state for making decisions. Two rounds of structural adjustment packages that commodified citizenship were adopted by a closed group of free-market technocrats leading to mass popular protest. Furthermore, an abrupt fall in oil prices in 1998 led to an economic and fiscal disaster in Venezuela “provoking an acute sense of frustration among Venezuelans and reinforcing their repudiation of traditional elites, the parties, and moderate proposals” (Lopez-Maya 2011: 219). It is in this setting that Hugo Chávez was elected in 1998.

Chávez immediately organised a constituent assembly to begin drafting a new constitution with input from social and popular movements that sought to deepen and extend democracy by guaranteeing social rights, prohibiting the privatisation of social security and the state oil company, increasing job protection for workers, and incorporating informal workers and housewives into the social security system (see Hellinger 2011; and López-Maya and Lander 2011 for detailed discussion). When Chávez first came to power, he was oriented toward a “Third Way” strategy like that of Tony Blair and Anthony Giddens (Buxton 2016: 9). He saw himself as a democratic socialist “who

wanted to build a participatory democracy, institute a basic welfare system, and address Venezuela's chronic social problems" (2016: 9). However, the ratification of the 1999 Constitution strengthened presidential powers, and by the end of 1999, "Chávez had weakened institutional checks and balances on executive authority and set the stage for new elections in 2000 under the terms of his Bolivarian constitution" (Roberts 2014: 259).

Following his re-election in the 2000 election, the National Assembly passed an enabling law allowing Chávez to rule by decree for one year (Roberts 2014: 260). In November 2001, Chávez used this authority to issue 49 legislative decrees. They sought to democratise property and production (Lander 2017a) by allowing for the expropriation of unutilised farm lands, by promoting and financing cooperative production, and crucially, by reasserting executive control over *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A.* (PDVSA) – the state oil company – and financial institutions, thereby challenging elite interests (Hellinger 2012: 260; Roberts 2014: 261).

The result was an intense backlash by economic elites who between 2001 and 2004 repeatedly sought to destabilise and topple the government. The initial strategy to respond to the "attacks on private property" was marked by the establishment of the Democratic Coordinator, "a heterogeneous grouping of political parties, NGOs, the business association Fedecámaras, the trade union confederation, and the CTV (Venezuelan Workers' Confederation, *Confederación de Trabajadores de Venezuela*), with Catholic Church and media support" (Cannon 2014: 54). The traditional unions called a nationwide strike in December 2001 (Smilde 2011: 9). In April 2002, a coalition of dissident military members, sections of the Venezuelan business community, and opposition supporters "launched a coup d'état against the Chávez government with the support of several private media stations" (Gill 2016: 367). An interim government headed by business leader Pedro Carmona was installed (Smilde 2011: 9). The US government supported the overthrow openly and more covertly via funding from USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) for opposition parties (Cannon 2009: 191; Coker 2014: 92). However, a countercoup two days later, in conjunction with mass popular demonstrations, brought Chávez back to power (Smilde 2011: 9).

The reversed 2002 coup constitutes a fundamental turning point in the Bolivarian process (Ciccariello-Maher 2013: 141). It was the mass street mobilisation by the "constituent masses" (2013: 141), and the interventions of more organised popular sectors that played the key role in returning Chávez to power" (de la Torre 2013: 31). The

vulnerability of the Chávez government to elite opposition forces and their use of aggressive tactics to prevent attempts to extend democracy forced it to “be particularly responsive to the demands and aspirations of its movement’s rank-and-file members in order to count on their ongoing mobilization” (Ellner 2013: 78).

In the period following the coup, elite-opposition forces called for a national work stoppage in December 2002. Other responses to efforts to extend democracy saw elites use their economic power “as they have done throughout history when they consider their interests threatened” to create a scarcity of important commodities (Ellner 2013: 67). Following the general strike, the central government responded to scarcities (which pushed up prices) by implementing price and exchange controls in February 2003 (2013: 67). The private sector responded by reducing production and exporting more. To address the shortfalls (and to intimidate the private sector into maintaining production and distribution at normal levels) the government began expropriating companies (2013: 67).

While Chávez’ policies and method of pushing through reforms challenge fundamental tenets of the liberal democratic creed such as protection for private property rights and absolute separation of power between branches of the government, the policies were clearly aimed at boosting government capacity to protect vulnerable popular sectors. Furthermore, the aggression of elite forces and their power – economic, political, military, and transnational – to prevent any efforts to respond to the vast majority’s demands to tackle the gross inequalities of Venezuela’s society meant that strict adherence to liberal democratic standards would essentially entail a strict adherence to the status quo, that is, wealth and political inclusion for the minority elite class, and exclusion for the millions living in extreme poverty.

