5.11

POPULISM AND CONSPIRACY THEORY IN LATIN AMERICA

A case study of Venezuela

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Introduction

Despite the expansion within the field of conspiracy theory research, Latin America remains largely overlooked. However, the region has a complex culture of conspiracy theory, because of its postcolonial status, centuries-long struggle against the spectre of U.S. hegemony and the legacy of military intervention in politics. In Argentina, the death of Alberto Nisman – chief investigator into the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community centre – provided fertile ground for numerous conspiracy theories that tell of government-ordered assassinations, cover-ups and rogue intelligence officers (Rodriguez, Smallman 2016). In Chile, ex-president Salvador Allende’s body was exhumed in 2011 to lay to rest the conspiracy theory that he was actually assassinated during the 1973 military coup (Guardian 2011). In Mexico, the death of one of ex-President Felipe Calderón’s interior ministers in a helicopter crash equally engendered a wide range of conspiracy theories that he had been murdered – by the military on the order of the President, a drug lord or by the Partido Revolucionario Insitucional (Herrera 2018). The list goes on. Yet, there is no denying that conspiracy theories have captured the Venezuelan imagination perhaps more than any other Latin American nation.

Due to the myriad conspiracy theories that flourished under Hugo Chávez’s presidency from 1999 to 2013, this chapter will use Venezuela as a case study to examine the role of conspiracy theories in Latin American political discourse. From indicting the U.S.A. for developing cancer as a biological weapon to assassinate leftist Latin American leaders, expelling the Drugs Enforcement Agency (D.E.A.) for spying on his government, exhuming Simón Bolívar’s body to prove that he was assassinated and alleging 52 attempts on his own life, conspiracy theories undoubtedly played an integral role in Chávez’s rhetoric (Hoy 2005; Padgett 2010; Ultimas Noticias 2011; Fernández 2013). Although the use of conspiracy theories as a rhetorical device has also been deployed by Chávez’s successor, Nicolás Maduro, and the Venezuelan opposition, this chapter will focus on Chávez as the originator of this trend in modern Venezuelan politics.

The pernicious effects of conspiracy theories on Venezuelan politics have already been dealt with in detail by journalists and academics alike (Hernáiz 2008). Indeed, they are impossible to ignore. Not only have conspiracy theories been used to distract the public from ongoing problems related to security, hyperinflation, and the scarcity of essential goods, but they have also
served to justify authoritarian acts, including the silencing of political opposition and the concentration of power in the executive (Hernáiz 2008). Yet, as important as this recognition and analysis is, it fails to fully engage with the complex role that conspiracy theories play in Latin American politics and overlooks the fact that they can have both a positive and negative impact within the same political ideology (Knight 2000: 21). Consequently, there is a lack of understanding as to why conspiracy theories have held such widespread appeal in Venezuela. This chapter therefore focuses primarily on the mobilising capacity of conspiracy theories within political discourse, and, in particular, how Chávez used them to unify ‘the people’ and coalesce a collective identity, in addition to providing believers with a sense of personal and collective agency. This is by no means intended to be a comprehensive analysis of the role of conspiracy theories in Latin American political discourse (and, indeed, one chapter could not do that justice). However, it is intended that the issues raised and discussed further our understanding of the popularity of conspiracy theories within Latin America and pave the way for further research.

The very terminology used to discuss conspiracy theories is undeniably problematic. Jack Bratich contends that a ‘conspiracy theory’ is merely a discourse that has been labelled as such by mainstream society in an attempt to marginalise and dismiss it (Bratich 2008: 3–5). Although Bratich’s viewpoint is crucial in highlighting the role that nomenclature plays in the delegitimation of dissent, using his framework makes it almost impossible to discuss a very real and active phenomenon. Therefore, this chapter follows Peter Knight’s explanation that the term ‘conspiracy theory’ can be applied to anything from ‘fully elaborated theories to passing suspicions about hidden forces’ (Knight 2000: 11). This broader understanding of the term is particularly important in relation to historical episodes of conspiracism in Venezuela, where frequently a more generalised fear of conspiracy was expressed. ‘Conspiracism’ is defined here as ‘the act of using conspiracy theories’, whether in politics or for any other purpose (Gray 2010: 6).

This chapter will first examine the use of political demonology in the dictatorial governments prior to 1958 to assert that the ‘conspiratorial nature of military politics’ embedded conspiracism into the heart of the Venezuelan political tradition (Coronil 1997: 208). The second part will then examine the complex interrelationship between populism, chavismo and conspiracy theories, arguing that the appeal of populism in Latin America potentially lends conspiracy theories, with their populist underpinnings, greater legitimacy. This chapter uses Ernesto Laclau’s definition of ‘populism’ as a political logic, rather than a movement attached to a specific political ideology or social base (Laclau 2005: 5). According to this definition, there are two preconditions of populism: (1) An ‘antagonistic frontier’ between ‘the people’ and the ‘power bloc’; and (2) an articulation of social demands (which have been unfulfilled by the power bloc) into an equivalent chain, which allows for the emergence of ‘the people’ as a collective (Laclau 2005: 74). An ‘empty signifier’, according to Laclau, is a name or concept that ‘both expresses and constitutes an equivalent chain’ (Laclau 2005: 129, 217). In other words, it is ‘empty’ because it loses its own specific meaning when it functions as a substitute for the multiple demands that constitute the equivalent chain (Beasley-Murray 2006).

