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SHADES OF VIOLENCE:
CRISIS AND CONFLICT IN VENEZUELA

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Dedicated To

My Mentors and Companions,
Simón and Francisco

The People of La Vega

My Wife, Kathleen Pitta-Ewing

and

My Teacher and Friend, Reygar

Abstract

SHADES OF VIOLENCE:
Crisis and Conflict in Venezuela

by

Walter A. Ewing

Adviser: Professor Joan Mencher

The debt crises and structural adjustment programs of the 1980s and 90s have fostered social and political upheaval around the globe. The effects of this upheaval go beyond the simple expansion of poverty as incomes fall and prices rise. Along with the desperation and discontent of poverty come rising rates of drug abuse, crime, gang violence, political protest, and repression by state security forces. Caracas, Venezuela, is one of the many cities of the world where this dynamic of poverty, violence, protest, and repression is keenly felt. This dissertation describes fourteen months of fieldwork that was conducted from November 1993 to December 1994. This fieldwork included eight months spent in an impoverished *barrio popular* that was subject to chronic water shortages, gang warfare, a crumbling system of political patronage, and street sweeps by the police and National Guard.

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This dissertation and the fieldwork on which it is based would not have been possible without the collaboration of many people: my wife Kathleen, who translated for me during the initial months of my stay in Caracas when I was too anxiety-ridden and overwhelmed to understand anyone in any language, and who provided strong moral support throughout my fieldwork; my friend Reygar, who taught me the street slang of Caracas, showed me around the city and beyond, and spared me the laborious task of transcribing my recorded interviews once I had returned to the United States; Simón, Francisco, and all the other community activists of La Vega who allowed me to share in their lives and who taught me things about La Vega, Caracas, and Venezuela that I could never have learned from any book; all the people of La Vega who graciously helped a totally out-of-place *gringo* such as myself feel welcome in a foreign land; Joan Mencher, Marc Edelman, and Leith Mullings of the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate School and Lesley Gill of American University, who helped me correct the many shortcomings of the early drafts of this manuscript; and the U.S. Fulbright Program, which provided the funding that made my work possible.

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"Techos de Cartón" (Roofs of Cardboard)

Que triste se oye la lluvia	How sad to hear the rain
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Que triste vive mi gente	How sad live my people
en las casas de cartón	in the houses of cardboard
Viene bajando el obrero	The worker comes down
casi arrastrando los pasos	almost dragging his steps
por el peso del sufrir.	from the weight of suffering
Mira que mucho sufrir [sic]	See how much he suffers
Mira que pesa el sufrir	See the weight he suffers
Arriba, deja la mujer preñada	Above he leaves his pregnant wife
Abajo está la ciudad	Below is the city
y se pierde en su maraña.	and it is lost in its tangle
Hoy es lo mismo que ayer	Today is the same as yesterday
es su vida sin mañana.	in his life without tomorrow
¡Ay!, caye la lluvia	Oh!, the rain falls
viene, viene el sufrimiento	the suffering comes
pero si la lluvia pasa,	but if the rain passes,
¿cuando pasa el sufrimiento?	when does the suffering pass?
¿cuando viene la esperanza?	when does hope come?
Niños color de mi tierra	Children the color of my land
con sus mismas cicatrices	with the same scars
millonarios de lombrices	millionaires of worms
Y, por eso:	And so:
Que tristes viven los niños	How sad live the children
en las casas de cartón	in the houses of cardboard
Que alegres viven los perros	How happy live the dogs
[en la] casa del explotador	[in the] house of the exploiter

Usted no lo va a creer,	You're not going to believe it,
pero hay escuelas de perros	but there are schools for dogs
y les dan educación;	and they give them education
pá que no muerdan los diarios	so that they don't bite the newspapers
Pero el patrón,	But the boss
hace años, muchos años	for years, many years
que está mordiendo al obrero	bites the worker
Que triste se oye la lluvia	How sad to hear the rain
en las casas de cartón	in the houses of cardboard
Que lejos pasa la esperanza	How far away passes hope
en los techos de cartón	on the roofs of cardboard

Alí Primera[1], *Alí Primera Volumen 2*, Promus, 1992

[1] Alí Primera (1942-1985) is a figure of heroic proportions for many Venezuelans. His career as a folk singer, guitarist, and leftist revolutionary was ended by an automobile accident (La Vega Dice 1986: 15).

Preface:
No Man's Land

During my fourteen months in Caracas, there were some days more than others that seemed to distill the many facets of *barrio* (slum)[2] life into only a few short hours. Days that never let me forget I was in a South American city, but that also gave me a long look into a very dark mirror reflecting my own society. Not just because the businesses, banks, and governments of my country have helped to make Venezuela the Third World that it is. But because there is enough of the Third World within the First to make such geographical boundaries seem small sometimes.[3]

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[2] Although the word *barrio* is not usually defined as "slum," in Caracas it is used as shorthand for *barrio popular*, which distinguishes lower-class communities from *urbanizaciones* (middle-class and upper-class communities).

[3] As I use the terms, the "Third World" consists of those nations that have historically suffered under systems of colonialism and neo-colonialism established by states and business enterprises of "First World" nations in Europe and North America. Although "Third World" nations as a whole have higher rates of poverty than their counterparts in the "First World," these terms do not imply any fundamental difference between the two groups of nations in terms of the political economy of class stratification. In both groups, most wealth and power are monopolized by a very small portion of the population, while a much larger number of disenfranchised people live in poverty. As a result, the terms refer only to broad historical patterns that are shared by the nations of each group, and which therefore distinguish one group from the other.

It was a sunny and warm Saturday in Caracas when I found myself spending the afternoon in something as boring as a political meeting. Not hiking through the Avila mountain range to the north, climbing above the urban smog and into the fresh air. Not soaking up sun on the Caribbean shore that lay just beyond the mountains. But sitting in a public forum called by the municipal government to debate a proposal for re-zoning the *parroquia*, or parish, known as La Vega.

I was with Simón, a moody and somewhat jaded community leader who filled his spare time with unpaid political work and spent most of his life completely broke because he refused to sell out to the corrupt political parties that dominated the entire country. He was one of the few poor people at the meeting: one of the tens of thousands of people who actually lived in the *barrios* that lend their collective name to the entire *parroquia*. But most of the self-important bureaucrats and over-dressed professionals who took turns giving speeches looked at the *barrios* with fear and disgust.