While elite destabilisation efforts fostered a centralisation of power, they also highlighted Chávez’ reliance on the popular sectors to act as bulwark against such forces. There was an active effort from the government to foster the development of an organised popular society capable of driving the democratisation process from below. As such, while power was centralised in order to overcome elite vetoes, this power was used progressively, both to extend democracy via the redistribution of booming oil rents, as well as to deepen democracy by boosting popular power and its access to decision-making channels. As such, the centralised power in the office of the executive was used to fundamentally re-design the citizenship model for popular sectors. By taking control of the country’s oil reserves, and with booming prices, social spending approached 70 percent of the national budget

(Lander, in Lang and Lander 2018). The government introduced the *misiones*, a series of state-sponsored programs aimed at delivering the socio-economic goals of the new Constitution to popular communities (Hawkins, Rosas, and Johnson 2011: 190; Hellinger 2012: 146). Illiteracy was drastically reduced, while medical access and public education was extended to all the population (Boron, in Chavez, Ouviaña and Thwaites Rey 2017: 34). There was a drastic reduction in poverty, nutritional improvements for popular sectors, declining infant mortality rates, and a closing of the inequality gap (Lander 2017b: 36).

Muhr (2012: 26) distinguishes the *misiones* from conventional social welfare schemes found in social democracies as the former seek to combine short-term poverty alleviation with long-term structural change. The *misiones* are defined by the government as the “conjunction of constituted power and constituent power” (MINCI 2007: 7, 12); their purpose “is not only to bring the benefits of the welfare state to the poor, especially those in the informal sector, but to alter the governance of the economy from one emphasizing atomistic participation in the market to one relying on cooperatives, state coordination, and local know-how – in a word, what the government celebrates as ‘endogenous development’” (Hawkins et al. 2011: 190).

In terms of democratic deepening, several new laws were introduced which sought to reformulate the role of popular participation and the idea of the state. One of the most important laws passed during the Chávez presidencies was the 2006 Law of Communal Councils (CCs). CCs “are based on the idea that local-level citizen participation in the planning, implementation, and maintenance of community development projects establishes a platform on which a new ‘protagonist’ democracy can be built” (Wilde 2017: 141). Chávez saw the CCs as the cornerstone of the move toward “21st-century socialism”, claiming that their formation “marked the beginning of a transfer of political, economic, and administrative power from the ‘constituted power’ of the state to the ‘constituent power’ of civil society” (2017: 141). The CCs, therefore, are seen by the government as “the vehicles to reach the full implementation of a system that aims to give a protagonist role to the citizens in the decision-making process” (Salazar 2013: 13).

Although funds for projects may come from several sources including municipal and regional governments, the majority of funding comes from the national government (Wilde 2017: 142). In a 2006 speech, president Chávez called for the CCs to “be built as a subsystem of decision making and avoid becoming only adjuncts to the mayors, governors, or political parties” (cited in Motta 2011: 37). As such, the CCs represent

attempts to “create a new set of state institutions that bypass the traditional state and distribute power in a democratic and participatory manner” (Motta 2011: 37).

For some the CCs are not autonomous spaces for participation, but rather state-dominated institutions. Financial dependence on a rentier state and regulation by a charismatic president who centralizes decisions in the executive are said to neutralize grassroots actors’ ability to articulate independent political claims and impact political decision-making (Wilpert 2007; Uzcátegui 2010; Garcia-Guadilla and Mallen 2013). While acknowledging the “rough edges” of CCs, other analysts have highlighted the potential benefits of increasing state funding to historically excluded sectors of society (Ellner 2009). As Wilde (2017) details, another strand of scholarship suggest that the CCs “subject constituted power to constant constituent pressure, binding the two in a dialectical chain toward ever more radical and direct representation” (Ciccariello-Maher 2013: 129). In such perceptions, the CCs offer the possibility of decentralizing power away from the state toward empowered publics (Azzellini 2010). The Organic Law of the Communes of 2010 meanwhile aimed to increase popular power by allowing autonomous development and decision-making along with the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of goods and services via the grouping together of multiple CCs into communes (*comunas*). The *comunas* were envisioned as “representing a fourth level of government” allowing project design on “a wider scale in accordance with state planning” (Ellner 2013: 76), with decision-making retained at local-levels in CC assemblies (Azzellini 2013).