Finally, it will consider the limits of conspiracy theories as a meaningful method of dissent and political thought. While their function in Venezuela under Chávez as a means of constructing an identity for the previously marginalised is positive in some ways, there is no escaping their negative impact, as highlighted above. This precarious balance between conspiracy theory’s varied mobilising capabilities is reflected in the tenuous space that Chávez’s particular brand of populism occupies between a participatory democracy and authoritarianism and is a tension that runs through the chapter.
Political demonology

Hugo Chávez’s penchant for conspiracy theories has been portrayed as an aberration on the Venezuelan political landscape, or a perpetuation of a post-Second World War culture that is inherently suspicious of the U.S.A. (see e.g. Pipes 1997; Hernáiz 2008) There is no denying that U.S. intervention has left an indelible stain on the region and its inhabitants – one that lends a degree of legitimacy in Venezuela (and Latin America more generally) to conspiracy theories involving the U.S.A. that they might not achieve elsewhere. However, while foreign intervention in Latin America sets an important precedent upon which many contemporary conspiracy theories have been constructed, the reasons for the recent deluge in Venezuela are far more complex.

Like much of Latin America during the twentieth century, Venezuelan politics was blighted by a combination of military dictatorships, civilian and military coups between 1899 and 1958. This type of political system, in which coups are a quasi-acceptable form of political dissent, naturally cultivates an atmosphere of intense suspicion, primarily because coups occur through real conspiracy against a government, and second because, when power is taken by force, fears instinctively emerge that another group of plotters will try to take that power. Fears of conspiracy are frequently articulated through conspiracy theories, i.e. ‘I fear that they might conspire to overthrow me’ morphs into ‘they are conspiring to overthrow me’. When expressed by the executive branch of government, these fears and theories can often result in a greater concentration of power in the executive and the repression of political opposition. In turn, this only animates or forces that opposition to genuinely conspire against those in power. This is what is referred to as the ‘conspiratorial nature of military politics’ in this chapter. For example, Judith Ewell notes that Cipriano Castro’s regime was marked by ‘paranoia’, particularly when it came to his second-in-command, Juan Vicente Gómez. Although he could not prove it until it was a fait accompli, Castro was convinced that Gómez was secretly plotting to usurp power. When Gómez finally did seize power while Castro was in Europe (through the articulation and propagation of his own conspiracy theory that Castro was plotting his assassination), he was able to successfully prevent Castro from returning both to power and Venezuela (Ewell 1984: 46–7). Journalist María Teresa Romero compares the ‘paranoid’ outlook of Hugo Chávez with that of Cipriano Castro, lamenting that ‘having paranoid rulers has been one of our biggest political tragedies’ (Romero 2007). Although Romero is correct in her observation of a connection between the outlook of Castro and Chávez, it is not the political pathology that she deems it to be. Indeed, the notion that conspiracy theories are indicative of clinical paranoia is an approach that the academic community now largely dismisses because it tends to pathologise and marginalise views that deviate from those of establishment liberals and conservatives (Fenster 2008: 34; Bratich 2008: 31). Moreover, since conspiracy theories emerge in such a wide variety of social, political, economic and historical contexts and are utilised by myriad actors within government and the general populace, it seems tenuous to diagnose such vast swathes of people with a particular psychological disorder.