To them a *barrio* was a no man's land of gangs and violence that threatened the middle-class world they'd tried to create for themselves. So they wanted to cut off the *barrios* and leave them behind, forming their

own *parroquia* and their own local government free of poor people and all the problems they bring. Simón and a few other La Vega-sympathizers laughed every time one of these self-styled urban planners re-drew the map, carefully chopping off the hillsides where most of the population lived.

We 'd had enough of this after a couple of hours and headed for the *barrios* about which everyone was arguing. We left the very private university where the meeting was being held and hopped on one of the battered old busses that cruised the city day and night. The bus crawled through the weekend traffic, with us crammed inside like sardines, until we reached the lone entrance to the *barrios*. Then we got off and took another bus up into the hillsides, past the plaza filled to overflowing with vendors, past the illegal cement factory that had polluted the area for decades, through the cratered streets lined with *ranchos* (small houses) and piles of uncollected trash.

We were actually going to another meeting. This time it was a meeting of a housing association that offered home-improvement loans to those few people fortunate enough to have stable jobs and legal title to their land. Other than the gangs, it was one of the few active civic

organizations in the area where I lived and relied heavily on the participation of women (although the current president was male). It held its meetings in an old community center with a crumbling ceiling that was also home to a community press and a program in popular education offered through a local university. The meeting this afternoon was a planning session to get ready for the big city-wide housing conference that the association was hosting in a few weeks. About twenty people showed up, which was close to a record turnout by the standards of the association. The meeting itself was routine but productive, spent working out the details of food, transportation, and commemorative T-shirts.

Towards the end of the meeting we were joined by Francisco, another member of the small group of all-male, independent community activists with whom I spent most of my time. He arrived complaining about a stomachache and a headache that he blamed on drinking beer too early in the day. I reassured him and said that his problems were probably just the result of an ulcer or cancer, to which he replied with exaggerated groans of agony. After the meeting ended, Simón and I decided to treat Francisco's ailments with more beer, so we went into the street to join all of the other people who were bringing in Saturday night

with cheap liquor and stale air. Most of the street revelers were men, and most--my companions included--engaged in their revelry at the expense of their domestic relationships, leaving behind women who often became quite irate as their men headed out the door without them to spend scarce disposable income on excessive drinking.

Two other familiar faces had also dropped by for the beer-drinking: Miguel, another of the core community activists, and Roberto, a member of the housing association. Since I was the only *gringo* (North American) with a fellowship in the group, it was up to me to buy the first round. I took my 500 *bolívar* bill (about three dollars) to one of the hundreds of houses that "informally" sold beer and stood in front of the barred door as a giant parrot screamed at me in Spanish. The old woman who took my money checked it under a small ultraviolet light to make sure it was real, and then suspiciously asked me if I was going to return the empty bottles to her--even though I'd been buying beer there for months and had never once stolen her bottles.

It started to rain as I was bringing the beers back, so we took shelter under the small sheet-metal roof in front of the place. As the parrot kept yelling in the background, an old man with thick white hair

and a thick white moustache arrived, his face bright red from all the liquid celebration he'd already been enjoying. He was an acquaintance from the neighborhood and greeted us by slowly taking five bananas from the little plastic bag of groceries in his hand and giving one to each of us. Then, much to our amusement, he treated us to a painfully emotional rendition of some traditional Venezuelan songs from the Andes.

It was getting dark by now, and the old lady who sold the beer told us that she was closing early for the evening. I wasn't sure whether it was the red-faced man's heartfelt singing or the danger of police patrols that had driven her to it. Since the night was just beginning and the rain had ended, we decided to move our party somewhere else. The singer went on his way, Miguel went home early, and the rest of us got in Francisco's pickup and drove to a liquor store that was actually legal and was usually a safe zone from *operativos* (street sweeps) by the police and National Guard.

In front of the store, Simón and Roberto ran into a woman who belonged to the housing association but hadn't come to the meeting, and the three of them got involved in a long discussion about preparations for the upcoming conference. Francisco and I tried to drink our beers in

peace by the truck and talk about his health problems, but an old man sitting on a small wall just a few feet away started crying and talking to anyone nearby, including us. He was so drunk that he was close to falling over and tears streamed from his eyes as he told us that he hated to see the country in such a pathetic state and that you have to respect Venezuela. Francisco just nodded his head and said "Yes" a few times. A couple of other men soon came over and calmed him down, talking to him for a while and buying him another beer. We blamed his outburst on too much alcohol and an economic depression that had lasted too many years.

After a half-hour more of drinking and listening to rounds of gunfire echo down from the winding alleyways above, we decided to relocate again. So we got back in the truck and headed further up into the hills. We'd been standing in the street for about twenty minutes when six teenagers came walking down from the alley that began where the street dead-ended. A few were holding pistols under their shirts, and one walked by carrying a sawed-off shotgun. They didn't pay any attention to us and we just kept talking casually among ourselves. After they'd passed by, Simón commented on how relaxed Mr. Shotgun had looked, as if he

owned the street--which he did, if only for a moment. Roberto joked that it wasn't a gang, just a "civil association."

After a minute or so, a young man who'd been watching from a house nearby came over and told us about the gangs he'd seen over the years: how they seemed to descend from the hills all at once as if they were in radio contact with each other, and how they've robbed people of their security. From there the conversation turned to the riots of February 27 and 28, 1989, when mobs all around the city had looted and burned anything they could get their hands on to protest an increase in gasoline prices mandated by the Venezuelan government and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Francisco talked of the military snipers who'd shot down anyone they saw on the streets. And then he told me about how Miguel had been hit in the gut by a stray bullet fired by the police during an *operativo* the previous year. That was one reason that he didn't hang out with us very often during our beer-drinking sessions on weekends.

A little while later the gang came back uphill and stopped at the entrance to the alley in front of us. Simón must have thought that this would be a good time to play mind games with the *gringo*, because he sent me for more beer right then. That meant walking past the gang and

up the alley behind them, so I lied and said that I didn't know which house was open for business. He gave me great instructions on how to get there, and for a minute I was scared that I was really going to have to do it alone. But Francisco came to my rescue and told Roberto to go with me. My eyes never left the shotgun as the two of us walked by the teenagers and up the alley. A few seconds later they all left and went back to wherever they'd come from high in the hills.