Chávez “bent” the liberal model so as to overcome elite constraints and sought to use centralised political and economic power to construct a radical-substantive democracy that boosted the quality of political and social citizenship of popular sectors. However, while he successfully recalibrated the very notion of what citizenship meant for poor Venezuelans, there were inherent tensions in the process. The story of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) is illustrative of this point. Following the series of elite efforts to remove Chávez from power between 2002 and 2004, and his landslide victory in the 2006 election, Chávez initiated the process of forming the PSUV, thereby bringing the majority of political parties that supported him under one umbrella (Hetland 2017). In fact, from the outset Chávez maintained that if any existing progressive parties did not join the PSUV then they would have to leave the government (Cannon 2009: 59).

The formation of the PSUV offered Chávez the opportunity to clarify the political-ideological objectives of his project of developing

twenty-first century socialism (Hetland 2017: 21). Indeed, its creation “represented another of Chávez’s efforts to organize the popular sectors” (Hetland 2017: 21). The aim was to provide opportunity for grassroots input in policy formation, uniting leadership and base into one single body (Cannon 2009: 60). It was hoped such a move could counteract bureaucratisation and attendant issues of clientalism and corruption and ultimately foster an independent popular movement that was not dependent on the president or any one figure for its survival (2009: 60). However, according to Webber (2016), the PSUV, despite initially generating enthusiasm and millions of new members, “never realized its potential due to its rigid verticalism, lack of internal debate, and the generalized absence of participatory democracy within the party”. As a result, the PSUV became a top-down structure (Gonzalez 2017) which proved slow in responding to grassroots demands, while those social movements that did not align themselves with the PSUV were sidelined (Velasco 2017a). Indeed, following Chavez’ death in 2013, the tensions and issues of using centralised power to overcome elite resistance and to deepen and extend democracy became more apparent.

Maduro, elite destabilisation, and regressive centralisation

From the moment of Nicolás Maduro’s election, “the political and economic pressures imposed on Venezuela have been relentless” (Foster 2015: 12). Nearly victorious in the 2013 election, “the opposition swarmed at the sight of fresh blood” (Ciccariello-Maher 2016: 77). The year 2013 witnessed the beginning of an economic slide for Venezuela. By April, month on month inflation had reached 6 percent (Sagarzazu 2014: 322). While the economy struggled, the country began to witness scarcities of basic products. Oil prices fell by 50 percent from June to December 2014 (Smilde 2015: 49). With oil revenues accounting for “approximately 95 percent of export earnings, 60 percent of budget revenues, and 12 percent of GDP” (Buxton 2016: 7), the economic power of the government was hobbled. The pressure on the government was “further intensified with widespread hoarding of imported goods - a form of economic corruption introduced by vested interests of the rentier-importer economy, directed at thwarting price controls introduced to regulate the growing inflation” (Foster 2015: 12). In addition, foods sold at government regulated prices were also hoarded and transported across the Colombian border where they were sold for extensive profits (2015: 12). Disturbingly, it was not simply the traditional elites who engaged in such practices. There are widespread accusations that government and military elites, charged with managing the supply of

US dollars for purchasing price-controlled goods, as well as the supply of food and medicines, were heavily involved in corruption (Gonzalez 2017). Meanwhile, the US, hoping to take advantage of Maduro's vulnerability, introduced a range of sanctions thereby discouraging Western banks and investors from doing business in Venezuela at a time when the country was in desperate need of dollars (Hetland 2016).

In the December 2015 legislative elections, the PSUV was "trounced in the urban barrios" (Hellinger and Spanakos 2017: 2) whose residents were "sending a powerful signal – either by abstaining or voting for the opposition – of their displeasure with the government" (Velasco 2016). The PSUV was punished for the endless lines found around the country as people queued for scarce goods, for inflation levels that had reached 100 percent, and for rising poverty levels (Hetland 2017: 17). The opposition gained a two-thirds supermajority in the National Assembly giving them substantial legislative power, the first time the opposition achieved such a position since Hugo Chávez's election in 1999 (Cannon and Brown 2017: 614). However, the Venezuelan Supreme Court (TSJ) reduced the opposition's number of elected deputies by three due to irregularities in their elections. As Cannon and Brown (2017: 616) note, "this prompted the National Assembly to unilaterally reincorporate the suspended deputies in July leading the TSJ to 'declare congress illegitimate', effectively neutering that body and any legislation it may pass".