Alleged conspiracies and attempted coups during Juan Vicente Gómez’s 27-year rule culminated in a distinct form of conspiracism that Michael Rogin calls ‘political demonology’ (Ewell 1984: 54–5; Rogin 1987: xiii, xiv; Gray 2010: 6). In political demonology, those at the political centre attribute their opposition with nigh-on otherworldly powers that will (in the eyes of the demonologist) enable them to subvert the centre. In order to combat these subversive powers, the demonologist then mirrors these characteristics in the name of countersubversion (Rogin 1987: 284–5). However, while this demonology might be rooted in genuine fears, it is also unequivocally used as a vehicle of repression. For example, Gómez’s appropriation of
U.S. fears about communist infiltration that arose during the first Red Scare of the 1920s led to the designation of most of his opposition as communists (Ewell 1996: 125). Naturally, fears of a communist conspiracy were rooted in ideas about protecting national security and interests with regard to oil, but they were also part of a more calculated campaign to whip up popular panics about labourers and unions, and to neutralise the threat of anti-gomecistas. However, in his battle with the ‘Communist conspiracy’ that was allegedly taking place in Venezuela, Gómez began to mirror the subversive characteristics he had attributed to his opposition, creating a covert network of spies at home and abroad to monitor, imprison and torture his opponent (Rangel 1974: 227; Ewell 1996: 55). This political demonology and countersubversive tradition did not terminate with Gómez, either. Eleazar López Contreras, Gómez’s successor, also pursued the ideology of anti-communism; 47 pro-labour leaders and politicians were imprisoned and exiled for ‘Communist activities’ in 1937 alone (Ewell 1984: 76, 82). Coinciding with the apex of U.S. anti-communism and the increased reach of U.S. intelligence agencies, Pérez Jiménez’s dictatorship (1948–1958) marked a heightened point of political demonology. Pérez Jiménez allowed agents from the F.B.I. and C.I.A. to record the fingerprints of oil workers and carry out other surveillance techniques in order to keep track of any potential subversives and communists (Rabe 1982: 120–1). In the name of national security and anti-communism, Pérez Jiménez’s secret police force, the Seguridad Nacional, hunted down and tortured those considered a threat to the nation – coincidentally, members of the opposition (Galván 2013: 64–5).

The virulent anti-communism that marked the regimes of Gómez, Contreras and Pérez Jiménez, while being used to manipulate and repress the opposition, also expressed anxiety over national security and the spread of this little-understood ideology within the Western hemisphere. While Rogin attributes the countersubversive tradition in the U.S.A. to the concepts of rugged individualism (i.e. that anyone can succeed if they work hard enough), Western expansion and the construction of American identity in opposition to ‘aliens’ (whether racial, ethnic, class or gendered), its history in Venezuela, and Latin America more broadly, comes from a markedly different perspective (Rogin 1987: xiv). It is rooted in the conspiratorial nature of military politics that has shaped the country’s political imagination since the early twentieth century, fears over the permeable nature of geographic and metaphorical borders (as a result of, for example, colonisation and U.S. interference) and the search for an inclusive national identity in a region where the Manichaean dichotomy of civilisation and barbarism continues to produce identity anxiety.

Since independence, the dichotomy of civilisation and barbarism has burdened the Latin American articulation of identity, and Venezuela is no exception. As the economic situation in Venezuela deteriorated at the end of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s, the image of unity and modernity began to shatter, exposing a deep-rooted crisis of identity. International oil prices dropped and the poor blamed the elite for being self-serving and failing to diversify the economy sufficiently, while the middle and upper classes scapegoated the poor (Ellner 2003: 19). Indeed, as social polarisation worsened and the myth of unity and progress started to fracture, so too did the myth of racial harmony as elite discourse during the 1983 devaluation of the Bolívar and the 1989 caracazo (a series of violent protests in Caracas) became increasingly racialised, with invectives such as ‘mixed breeds’ and ‘Indians’ being cast on the protestors and looters (Herrera Salas 2005: 72). It became evident that the pueblo had never truly been part of the official narrative of identity and modernity (Emerson 2011). The social, political and economic cleavages of the 1980s and 1990s thus unveiled a crisis of identity that had been corroding beneath the mask of ‘civilisation’ and unity since independence. Knight explains that conspiracy theories frequently thrive among marginalised sectors of society because they are a means of explaining the complex forces that perpetuate these communities’ poverty and disenfranchisement (Knight 2000: 145–6). This is
unequivocally true in Venezuela as well. The violence instigated against the working classes during the caracazo in 1989, the underlying racism within society that stemmed from the colonial era and their marginalisation as the ‘barbarous masses’ suddenly seemed to make more sense when Hugo Chávez voiced ideas of an elite conspiracy to subjugate the pueblo (Chávez 2003).

**Populism and conspiracy theories in Hugo Chávez’s discourse**

Throughout his 14-year presidency, Hugo Chávez alleged that there were 52 attempts on his life (Fernández 2013). This seems excessive in itself, yet it barely scratches the surface of the conspiracy theories that flourished during Chávez’s presidency. As indicated above, Chávez has undoubtedly inherited a political legacy inclined towards demonology of political opponents, and yet these attributes also thrived under him in an unprecedented manner. The aim of this section is therefore to analyse the function and style of conspiracy theories within Chávez’s discourse. In particular, the complex interrelationship between populism, chavismo and conspiracy theories.

A matter of contention within the definition of populism is the role of conspiracy theories. Kirk A. Hawkins contends that conspiracy theories are an intrinsic characteristic of populism because he understands the ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ mentality as a cosmic battle between the good ‘unified will of the people’ and an evil ‘conspiring minority’ (emphasis added) – otherwise known as Manicheanism (Hawkins 2010: 29). However, the concept of the ‘power bloc’ is largely an abstract concept and empty signifier that can be adapted and interpreted as required (at least in Laclau’s work) but is not by definition conspiratorial, though it may be interpreted as such by individual populist movements. In the same vein, although many populist leaders use conspiracy theories as a means of soliciting support for their movement, as Chávez did, it is not a necessary component of populist discourse (Fenster 2008: 84). Therefore – and while this is undoubtedly an area for future research – although conspiracy theories often have populist foundations in which the power external to the people is definitively conspiratorial, this is not always the case within populism alone. As such, the presence of conspiracy theories is arguably not one of the preconditions to populism (Fenster 2008: 11, 84).