Not long afterwards, a Protestant evangelical came walking up the street wearing a tie and holding a small red bible in his hands. He was returning home from a late-night prayer meeting, which explained why he greeted us all with a very sober smile. Simón was in the mood for a fight and started to bait him right away by talking Old Testament: war and destruction and smiting one's enemies with a sword and all that. Simón was trying to get him to admit that armed repression justifies an armed response, but the evangelical just kept smiling and quoting the New Testament: peace, love, and brotherhood. The two of them debated back and forth for about half an hour, but Francisco and I tuned most of it out. Both of us are devout atheists and have grown tired of discussions about Christianity, especially on Saturday nights.

While Simón and the evangelical were still arguing about the nature of god and social change, a group of hikers came up the street with packs on their backs and machetes in their hands. They were members of a local ecological group and were going to camp in the upper reaches of the La Vega hills, which the people of the *barrios* hadn't yet colonized with their *ranchos*. The leader of the group knew Simón and stopped for a minute to say hello and take a swig from his bottle of beer before continuing up the dark alley where the gang had gone earlier. He was soon joined by the evangelical, who'd finally had enough of talking to Simón and the other godless drunks who were my companions. Simón made sure to point out to me how everyone kept walking up the same alley as the gang and going about their lives as usual. When there was no choice, one learned to coexist with the gangs--even if it wasn't always a peaceful coexistence.

Violence and Protest in the Age of Austerity

Three weeks later the gang made a more violent appearance. My activist companions and I were heading back home to La Vega after an evening spent cruising around the city in Francisco's old pickup. As we entered the *barrios*, Miguel and Juan started arguing about an article we'd read in a newspaper the day before. It had talked of special commandos in the state security police (Disip) that had been trained and equipped to control any kind of social unrest, in the cities or the countryside.[4] Juan said that the commandos had been created as a response to Venezuela's sky-rocketing murder rate. But Miguel said that the Disip were a political police and that putting down "social unrest" meant shooting people who were protesting an economic crisis that had been slowly starving them to death for over a decade.

They were still debating the issue when we saw the three Disip patrol cars sitting at the end of the street ahead. Simón got out of the truck and went to see what was happening, and came back after about ten minutes to inform us that a teenage girl had been shot dead and dumped in an alley. She'd been the girlfriend of one of the gun-toting gang

[4] *Ultimas Noticias*, 15 Octubre 1994, p. 18.

members we'd seen before. He'd been involved in killing someone from a rival gang that morning, so the rival gang had killed her in retaliation. Her brother was in the Disip, which was why they were handling the case instead of the Judicial Technical Police (PTJ).

In the end, gang violence and the "social unrest" for which the commandos were created are two sides of the same problem: a worsening poverty that tears apart the social fabric in every way imaginable. Scenes like this are common around the world, from Caracas to New York, as budget cuts, low wages, high prices, and decaying public services force people to fight ever more fiercely among themselves for what few opportunities and resources remain. However, this heightened struggle for survival has done more than create anarchy on city streets in which crime is the most upwardly mobile career path and where alcohol and cocaine serve as social pain killers. It has also sent shock waves through the political systems of entire countries, as traditional parties and politicians are discredited in the face of economic crises they seem unable or unwilling to remedy, as disempowered groups organize to fight policies that drive them further into poverty, and as the forces of state security use repression to deal with both the social violence and political protest that

are the inevitable result of hunger and desperation.

This interplay of poverty, violence, protest, and repression has become truly world-wide in the present era of multinational corporations and global markets. In terms of human suffering and inequality, the difference between Third World and First is increasingly one of degree in a world where economic policies are designed by transnational organizations such as the World Bank and the IMF The institutions of transnational capitalism that maintain the poverty of the Third World pay little attention to national borders. And to someone looking down on the world from a mansion or a corporate board room, the difference between a U.S. ghetto and a Venezuelan *barrio* is little more than the difference between two points on a map.

It is for this reason that a *barrio* in Caracas is not all that different from a First World slum. Teenagers are regularly shot and killed for expensive shoes with names like Nike, Jordan, and Ewing. Gangs carve up entire neighborhoods into their own private turf. The police have a reputation for brutalizing the people they are supposedly protecting. Beer, rum, and *bazuko* (crack) are the weapons of choice for people trying to numb the pain of wages that are too low and prices that are too high.

And inner city streets can quickly become flash points for the kind of looting and rioting that struck Los Angeles in 1992. In short, there is every shade of social violence that you would expect to find in communities where an ever-deepening poverty breeds desperation and alienation on a mass scale.

Of course, Caracas is in Venezuela, not the United States. And in Venezuela the poor are the majority of the population, not just a sizeable minority. The wealth of the nation is drained not only by its own elites, but by banks and corporations to the North. Bureaucrats manage a system of patronage politics that is little more than organized corruption, offering bribes and public works projects in exchange for votes. But politicians now find themselves empty-handed as state revenue falls, leaving the rest of the population to live with the effects of never-ending spending cuts, runaway crime, rampant inflation, and crumbling public services. Under these conditions, it's not surprising that the level of grass-roots political organization is low and the level of cynicism high. Nor is it surprising that various forms of protest do exist, ranging from high rates of voter abstention to street demonstrations in communities without water to the occasional mass riot.

It is easy to forget all of this if one looks only at the middle-class areas of the city. Billboards and neon signs advertise the same transnational corporate feeding frenzy of cigarettes, stereos, fast foods, and soft drinks that you find in the United States. Trendy outdoor cafes offer a place to watch foreign tourists and the middle-class Venezuelans who model the latest in music-video fashions and cellular telephones. Hollywood shows such as "Baywatch" and "Beverly Hills 90210" offer viewers a rosy image of what life in the United States is supposed to be like. The newest English-language action movies are in the theaters, North American music is on the radio, and shopping malls are easy to find. But daily life is much different for the majority of the population living in the *barrios* that surround these oases of "modernity."