2016 witnessed a deepening of the economic and social crisis. Oil prices dipped to \$34/barrel, GDP declined by 25 percent between 2013 and 2016, inflation was estimated at 720 percent, with food inflation reaching 1,400 percent (Santos 2017: 58–61). In this scenario, and with capital flight and debt repayments further reducing available dollars, food imports fell 40 percent in the first half of 2016 alone (Hetland 2016). With little domestic production, scarcities of vital goods, medicines, and food soared. In 2017, the economic scenario worsened as inflation worsened, while the black-market exchange rate for dollars in August 2017 stood at 16,280 bolivares/US\$1, up from a rate of 18bs/US\$1 in 2013 (based author's own observations).

In this scenario, and by "closing off constitutional avenues for opposition" (Hellinger 2017) the government "played into the hands of the more radical sectors" (2017) of the MUD – the opposition coalition of parties whose incendiary rhetoric led to a wave of almost constant street protests for three months. In the midst of protests Maduro "doubled down on the loyalty of the security forces and the risk of alienating even his Chavista supporters by calling for a constituent assembly to rewrite the 1999 constitution" (Hellinger 2017). Without holding a

consultative referendum in advance – unlike in 1999 when Chávez relied on popular support to convene a constituent assembly – a vote was held to elect the 545-member assembly (Smilde and Ramsey 2017). The electoral process for the National Constituent Assembly (ANC) faced accusations of bias because it seemed to guarantee that, in the absence of majority support for either the constituent process or the Maduro government, “Madurismo wins a majority” (Lander 2017b). The opposition decried the move as an attempt to avoid presidential elections in 2018 and declined to participate (Smilde and Ramsey 2017).

Maduro claimed that the forming of the ANC was necessary to overcome the political impasse and violence in the country and to advance the country’s revolution, but many observers questioned the timing of the process, suggesting that it was “the initiative of an unpopular leader avoiding fair elections at all cost” (Smilde and Ramsey 2017). International condemnation of the process was severe. With the Rightward shift in several key South American nations including Brazil and Argentina, the Venezuelan opposition’s analysis of the political and economic context was supported by Mercosur which suspended Venezuela, while Luis Almagro of the Organisation of American States (OAS) called for the Inter-American Democratic Charter to be invoked against Venezuela (Cannon and Brown 2017: 617). Florida Senator Marco Rubio openly threatened the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Haiti with punishment if they failed to cooperate with Washington’s plans to “delegitimise the government of Venezuela” (Weisbrot 2017a). Mike Pompeo, director of the CIA, admitted to coordinating with the Mexican and Colombian governments to overthrow the Maduro government (cited in Aporrea 2017). The Trump administration and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson openly called for regime change, which emboldened the radical sectors of the opposition who did not seek a negotiated or peaceful solution to the political impasse (Weisbrot 2017b), and whose aim was “not only to get rid of Maduro, but to destroy Chavismo itself” (Gonzalez 2017). As Weisbrot (2017b) emphasises, there was a real attempt on the part of the US to further destroy an economy which was already a wreck so as to force the government from power.

This scenario fueled an entrenched attitude on behalf of the government (Velasco 2017b) with an increasing militarisation of the upper echelons of Chavismo. Maduro, whose control over the military was always more tenuous than that of Chavez’s, strove to cultivate a “loyal core among security officials” (Smilde 2016a). Furthermore, Smilde (2016a) suggests that Maduro’s appointment of military

personnel facing charges in the US raises the exit costs of the government losing power and ensures the loyalty of high-ranking officers.

Meanwhile, it became increasingly clear that the military elites “were openly involved in corruption, especially in trafficking medicine, food, and foreign currency, which directly affects popular sectors” (Velasco 2017b). 2017 witnessed an increase in popular protest, not against the government per se, but against poverty and corruption (Velasco 2017a). In the barrios “the government is not only weakened, but discredited, even among the most committed Chavistas, for whom the government reacts with timidity and incoherence against what they perceive as a violent opposition” (Velasco 2017b). When a tipping point was reached under Maduro during the economic crisis, and radical-popular critique of the government’s control of the direction of the Chavista process became more overt, the government sought to silence contestation coming from the base.