Indeed, those studying both populism and conspiracy theories frequently miss the nuanced relationship between the two. Fenster argues that some of the key theoretical frameworks often used to analyse conspiracy theories in the U.S.A. (namely, the symbolist and realist schools of thought) are characterised by an aversion to populism, which leads them to disregard conspiracy theories as a dangerous political phenomenon that requires ‘surveillance’ and ‘discipline’ (Fenster 2008: 83). However, populism and its reception – and therefore the populist foundations of conspiracy theories – manifest in a markedly different way in Latin America to the U.S.A. Rather than a form of political pathology or extremism, Beasley-Murray explains that populism holds a particular appeal in Latin America because of its promise (whether founded or not) to resolve the complex issue of identity (Beasley-Murray 2003: 29). This is because of the simple division of the nation into two opposing camps: The people and the power bloc, which is an articulation of antagonism that is easy to activate in Latin American societies due to existing structural conditions such as social, economic and political polarisation. Therefore, you are either with the people or against them (Beasley-Murray 2003: 29). That is not to say that academics, such as Kenneth Roberts, have not still disparaged populism as being a threat to democratic institutions within Latin America, but they also recognise that it is frequently a legitimate response to popular demands for an inclusion in politics and to be part of the national community (Roberts 2000: 1–32). Therefore – although it would need further ethnographic research – there is an argument that conspiracy theories achieve greater legitimacy within Latin America
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because their populist underpinnings are not automatically considered a danger to political rationality. As such, it may be that the reception of populism in different regions directly affects the reception of conspiracy theories and is an area of study that should be considered further.

It is not only through populism that Chávez’s discourse attempted to resolve the complex issue of identity, however, but also conspiracy theories. As Matthew Gray and Peter Knight highlight, conspiracy theories work as potent group ‘identifiers, mobilisers, and signifiers’ by imagining that the group is at risk (Gray 2010: 31; Knight 2014: 361). By adding the conspiratorial element to the populist division of ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ and insisting that ‘the people’ are under threat from the conspiring ‘power bloc’, conspiracy theories strengthen the collective identity of ‘the people’ by giving them a clear and malevolent enemy against which to mobilise. In addition, conspiracies (especially the ‘imperialist conspiracy’) as a broader concept also functioned as an ‘empty signifier’ in Chávez’s discourse. While the conspiracies espoused by Chávez do not fully lose their literal meaning, they have functioned as an empty signifier in the sense that they are so open to multiple interpretations, yet they simultaneously assist the concretion of identity of ‘the people’. This is why it is not especially important for Chávez’s supporters to believe in their literal meaning, because they function as a conduit for expressing multiple anxieties and demands. For example, allegations that Chávez’s political opposition, in collusion with U.S. agencies, have tried to assassinate him could be taken very literally, or it might be interpreted as symbolic of the historic mistreatment of poor, Afro-indigenous bodies by the Venezuelan political, social and economic elite. The point is that it could be appropriated differently by and hold different meanings for any number of groups and individuals within society.

In Venezuela, Chávez was thus able to strengthen group identity and unity through repeated references to conspiracies allegedly conducted by the domestic opposition and U.S. government (frequently referred to as ‘la conspiración imperialista’). This idea is particularly well represented in a quote from an episode of Chávez’s television show, Aló, Presidente, in 2005:

Their [the U.S.] attempts at blackmail will not be able to isolate Venezuela from our brother countries [in Latin America] … they [the U.S. and domestic opposition] have failed in their coup d’état, they have failed in their economic sabotage, because they know that the Bolivarian project moves forward victoriously in social issues.

(Chávez 2005)

This quote demonstrates a number of charges that Chávez held against the enemy (domestic opposition and the U.S.A.), namely, the coup, blackmail and economic sabotage. Importantly, despite these purported attempts to subvert Chávez’s government, the emphasis is on how the Bolivarian movement (i.e. the anti-imperialist political and social movement started by Chávez and designed to build ‘twenty-first-century socialism’) thwarted these efforts and thrived in addressing social issues. It emphasises that, despite these malicious conspiracies designed to weaken the movement, it became stronger than ever. Thus, by presenting the Bolivarian movement as under threat from powerful enemies yet managing to survive, Chávez cleverly projected an empowering image of unity and strength of the collective. Moreover, Chávez complemented this rhetoric with initiatives like the misiones, which aimed to achieve progress in inclusive social development, education and healthcare (Buxton 2014). Whilst the misiones suffered from many internal problems, at least partially stemming from neglect during Chávez’s third term, they were a physical representation of the positive steps the Bolivarian movement was taking to address social inequalities and bring previously marginalised sectors of society into the Venezuelan social imaginary.