Chapter 1:

Introduction: From Third World To First

The personal experiences described in the previous chapter illustrate the main argument of this dissertation: that the economic, political, and social impact of neo-liberal policies that call for "restructuring," "adjustment," "austerity," and "downsizing" go far beyond what can be gleaned from macro-economic indicators dealing with budget deficits, inflation rates, and trade balances. The poverty and popular discontent which are fueled by neo-liberal policies are manifested in ways as diverse as the crumbling of traditional political systems, increasing political protest, deficient public services, and skyrocketing rates of drug abuse, crime, gang violence, and state repression. In other words, there is an "inhuman face" to neo-liberalism that is easily overlooked in dry reviews of economic statistics.

Another theme that runs throughout this dissertation is that the effects of and responses to neo-liberalism are not limited to the Third World. The "budget cutting," "downsizing," and "welfare reforms" of the

United States, for example, are not fundamentally different from the policies and programs mandated by the IMF south of the equator. In other words, the issue of structural adjustment cannot be rigidly defined in terms of the First World vs. the Third World. There are poor communities in the First World that have much in common with their counterparts in the Third World. Conversely, there are wealthy communities in the Third World that have more in common with the wealthy of the First World than with the majority of the population in their own nations.

Finally, this dissertation attempts to counter the more romantic strains of thought that run throughout the literature on "new social movements" (NSMs). Most advocates of the NSM approach present a view of political struggle and social change that pays little attention to history and is far removed from the daily lives of most of the world's population. NSM theory tends to ignore the most basic features of poverty and inequality in its quest to portray "new" social movements as experiments in the creation of grass-roots democracy.

Before exploring these themes in more detail, however, it is first necessary to provide an overview of the poverty, protest, violence, and repression that are found in communities throughout the Americas. Although the bulk of this dissertation is devoted to the experiences of people at the local level, a brief review of some basic statistics on inequality is useful in setting the stage for a broader discussion. Such statistics reveal little about the concrete conditions that the poor must confront, but they do aid in understanding the magnitude of the problems with which they are forced to live.

The Americas During the Debt Crisis

Beginning in the late 1970s and continuing to the present day, nations around the world have fallen victim to what has come to be known as the "foreign debt crisis." As world commodity prices fell and interest rates rose, states found themselves unable to pay off the massive debts acquired during the world economic expansion that had lasted throughout most of the 1970s. As a result, more and more political power has fallen into the hands of foreign creditors such as the World Bank and the IMF Cash-strapped governments have been given more credit only if

they implement policies that keep profits flowing to the banks and corporations of the United States and western Europe. Under the neo-liberal banner of free-market ideology, "structural adjustment programs" (SAPs) have been implemented that call for currency devaluations, cuts in price subsidies, wage freezes, reduced imports, new taxes on consumers, slashing of state budgets and social programs, privatizing of state-owned enterprises, and an increase in exports and foreign investment (Dornbusch 1989, Drake 1989, Korten 1995: Chp. 12, Vilas 1996, Walton 1989).

The ostensible purpose of these programs has been to reduce budget deficits and trade "imbalances" and to "normalize" prices in the open competition of the "free" market. However, the programs do little to create diversified and self-sustaining economies, and seem designed merely to ensure that wealth is generated for continued debt payments. Yet these programs have not even succeeded in reducing the debt burden of the nations in which they are implemented. To the contrary, the total foreign debt of the world's low-income countries actually increased from $134 billion in 1980 to $473 billion in 1992 (Korten 1995: 165). Latin America has been the hardest hit region. According to estimates from

19 countries[1], the total foreign debt of the region increased from over $238 billion in 1980 to nearly $430 billion in 1991 (SALA 1995: Table 2901).

What these programs have succeeded in doing is further widening the already massive gap between rich and poor. In 1950, the wealthiest 20 percent of the world's population had an average income that was 30 times higher than that of the poorest 20 percent. By 1989 this ratio had increased to 60, leaving the richest fifth of the population with 82.7 percent of the world's income, while the poorest fifth received only 1.4 percent (Korten 1995: 106-07, UNDP 1992). In Latin America, the number of people living in poverty increased from 118 million in 1980 to 196 million in 1990, representing nearly half of the total population. This 42 percent increase in poverty was nearly twice the 22 percent increase in population during the same period (Vilas 1996).

In contrast to the rest of the Third World, the poverty of Latin America is primarily urban. In 1995, 76 percent of Latin Americans lived in cities--a drastic change from 1950, when 65 percent of the region's

[1] Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

population lived in the countryside (Dore & Weeks 1996). In the early 1990s, half of all people in Latin America lived in cities with a population of more than 100,000. As of 1990, about one-third of the population lived in 41 metropolitan areas with 1 million or more inhabitants (Angotti 1995, 1996). Moreover, 80 percent of those people who were newly impoverished between 1980 and 1990 lived in cities (Vilas 1996). Venezuela is by far the most urbanized country in the region, with only 9 percent of its population still living in rural areas as of 1992 (UNDP 1995: Table 6). In 1990, the capital city of Caracas was home to about 4 million people, or 20 percent of the national population (SALA 1995: Table 634).

The modern Latin American metropolis is characterized by widespread poverty, extreme inequality, and severe pollution (Vilas 1996). The failure of urban industries to employ large numbers of workers leaves the majority of the population to survive in the "informal" sector of the economy beyond state regulation. But this "informal economy" feeds into the "formal" sector through subcontracting arrangements and ensures that wages will remain low due to the large number of impoverished people who are forever seeking steady employment (Portes, et al. 1989; Safa

1986). Moreover, the SAPs of the IMF and World Bank have discouraged any state investments designed to improve the quality of urban life, thereby making living conditions even more unbearable than they were before. As a result, cities such as Buenos Aires, Lima, Caracas, and Santo Domingo have been the sites of riots and other forms of protest against SAPs (Angotti 1995, 1996; Walton 1989).

Neo-liberal programs of structural adjustment have also produced major changes in the organization of households throughout the cities of Latin America. As wages fall and the number of salaried workers decreases, household members must rely more on jobs in the informal economy and on the income-generating activities of women and children. An increasing proportion of household income is devoted to food, and diets are based more on relatively cheap sources of carbohydrates and sugars rather than more expensive sources of protein. As people come to rely more on the pooling of scarce resources, the number of extended-family households has increased and networks of mutual assistance have become key to survival (González de la Rocha 1995).