While Chávez sought to use centralised power to overcome elite impediments to democratic extending, this centralised power was combined with efforts to deepen the quality of democracy whereby organised popular actors could directly influence the decision-making process. Furthermore, Chávez repeatedly allowed for free and fair elections and always respected their outcomes. Like Chávez, Maduro has faced near constant elite and international efforts to topple the government. However, while centralised power was used to act as a defence against domestic and international elite destabilisation efforts, it was also used to side-line critical popular voices, to impede or block scheduled elections, to disregard the results of elections, and to entrench a military and party bureaucracy in power despite lacking majority support from the populace. As Smilde (2016b) states, “Chavismo has come full circle. From a movement that showed how nonelite actors could use the instruments of electoral democracy to upend an entrenched elite, Chavismo has itself become an entrenched elite preventing those same instruments from upending it”.

Conclusion

The above discussion of the Venezuelan experiment to respond to the crisis of market democracy highlights the difficulties such processes face when they challenge entrenched elite interests, both domestic and international. Left governments will find themselves “squeezed between popular demands, articulated by key social movements for greater participation and improved living conditions, and global demands for pro-market orthodoxy and protection of the interests of

capital” (Cannon and Kirby 2012: 202). As such, Left leaders may feel that centralising power in the executive is necessary to revitalise the democratic project in a society guided by neoliberal logic that allows economic elites to use their power to make a mockery of actually existing democracy.

The Venezuelan case highlights both the possible risks and rewards of such a process. Centralised power could be used to overcome and restrict elite influence over the decision-making process and to push through laws that boost the social citizenship of popular sectors. Chávez used centralised political and economic power to re-incorporate popular sectors of society who had been side-lined under the market model of democracy. However, over time the use of centralised power as a response to elite destabilisation tactics increased the tendency toward a regressive centralisation. While one could conclude then that bending the rules of liberal democracy is not the solution to save democracy from the current crisis it faces, the Venezuelan case also highlights that it was precisely by doing so that democracy was revitalised. While centralisation certainly moved in a more regressive manner over time, “the Bolivarian Revolution offered both a mandate to mobilize and a tool to do so, and that remains” (Velasco 2016), albeit in a more limited form at present, thereby representing a spectacular change from the exclusionary market-democracy era. As a result of Chavismo, popular sectors have developed self-respect, understood that they too have a right to inclusion, and have forged new links that have boosted their associational and collective power to pressurise future governments. Whatever happens next in Venezuela, the stability of any “project that emerges from this moment of intense crisis, will depend on the ability of those sectors to understand that it is impossible to sideline or marginalize the demands – especially for participation – not for handouts, not for immediate goods or services, but for participation of popular sectors” (Velasco 2017c). This re-incorporation of popular voices into the democratic debate represents a spectacular outcome of the Chavista democratisation project.

Given the undemocratic nature of actually existing democracy in the West today, theorists must ask themselves whether it better to defend all aspects of liberal democracy and allow the democratic project to ossify in the long shadow cast by neoliberalism, or whether is it time to engage in new discussions that, as the Venezuelan case demonstrates, are full of risk, but that may offer a pathway toward resolving the democratic crisis. As Macpherson formulated the challenge in 1977, we must determine what we want liberal democracy to

mean; adhering to a notion where “liberal” means freedom of the stronger to overcome the weaker by following market rules cannot be defended as being democratic. Rather, liberal democracy should be equated with the equal effective freedom of all to use and develop their capacities. The latter understanding is inconsistent with the former. Given the power of economic elites to capture and control not only democratic decision-making channels but the very nature of what it means to be a citizen, achieving the latter ideal may, paradoxically, entail a period of centralisation of power in the executive which would act as a stepping-stone toward a more inclusionary democratic model, both politically and socially.

A fundamental question thus emerges regarding how to ensure that centralised power would be used progressively to democratise democracy and to avoid the errors of the Venezuelan experiment. For Poulantzas (1978: 260), the only way to avoid centralisation becoming regressive and sliding to “authoritarian statism” is to combine the radical transformation of the state and representative democracy headed by a progressive government with the unfurling of forms of direct and participatory democracy that maintain autonomy from the state itself. An active, autonomous, powerful popular base capable of guiding the democratisation process from below must exist so as to act as protective buffer against the risks of regressive centralisation. While the specifics of how to tether centralised power to power-from-below requires deep thinking and theorizing, without engaging in such processes it is difficult to identify a way out of the current crisis of too little democracy.

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