Although some commentators believe that Chávez created social polarisation through his ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ mentality, in reality he embraced a ‘repoliticisation of social inequalities’ that
already existed (Roberts 2003: 71). In the process, he inverted the civilisation and barbarism paradigm, proclaiming that ‘They [the colonisers] were the barbarians. Civilisation existed here, they brought barbarism’ (Chávez 2003). Memory historian Aleida Assman theorises that, in every society, whichever group is in power will ‘canonise’ certain memories and identities, whilst ‘archiving’ others (Assman 2011: 337). In Latin America, the typically lighter-skinned elite have largely regulated the canon, which, Chávez lamented, led to the exclusion of the indigenous peoples (and Afro-Venezuelans) and an attempt ‘to erase us from collective memory’ (Chávez 2003). Nonetheless, Assman also asserts that what is archive can become canon, and this is exactly what Chávez tried to achieve by targeting the elite and championing the rights of the historically downtrodden members of Venezuelan society, and challenging the previous perversion of the ‘official historiography’ (Zúquete 2008: 102). If, as Jeffrey Olick and Joyce Robbins suggest, identities are constructed and sustained through memory sites and practices, then Chávez also used conspiracy theories as one such type of mnemonic practice that served to reinforce the chavista identity, as will be seen in the following section (Olick, Robbins 1998: 124).

Perhaps one of the most potent empty signifiers used to coalesce and redefine Venezuelan identity in Chávez’s discourse was that of Simón Bolívar (Cannon 2009: 68; Hawkins 2010: 57; Zúquete 2008: 101). ‘Bolívar’ has in many ways lost its specific meaning as it has become attached to nearly the whole gamut of the Bolivarian Revolution. From changing Venezuela’s official name to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, adding a ‘Bolivarian’ star to the flag and naming community groups the ‘Bolivarian’ Circles, ‘Bolívar’ has come to depict everything pertaining to chavismo (Zúquete 2008: 111). Moreover, Chávez combined Bolívar and conspiracy theories to convey a deep-rooted historical contiguity between himself and Bolívar in order to locate the present struggle against a conspiring power bloc as part of an on-going cosmic battle (Chumaceiro Arreaza 2003: 32). This is evident in a speech he gave in 2001 via V.T.V., the state television channel, in which he declared that:

Bolívar was betrayed in life by the predatory oligarchy … this same oligarchy that now threatens the revolutionary government in a ridiculous way, this is the same oligarchy that betrayed Bolívar, expelled him from Venezuela to God-knows-where in 1828–1830 and was sent to (and almost did) kill him.

(quoted in Chumaceiro Arreaza 2003: 32)

The parallels between the conspiring elite of Bolívar’s time and Chávez’s also reached their peak in the allegations that their ultimate motive was to assassinate the leaders. For example, during the airing of Aló, Presidente on 20 February 2005, Chávez candidly told his listeners that ‘If I were to be assassinated, then there is a major culprit on this planet that is the President of the United States, George Bush’ and that he was certain that ‘Washington is planning my death’ (Chávez 2005). In 2010, Chávez announced that a team of experts would exhume Simón Bolívar’s body to discover the real reasons behind his death. Not convinced by the ‘official’ story that Bolívar died of tuberculosis, and spurred on by recent research by Dr Paul Auwaerter that suggested the Latin American hero might have died from arsenic poisoning, Chávez expressed his belief that ‘they [the elite] assassinated him’ (quoted in Padgett 2010; Primera 2010). The mirroring of assassination attempts between the two leaders further establishes the historical contiguity that is designed to mobilise supporters against this conspiring elite that has purportedly been attempting to subvert the Bolivarian dream since the days of Bolívar himself. It is through this reinterpretation of the past, particularly the past relating to Bolívar, that Chávez transformed these conspiracy theories into a mnemonic practice that reinforced his new interpretation of Venezuelan identity and mobilised support.
There is a distinctly moralistic and quasi-religious undertone to much of Chávez’s discourse that was designed to illustrate that the Bolivarian Revolution was (and still is) irrefutably on the side of good, and that they must continue in their endeavours to thwart attempts at subversion. As he claimed during his 1998 presidential campaign, ‘We’re in Apocalyptic times, there’s no middle ground. Either you are with God or you are with the Devil and we are with God’ (quoted in Roberts 2003: 70). Since the 2002 coup and the U.S.A.’s believed involvement in orchestrating it, Chávez’s frequent references to former U.S. President George W. Bush as ‘the Devil’, ‘immoral’, and ‘psychologically ill’, and the domestic opposition as ‘los lacayos del imperialism’, clearly illustrate whom Chávez saw as being on the side of ‘evil’ (BF26A4F468341A4F2006; Baronderothchild 2006). Zúquete and Hawkins assert that this strong moralistic tone to Chávez’s discourse locates the Venezuelan ‘mission’ in a cosmic battle that reaches far beyond the present, or indeed just Venezuela (Zúquete 2008: 106; Hawkins 2010: 55). While this is certainly true, Zúquete and Hawkins both overlook the connection between this Manicheanism and Chávez’s belief in conspiracy theories. It is now widely accepted among scholars that there are no intrinsic markers of a conspiracy theory as they can manifest in countless shapes and forms (Knight 2000: 11; Bratich 2008: 3–6). However, that is not to say that the characteristics outlined by Richard Hofstadter are not still relevant because the Manicheanism and apocalypticism that he identified are visible in Chávez’s discourse, which is laced with conspiracy theories (Hofstadter 1964: 30–1). Hofstadter explains that the apocalyptic element within conspiracy theories inspires personal and collective agency because of the idea that, if we engage in this battle against evil now, then a ‘doomsday’ event can still be avoided (Hofstadter 1964: 30). Furthermore, he highlights that, since this is a battle between absolute good and evil, total victory is constantly postponed because (as he sees it) these demands are unrealistic (Hofstadter 1964: 31). However, in Chávez’s case, this postponed victory over the opposition and the U.S.A. and the articulation of continued conspiracies against the movement functions to continually foster agency and mobilisation. Moreover, the vocalisation of victories (however small) towards achieving this triumph over ‘evil’ reminds followers that this is not a hopeless cause. For example, in Chávez’s closing campaign speech in 2006, he proclaimed:

Just as we defeated them [the enemy] in 2003 during the economic and oil sabotage, and how we defeated them in 2004 during the great and affirming referendum in 2004, and in 2005 in the government, most of the municipal and the National Assembly elections.

(Chávez 2006)

If Chávez’s supporters really believed that it was a hopeless cause, then they would not have voted him back into office with a staggering 62.8 per cent of the votes during this 2006 election (Consejo Nacional Electoral 2006).

Conspiracy theories, therefore, helped reconstruct Venezuelan national identity at a time when it was in crisis. They also inspired personal and collective empowerment and agency through their apocalyptic Manicheanism. This heightened sense of agency unquestionably contributed to higher levels of political participation, thus evidencing conspiracy theories’ mobilising capacities. For example, between 1998 and 2006, the participation of voters in presidential elections rose from 65.5 to 74.6 per cent (Wilpert 2011). Moreover, this sense of agency manifested itself in greater pushes toward economic, political and social independence from the U.S.A. on behalf of the Chávez government. For example, in 2004, Chávez’s belief that the U.S.A. orchestrated the 2004 recall referendum (a vote to remove Chávez from office) through their control of the Venezuelan media and funding of Súmate (the organisation that led the petition drive), confirmed in his eyes
that the U.S.A. was looking for an excuse ‘to call for international intervention in Venezuela’ (Chávez 2004a). This conviction nurtured Chávez’s desire to neutralise U.S. power and influence in Venezuela and Latin America and resulted in taking steps towards creating a ‘multi-polar’ world (McCarthy-Jones, Turner 2011: 557). The same year that Chávez accused the U.S.A. of trying to sabotage his government through Súmate and the recall referendum, he formally launched the Alternativa Bolivariana para las Américas (A.L.B.A.) designed to create greater regional solidarity of Latin American nations, particularly with regards to trade and development. A.L.B.A. has its own currency, the sucre, to maintain independence from the U.S. dollar. In 2005, A.L.B.A. also set up PetroCaribe, which supplies cheap oil to its members, particularly those in the Caribbean (McCarthy-Jones, Turner 2011: 558; Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the U.K. and Ireland). Additionally, Chávez initiated the revitalisation of O.P.E.C. (Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) in an effort to regain control over Venezuela’s own oil industry (Kozloff 2007: 26). Not all of these initiatives were wholly successful; for example, A.L.B.A. is particularly dependent on Venezuelan oil money, which is subject to international price peaks and troughs (Hart–Landsberg 2009). However, they made important steps towards encouraging Latin American nations to rely on and help one another. For Chávez, Latin America spent too long as subordinate to foreign countries. As the late president articulated in his closing campaign speech in 2006, ‘we were a colony of Spain for 300 odd years, and we have been a North American colony for the past 200 years’ (Chávez 2006). Therefore, if conspiracy theories about economic sabotage, media brainwashing and covert funding of ‘subversive’ groups like Súmate motivated Chávez to pursue policies like A.L.B.A. that encourage greater independence and challenge the status quo of U.S. hegemony, then they had a clear mobilising impact – contrary to Fenster’s assertion that conspiracy theories fail to foment any meaningful engagement with politics (Chávez 2005; Chávez 2006).