In the midst of this deepening poverty, crime rates have soared as more and more people, especially the young, turn to illegal activities in order to survive. Although all people suffer from the effects of skyrocketing crime, it is the poor who suffer the highest incidence of violent crime. Moreover, the poor are the primary victims of state violence. Security forces use the same tactics of arbitrary arrest, torture, and murder in "fighting crime" as they do in dealing with political dissidents (AI 1994, 1995, 1996; HRW 1996; Sérgio P. 1996).

However, social ills such as these are not confined to Latin America, or even to the Third World for that matter. They are also confronted on a daily basis, although on a less massive scale, in the countries of the First World. As the same policy of cutting budgets and "downsizing" that is employed abroad is also implemented at home, poverty deepens and the gap between rich and poor widens (Bello 1994). In the cities of the United States, public housing is crowded and dilapidated, government services are shrinking as the need for them grows, and the presence of homeless people in the streets has become commonplace (Harvey 1995). The current legislative obsession with slashing welfare programs only aggravates these problems by denying

state resources to the poor without mandating any structural changes in the economic system that would reduce poverty (Hill & Macan 1996).

The extent of this poverty and inequality is illustrated by a few basic statistics. Between 1974 and 1994 in the United States, the 20 percent of households with the highest incomes went from taking in 44 percent of all household income to nearly half. During this same period, the amount taken in by the poorest one-fifth of households went from a little over 4 percent of the total to just under 4 percent. The share going to the middle 60 percent of households dropped from 52 percent to 47 percent of the total. The top 5 percent of households went from taking in 6 times more than the poorest 20 percent to taking in 8 times more ($110,000 or more per year vs. $13,000 or less) (De Vita 1996).

At the end of 1994, 7.2 million people in the United States were unemployed and actively seeking work. Another 5.6 million wanted jobs, but had given up searching out of discouragement, or due to lack of affordable child care, or for any number of other reasons. And 4.4 million workers had been forced to work only part-time either because their hours had been cut or because they couldn't find full-time employment (Harvey 1995).

In 1994, about 38.1 million people (14.5 percent of the 262.8 million people in the country) lived below the official poverty line. One in five children was poor, compared with one in eight among people over the age of 18. Although blacks comprised 12 percent of the population (32 million) and Hispanics 10 percent (27 million), over 40 percent of black and Hispanic children lived in poverty, compared with 13 percent of white children. Over half of black and Hispanic single mothers with children lived in poverty, as did more than one-third of white single mothers (De Vita 1996).

Just as in countries south of the equator, these conditions have spurred a rising crime rate.[2] For every 100,000 people in the United States between 1984 and 1994, the number of murders increased by 13.9 percent, rapes by 9.8 percent, robberies by 16.1 percent, and aggravated assaults by 48.3 percent (SAUS 1996: Table 310). In 1994 in the nation's capital, there were 70 murders, 43.7 rapes, 1,107.2 robberies, 1,441.8 aggravated assaults, and 8,415.3 property crimes (burglary and theft) for every 100,000 residents (SAUS 1996: Table 313). Since much of this crime takes place in poor inner-city areas populated by racial

[2] Crime rates have declined in some major metropolitan areas since 1994, but it remains to be seen whether or not this is the beginning of a long-term trend.

minorities, it's not surprising that, in 1994, 50.8 percent of murder victims and 56.4 percent of those arrested for murder nationwide were black (SAUS 1996: Tables 315 & 323).

This mixture of poverty and crime has been accompanied by political alienation, social protest, and state repression as well. Since 1972, rates of voter abstention have ranged from 45 percent to 67 percent of the voting-age population. In 1994, the rate of voter abstention was 64 percent (SAUS 1996: Table 458). From 1980 to 1995, labor disputes resulted in a total of 1,061 work stoppages involving 6,703,000 workers[3] (SAUS 1996: Table 680). For years, the United States has appeared in the human rights reports of Amnesty International due to the increasing use of the death penalty, the re-introduction of prison chain gangs, and continual cases of murder, torture, and general brutality among police and prison officials. Cities such as New York and Los Angeles are regularly featured in such reports (AI 1994, 1995, 1996).

Although the remainder of this dissertation will focus on the political and social consequences of debt and "adjustment" in one city of one South American nation, it is important to remember that these are

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[3] Workers are counted more than once if involved in more than one work stoppage.

truly global issues. You don't have to travel south of the equator to witness the devastating effects of SAPs, social violence, and state repression. You don't even have to leave the country to get a taste of what "Third World" poverty is really like. You only have to go for a walk in any large city of the United States.

Chapter 2:

Adjustment with an Inhuman Face

"There are, it is true, human costs of adjustment. All the higher, when adjustment is postponed and the therapy, which could have relied on two tablets of aspirin at an early stage, calls for surgery."[1]

Michel Camdessus
Managing Director of the IMF
June 26, 1996

"In retrospect, it is clear that we did not anticipate just how popular structural adjustment lending was going to become."[2]
Ernest Stern, World Bank, 1991

Fact and Fiction: Structural Adjustment and the "Free" Market

In 1987, officials of UNICEF (the United Nations Children's Fund) published a now widely cited study entitled *Adjustment with a Human Face* (Cornia, et al. 1987). This study is one among many over the past few decades that represent a growing and extremely contradictory trend among many planners and researchers in the field of international development: the attempt to simultaneously espouse free-market policies

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[1] Camdessus 1996b

[2] Stern 1991: 2

that increase inequality and poverty on a global scale, while seeking to undo the more devastating effects of these policies through "compensatory" programs aimed at the critically poor and other "vulnerable" groups. During the 1980s and 90s, this approach has taken the form of efforts to "soften the blow" of SAPs that drive people further into poverty by "freeing" their national economies from "inefficient" state controls.

Although frequently well-meaning, the logic that underlies this sort of policy is deeply flawed. It is equivalent to shooting someone and then giving them a band-aid. The approach calls for administering fatal doses of SAP therapy to an entire nation, while frantically trying to prevent too many people from dying in the process--all in the hope that the nation will somehow be better off in the end if it can just survive long enough.

Adjustment with a Human Face illustrates well the contradictions that are inherent in this perspective. The authors of the study observe that, during the 1980s, nutritional and educational well-being deteriorated for people living in eight countries in Latin America, sixteen in Sub-Saharan Africa, three in North Africa and the Middle East, and four in South and East Asia (Chp. 16). Furthermore, they point out that "it

appears that the type of adjustment policies adopted [in these countries] have [sic] been an important contributory element in many cases" due to the emphasis of such programs on reducing inflation via "depressed employment and real incomes" and the implementation of macro-economic policies "associated with rising urban food prices, cuts in food subsidies....and cuts in social expenditure per capita." They also note that SAPs often fail to consider "the effects of such programmes on income distribution, on the incidence of poverty, or on the nutritional and health status of particular groups" (pg. 288).

Despite these observations, the authors go on to say that "adjustment is clearly necessary" as countries "adapt to a changing world environment" (pg. 289-90). Although many adjustment policies have been "inadequate" in meeting "human needs," adjustment policy is not "the main cause of the human difficulties and social set-backs" of "vulnerable groups" (p.5-6). Rather, the overall economic situation is the primary culprit (i.e. global recession and falling commodity prices), and the situation would be worse without adjustment policies. However, the authors also note that the 1970s witnessed a growing realization "that increasing poverty....often accompanied growth because of deteriorating

income distribution--partly due to high levels of unemployment and often to **a process of growing inequality built into the political economy of national development**" [emphasis added] (pg. 6).

The premise of the authors' own approach is that, although "growth-oriented adjustment is not enough to ensure the protection of vulnerable groups," it is nevertheless possible that "the most vulnerable can be protected during adjustment....by the adoption of targeted programmes" (pg. 289-90). Among the advantages of this "adjustment with a human face" is that it "can help to reduce social tensions (food riots, for example) and reduce the probability of breakdown in the socio-political fabric" (pg. 295). This "people-sensitive approach to adjustment is more than a matter of economic good sense or political expediency. Ultimately it rests on the ethic of human solidarity, of concern for others, of human response to human suffering" (pg. 3). The authors optimistically claim that, in the end, "human welfare and progress is the ultimate goal of all development policy" (pg.6), despite their recognition of the fact that SAPs contribute to the expansion of poverty and that growing inequality is built into "the political economy of national development."

The ideas presented in the UNICEF study are not new. For decades, many development planners and practitioners have searched for ways to expand the mission of "development" to include the poor and people at the grass-roots level in general. This has taken many forms. In 1970, Robert MacNamara, then President of the World Bank, gave a speech in Nairobi, Kenya, calling for the creation of employment opportunities for the poor and the fostering of a more equitable distribution of income. This was followed in 1973 and 1975 by a Congressionally mandated "New Directions" strategy for U.S.A.I.D. (United States Agency for International Development) that emphasized similar goals (Hoben 1982). In the 1980s, the World Bank re-discovered the negative impact of poverty on the course of "development" (World Bank 1986), and development analysts repeatedly called upon governments and international agencies to focus on "human needs" (Falk 1978) and "people-centered" development strategies (Cernea 1985, Chambers 1983, Korten & Klauss 1984).

The architects of SAPs have responded to these calls for compassion by attempting to acknowledge the importance of "human" factors in development while still defending the fundamental soundness

and necessity of their programs. For instance, the IMF attempts to distance itself from the effects of its own SAPs by claiming that its role in the formulation of social policy is "indirect and limited" (IMF 1995: Introduction). Or consider the following statements by Michel Camdessus, Managing Director of the IMF:

> "Trade liberalization can be a positive sum game: everyone can gain. The movement to lower trade barriers and open world trade has undoubtedly increased world growth in goods and services; it has increased incomes and raised standards of living globally, which doesn't mean, unfortunately, for each individual.....Please do not accept the populist propaganda of those governments that so easily make the World Bank and the IMF the scapegoats of their own unacceptable negligence.....At the national level, the Fund recognizes the social costs of adjustment and works with the authorities to review the budgetary provisions for social transfers to protect the most vulnerable members of society. **We recognize that the costs of adjustment are too often borne by those least able to do so, and we try to help design social safety nets that are well targeted and cost-effective**" [emphasis added] (Camdessus 1996b).
>
> "IMF-supported reform programs include targeted safety nets aimed at shielding the most vulnerable groups from the **short-run** adverse effects of economic reform measures" [emphasis added] (Camdessus 1995).
>
> "As regards the role of the state, it is now nearly universally accepted that the most effective economic strategies are private sector-led and outward-oriented..... there is ample evidence that when the state dominates the economy, resources are often misallocated, and private investment and growth suffer. To be sure, governments do have an important role to play, but it is mainly facilitating economic activity--not taking the place of private transactors" (Camdessus 1996a).

The World Bank expresses similar sentiments. The very title of a 1991 collection of articles, *Restructuring Economies in Distress* (Thomas, et al. 1991), illustrates the Bank's perspective that it is administering aid to ailing nations, not adding their problems by advocating SAPs. A 1995 World Bank document states that:

> "A new study by OECD [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development] dispels some popular myths about adjustment lending and poverty. The study looks at all the evaluated adjustment operations that the World Bank supported in 1980-93--144 operations in 53 countries--and tracks what happened to poverty and income distribution. The results show that countries that successfully implemented the adjustment policies agreed to with the Bank have achieved growth in per capita income and reduced the proportion of their populations in poverty....This said, rates of poverty reduction varied widely....Poverty declined in all countries studied in Asia, but only in half those studied in Latin America. **Countries that delayed or postponed adjustment, such as Argentina, Brazil, Peru, and Venezuela, saw poverty worsen further in the 1980s**" [emphasis added] (World Bank 1995: Introduction).

These statements attempt to blame any increases in poverty on the **failure** of nations to implement SAPs-as-prescribed, and make no mention of the growing inequality in the distribution of wealth that has been taking place on a global scale since the end of World War II. As is illustrated by the statistics in the previous chapter, this process is only accelerated by SAPs.

Ernest Stern (1991), also of the World Bank, makes the same sorts of arguments. He states that "the oil shocks and subsequent occurrences in the 1980s revealed that many of the development strategies being pursued simply did not promise sustainable economic growth" given their "profoundly distorted" nature (pg. 1). He also poses the question "'Why bribe governments [with structural adjustment lending] to do what they ought to be doing anyway?'" His response is that any government that would undertake adjustment just to get a loan "does not understand the scope of the changes" and "would not resist the political opposition reforms might generate" (pg. 4). This overlooks the fact that the Bank itself has enormous political power as a source of credit to bankrupt, debt-ridden governments.