Nevertheless, as Hernáiz points out, conspiracy theories have also had undeniably negative consequences in Venezuela (2008: 1177). They have been used, amongst other things, to distract from very real socioeconomic problems and to displace blame onto external forces. For example, Chávez was heavily criticised when he unearthed the bones of Simón Bolívar for attempting to deflect public attention from the rising rates of inflation, corruption among government officials, increased crime and an accusation by Colombia that Venezuela was harbouring members of the F.A.R.C. (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) (Primera 2010). Similarly, Maduro’s entire presidency seems to have consisted of him blaming the Venezuelan opposition/U.S.A. for the spiralling socioeconomic and political problems that have brought the once prosperous nation to its knees (B.B.C. News 2019a; Guaido 2019).

Moreover, and perhaps more dangerously, they have been used to justify certain authoritarian attitudes. Fenster and Gray hypothesise that conspiracy theories are more likely to emerge within a state framework under an authoritarian regime, where the clear-cut boundary between the ‘people’ and the ‘enemy’ is likely to serve as a vehicle of repression against political dissent (Fenster 2008: 41; Gray 2010: 41). Supporting this assertion is Chávez’s complex and antagonistic relationship with the oppositional Venezuelan media. The suspicion of an on-going conspiracy conducted against him and his government by the media was used to justify acts of authoritarianism. In 2004, Chávez passed the Law on Social Responsibility in Radio and Television, which invoked the right to suspend or revoke the radio or television licences of stations that ‘promote, justify or incite war … public disorder … or crime; that are discriminatory; that promote religious intolerance; [or] that threaten the security of the Nation’ (Asamblea Nacional de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela 2005). Some analysts believe, however, that the imprecise wording in this law justified arbitrary interference on behalf of government and engenders self-censorship among journalists (Human Rights Watch 2008: 66).
However, perhaps the most controversial attempt during Chávez’s presidency to repress oppositional voices was his decision in 2007 not to renew R.C.T.V.’s broadcasting licence. As one of the main opposition television channels, international organisations like the Human Rights Watch jumped on this restriction of freedom of expression while the domestic opposition decried the increasing pressure to self-censor within the print and visual media (Human Rights Watch 2008: 67). However, since the opposition media, particularly main television stations like R.C.T.V. and Venevisión, participated in a media blackout during the 2002 coup, Chávez became convinced that the opposition were ‘trying to sabotage the democratic process via the media’ (Hellinger 2003: 50; Chávez 2004b). Despite these attempts to mute the opposition, however, Julia Buxton emphasises that Chávez’s overthrow of the ancien régime went a long way towards creating a participatory democracy (Buxton 2011: xv–vi). Deborah Norden similarly suggests that Chávez’s presidency actually occupied a tenuous space between a participatory democracy and authoritarianism (Norden 2003: 110). Therefore, the fact that Chávez toed a fine line between democracy and authoritarianism, and that conspiracy theories were not only used to further authoritarian attitudes during Chávez’s presidency, demonstrates that the emergence and proliferation of conspiracy theories is not simply confined to authoritarian regimes. In fact, Knight pertinently questions whether conspiracy theories might ironically thrive more under democratic governments where ‘the political reality fails to live up to an unrealistic utopian faith in egalitarianism’ (Knight 2014: 362). Indeed, as numerous conspiracy theory scholars such as Kathryn Olmsted, Michael Rogin and Jack Bratich have documented, conspiracy theories have also played an integral role in U.S. state discourse, such as with anti-communism during the Cold War (Rogin 1987: xiii; Bratich 2008: 165; Olmsted 2009: 209). As such, there is clear evidence both in Venezuela and the U.S.A. that state discourses do not merge with conspiracy theories under authoritarian leaders alone.

In scholarly discussions of conspiracy theories, there has been a growing interest in a more utopian approach to the phenomenon, in which conspiracy theories are deemed a positive challenge to democracy. However, both Bratich and Fiske’s understanding of conspiracy narratives, while important in recognising the healthy protest within democracy that they can provide, simultaneously suggest that all conspiracy theories are a worthwhile form of dissent (Fiske 1996: 192; Bratich 2008: 10). The danger with these treatments of conspiracy theory is that, by focusing too much on how conspiracy theories can be useful as a social critique and as a challenge to the status quo, they forget the ways in which they can concomitantly be tied to harmful projects and ideologies. Fenster’s discussion of this tension is particularly adept; he suggests that conspiracy theories are neither necessarily harmful nor progressive, but their positive impact is determined by the political project to which they contribute. Some conspiracy theories undoubtedly provide a challenge to the status quo of hegemonic power relations, yet they can also lead to violence and repression (Fenster 2008: 279–89). Nonetheless, Fenster ultimately undermines this nuanced argument in his afterword when he concludes that, when it comes down to it, all conspiracy theories are ‘wrong’ because they preclude any ‘real’ engagement in politics (Fenster 2008: 289). Moreover, he does not seem to take into account the possibility that conspiracy theories might yield both positive and negative results within the same political project. For example, for Chávez, there were undoubtedly benefits to the use of conspiracy theories in his discourse, like their ability to help construct and maintain a strong national identity and provide a source of empowerment and agency when used alongside real social projects that aimed to improve access to healthcare, education, housing and social security, as well as independence from the U.S.A. (Buxton 2011). Yet, we have also seen how they have diverted attention from issues of security, inflation and shortages, as well as being used to justify repression of dissent. In this sense, the precarious balance between
conspiracy theories as harmful and mobilising is reflected in Chávez’s own struggle between democracy and authoritarianism.