In the same vein, he notes that the World Bank "underestimated the political difficulty of protracted adjustment" (pg. 4) because adjustment programs result in a redistribution of economic power, which in turn results in a redistribution of political power. "The politics of change is one of the reasons adjustment has taken a great deal more time than expected in some countries and one of the reasons some adjustment efforts have not been sustained" (pg. 4-5). As an example of this

"resistance" to the implementation of SAPs, he refers to "the difficulty of laying people off" as state budgets are cut (pg. 3). But he dismisses this as the responsibility of the country in question, not of the World Bank. He also echoes the claim of the UNICEF study that adjustment is necessary, stating that, in nations that resisted SAPs, "adjustment postponed was pain compounded" (pg. 3).

Other analysts have been less sanguine in their assessment of SAPs and the neo-liberal ideology that underlies them. Carlos Vilas (1996), for example, points out that the new-found concern with poverty among development planners has been motivated by more than just altruism. In the mid-1980s, while GDPs (Gross Domestic Products) were rising throughout Latin America, governments and multilateral lenders observed that poverty was increasing, thereby creating "social instability" which threatened to de-rail the entire process of "structural adjustment" that was increasing economic "productivity." As a result, anti-poverty programs have been created that target those living in **critical** poverty, since they represent the greatest potential source of "instability."

However, the logic behind these programs views poverty as a social pathology, not as a natural outcome of neo-liberal economic policies. It ignores the fact that neo-liberal policies marginalize and impoverish people at a much faster rate than can be compensated for by anti-poverty programs. These programs may help some of those living in critical poverty, but they won't change the larger political and economic system that makes it impossible for the majority of the population to improve their living conditions and socio-economic status (Vilas 1996).

Arturo Escobar (1991) offers an equally scathing critique of the dominant "development" paradigm. In discussing the role of anthropologists in multilateral financial institutions, he lists a number of biases common among development planners: assuming that free-market "development" is inevitable despite the existence of widespread resistance to development projects throughout the Third World; assuming that the poor need "translators" and "cultural brokers" to speak for them; acting as if things would be worse if they weren't there to help (thereby denying their primary concern with career advancement); and ignoring much of the Third World literature on the historical legacy of colonialism.

Of course, not all analysts share the same narrow perspective as the IMF and World Bank representatives cited earlier. Mahbub ul Haq (1995), for instance, advocates a "human development paradigm" that goes beyond narrowly defined economic indicators. This paradigm is guided by four principles: (1.) Equity, defined as allowing all people equal access to economic opportunities via alterations in the distribution of productive assets and income, reforming of credit systems, and the removal of legal and political obstacles to participation in the economy; (2.) Sustainability, defined as the establishment of economic systems that can maintain an acceptable level of human well-being over time; (3) Productivity of economic systems; and (4.) Empowerment of people through political democracy, economic liberalism, and investments in education and health care (Chp. 2).

David Korten (1995) calls for a wide range of measures in the creation of a people-oriented model of development. These include strict enforcement of environmental and antitrust legislation; far-reaching tax and campaign-finance reform; debt reduction for poor countries; closing the World Bank; and stripping corporations of state subsidies and their legal status as individuals. Korten calls for a free-market system that is

geared towards the local level: cooperatives, community banks, worker-owned businesses, etc. (Chp. 24).

While the reforms advocated by Korten and Haq would undoubtedly be welcome improvements for the majority of the world's population, they fail to directly address a glaring contradiction that is inherent in most of the "basic needs" and "people-centered development" literature. Namely, that the free-market system itself creates the inequality and poverty that the reforms seek to address. Although the so-called "free market" has only existed for a tiny fraction of human history, the "human development" paradigm accepts it as the only possible system, and then tries to force it to act humane. But, by its very nature, a free-market economy is concerned only with profit and the most narrowly defined economic "efficiency," not with ethics or the equitable distribution of wealth and power. It is for this reason that various political tools, such as "social safety nets," must be used to add a semblance of humanity to the system in an ad hoc manner. This is comparable to forever patching the holes in a leaky boat without ever considering that it may be time to get a new boat.

As for SAPs, the neo-liberal ideology that underlies them is plagued by a myth commonly associated with the idea of the modern "free market": that, since the free market is more economically "efficient" than the state, unleashing the logic of the market on all spheres of a society will benefit that society in the long run. As discussed in the previous chapter, this ignores the fact that, historically, the machinations of the free market have resulted in an ever-increasing concentration of wealth and power in the hands of fewer and fewer people. As a result, social policies that seek to ameliorate this condition must work in direct opposition to the forces of the market place that create the need for such policies in the first place.

In addition, the broader capitalist ideology of which neo-liberalism is a part is subject to another myth: that free-market economy and democratic government exist in distinct yet mutually reinforcing realms of society. From a capitalist perspective, a "democratic" society provides equal access to the political system via regular elections that are open to all, and equal access to economic opportunities via the removal of political and bureaucratic limitations on the practice of free trade and free enterprise. In other words, all people theoretically have the freedom to

vote for the political parties and politicians of their choice, and to engage in those economic activities that offer them the best chance of upward mobility.

However, the concept of "freedom" has a somewhat different meaning in a world dominated by billionaires and transnational corporations. The owners of a big business are "free" to move or down-size their "private" operation for the sake of higher profits, while the workers have little say in a decision that deprives them of their livelihoods. Everyone is "free" to get high-quality medical care and education, provided that they have enough money to buy them. People are "free" to vote for the political candidates of their choice, once those candidates have attracted enough wealthy patrons to organize campaigns and have adopted platforms not so "radical" as to threaten the interests of those patrons.

In other words, political and economic power are inextricably bound to one another--they do not exist in separate social realms (hence the term "political economy"). As a result, SAPs and other neo-liberal policies that turn over more and more of society to the cold logic of the free market via mass privatization and investments by multinational corporations only

serve to place more economic and political power in the hands of the wealthy at the expense of the poor. The hope that this will somehow yield benefits that "trickle down" to the rest of the population is a cynical fantasy that has never materialized in the history of capitalism.