**Conclusion**

The current predilection for conspiracy theories in Venezuela is grounded in far more than an inherent suspicion of the U.S.A. and its intervention in the region. It is also rooted in the conspiratorial nature of military politics that has shaped the country political tradition since the early twentieth century. This is a tradition that is by no means limited to Venezuela – the military has played a leading role in politics across Latin America (see, for example, Castelo Branco in Brazil, Augusto Pinochet in Chile, Jorge Rafael Videla in Argentina, Anastasio Somoza Debayle in Nicaragua, Alfredo Stroessner in Paraguay), as has populism (see, for example, Juan Perón in Argentina, Alberto Fujimori in Peru, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua). As such, and while it would require further research, it is suggested that the conspiratorial nature of military politics has ingrained conspiracy theories into the Latin American political tradition and that the appeal of populism in Latin America (including its promise to resolve the complex issue of identity) lends conspiracy theories, with their populist underpinnings, greater legitimacy.

Chávez undoubtedly inherited a political legacy prone to conspiracism, but also demonstrated the mobilising capacities of conspiracy theories on an unprecedented scale – from the positive to the negative. The lines between conspiracy theories being attached to a positive or harmful dogma are not clear-cut and this is particularly evident within Chávez’s discourse. On the one hand, Chávez used conspiracy theories to help strengthen Venezuelan identity at a time when it was in crisis by constructing a clear enemy against which to mobilise (the Venezuelan elite and the U.S.A.). This enemy was then located within a historic and moral battle between good and evil designed to evoke a sense of duty towards the ultimate triumph of good. By imagining this new identity to be in danger of manipulation and interference by external forces, Chávez simultaneously used conspiracy theories to create a sense of agency among those who had historically been disenfranchised and marginalised within Venezuela.

On the other hand, it is impossible to ignore the negative side effects borne of conspiracism in Venezuela. Not only have conspiracy theories been used at points to distract the public from ongoing problems related to security, inflation and the scarcity of essential goods, but they have also served to justify authoritarian acts, like the silencing of opposition. While the latter undoubtedly started under Chávez (as highlighted above), the repression of dissent and the violation of human rights have become particularly fervent under Maduro. According to the Penal Forum, approximately 14,085 Venezuelan citizens have been arbitrarily arrested since January 2014 as a result of participating in anti-government protests and, as of 31 January 2019, 918 of those remain imprisoned (Foro Penal 2019). The reasons for such repression are numerous and complex. However, there is no denying that Maduro frequently justifies the use of force with allegations of a right-wing/U.S./Colombian coup conspiracy. Anyone either involved or supportive of these ‘coup tactics’ are subsequently detained, imprisoned, tortured and/or killed, thus fomenting a culture of fear and distrust (Phillips 2019). Not only do conspiracy theories thus exacerbate these problems of repression through fear of a conspiracy, but they also undermine the attempts of international arbiters to address these issues: As demonstrated by Maduro’s recent rejection of U.S. humanitarian aid, which he alleged was part of a plot to justify U.S. military intervention in Venezuela (B.B.C. News 2019b).

The question then becomes: Is it possible to inhibit the adverse effects of conspiracy theories? (Carey 2017; Foro Penal 2017).

1 How and by whom would such a limit even be imposed?
Carey suggests that improving education levels, stabilising the economy and reducing political partisanship could help break the cycle of conspiracism in Venezuela (2019: 454). Yet, this ignores the fact that conspiracy theories also thrive in largely stable economies such as the U.S.A. (though they may surge in times of turmoil) and, arguably, if we really are moving towards a ‘post-truth world’ in which analysing objective evidence and facts is less important, it is questionable whether improving education levels would have any effect.

This chapter has shown that conspiracy theories are by no means restricted to the U.S.A., and that they are a complex phenomenon that offers considerable insight into the fears and anxieties that govern contemporary Latin American society. As such, it is hoped that the issues raised and discussed here will spark further research into the role and popularity of conspiracy theories in this fascinating region, and why the spectre of conspiracy continues to haunt Latin American politics.

Note
1 According to data collected by the Venezuelan human rights organisation, Foro Penal, in its first three years and ten months, Maduro’s government imprisoned 56 political opponents on conspiracy charges (as well as another 48, mostly on protest-related charges), sentencing 21 of them as of February 2017 (Amaro Chacón, Carey 2017; Foro Penal 2017).

References


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