Moreover, this increasing inequality is the antithesis of true democracy. The right to vote becomes a hollow ritual when only a select few with superior resources have the ability to define the limits of political debate and to determine the structure of local, national, and international economies. Casting a vote every few years does not confer any real power on a person when someone else is deciding whose campaign receives funding, what prices are charged for the food that everyone eats, and what wages are paid for jobs that are needed to survive.

Violence: The Dark Underside of Adjustment

One of the least-studied aspects of SAPs, and neo-liberal economic policies in general, is the violence that is spawned by rising poverty. Until recently, there has been little systematic analysis of the myriad ways in which low incomes, political powerlessness, crime, gang violence, and

state repression interact to produce the epidemic levels of violence that plague countless poor communities around the world. Over the past several years, studies have emerged that attempt to tackle this issue in ways that move beyond the often racist and classist images of sub-human "gang bangers" that frequently appear in the mass media.

Philippe Bourgois (1995) undertakes such an analysis of drug dealers in a neighborhood of New York City's East Harlem. Seeking to move beyond impressionistic portrayals of an emotionally charged topic, he frames his discussion in terms of the larger political economy of East Harlem and New York City as a whole. He argues that drug dealing is just one, albeit the most profitable, income-generating activity within an "underground" or "informal" economy that has arisen to compensate for the high unemployment, low wages, and inadequate public assistance that make survival by "formal" and legal means virtually impossible.

Within this underground economy, there is a sexual division of labor in which men engage in more publicly visible activities than women, thereby exposing them to a greater risk of violence. Women tend to baby-sit, clean houses, rent out rooms in their homes, tend bar, work as at-home seamstresses for garment contractors, and establish sexual

relationships with men who have money. Men engage more in curb-side car repair, labor for unlicensed construction contractors, numbers running, and drug dealing.

According to Bourgois, it is this latter activity that creates the context within which the most dramatic forms of violence in the community take place. This is not because drug dealers are anywhere near being a statistical majority of the population, but because they dominate public space and therefore create what Michael Taussig (1987) refers to as a "culture of terror": a general climate of fear in which everyone must live, and which desensitizes people to violence as homicides and gun fights become commonplace. The culture of terror is not only perpetuated by the killings and shootings that are involved in turf wars among rival drug dealers, but by seemingly random acts of violence among drug dealers who are engaging in "public relations": establishing reputations for themselves so as to prevent rip-offs and challenges to their power.

To prevent his analysis from deteriorating into yet another slanted stereotype of ghetto life, Bourgois emphasizes that the drug trade has grown in recent years in response to the worsening economic plight of

poor communities. As businesses are "downsized," state budgets are cut, and wages remain stagnant, more people turn to self-destructive drug use as a means of escape and to drug dealing as a means of survival--with the high levels of violence that this entails. Bourgois concludes that the drug trade can only be combated by increasing the rewards of the legal economy relative to the illegal economy; that is, by increasing wages and employment opportunities, legalizing drugs, and not slashing the amount of aid given to welfare recipients the minute they get a legal, wage-paying job.

Matthew Gutmann (1996) explores aspects of violence and *machismo* in a *colonia popular* (slum) of Mexico City. While tearing down the stereotyped myth of the Mexican *macho*, he also points to elements of *machismo* that are exhibited by some men and that are often used by men as a justification for various behaviors, violent and otherwise, that are considered "natural" features of masculinity. Among these are wife-beating, alcoholism, infidelity, gambling, child abandonment, and bullying--behaviors that are exhibited by some women as well. Alcohol in particular is commonly cited as an explanation for violence by members of the community, especially with regard to men.

Gutmann also discusses the violence of the frequent raids on the community that are conducted by the police.

Mike Davis (1992) analyzes a number of forces that contribute to various forms of violence in Los Angeles, although he doesn't rely on local-level, ethnographic data in the same way as Bourgois and Gutmann. He begins by noting that the myriad social problems of Los Angeles have arisen in the midst of growing socio-economic polarization. In the 1980s, the affluent went from constituting 9 percent to 26 percent of the population, the poor from 30 percent to 40 percent, and the middle class from 61 percent to 32 percent. This system of class stratification is also characterized by racial inequality given the fact that, of the 15 million people living in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area, over half are "non-Anglos" (Prologue). Davis describes this volatile situation in the following terms:

> "..the worst popular fears of a generation ago about the consequences of market-driven overdevelopment have punctually come true. Decades of systematic under-investment in housing and urban infrastructure, combined with grotesque subsidies for speculators, permissive zoning for commercial development, the absence of effective regional planning, and ludicrously low property taxes for the wealthy have ensured an erosion of the quality of life for the middle class in older suburbs as well as for the inner-city poor" (pg. 7).

Within this decaying environment, crime and gang violence have skyrocketed. Although "most of the carnage is self-contained within ethnic or class boundaries," the "white middle-class imagination, absent from any firsthand knowledge of inner-city conditions, magnifies the perceived threat through a demonological lens" (pg. 224). As a result, private "protective services" and restricted "residential enclaves" have proliferated as the wealthy and middle class try to isolate themselves from the rest of the population. The state employs a similar logic in its official policy of "containment" of the homeless within the Skid Row area.

According to Davis, the LAPD (Los Angeles Police Department) plays a crucial and repressive role in trying to hold together this frayed social fabric. This includes not only routine cases of police brutality, but "airborne surveillance and engridding, endless police data-gathering and centralization of communications" (pg. 253). Since the Watts riots of 1965, helicopter surveillance of "high-crime neighborhoods" has become standard, and now includes the use of infra-red cameras and the deployment of complete SWAT units, "exceeding even the British Army's aerial surveillance of Belfast" (pg. 252).

In the case of Brazil, Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) offers a chilling account of death and "disappearances" among shantytown dwellers. In a Chapter entitled "Everyday Violence: Bodies, Death, and Silence" (Chp. 6), she states:

> "I ground my discussion in the problem of the 'disappeared', for the specter of missing, lost, disappeared, or otherwise out-of-place bodies and body parts haunts these pages" (pg. 216).

These bodies and body parts are the work of state-sponsored death squads that focus their efforts primarily on street children and *malandros* ("good-for-nothings"), most of whom are young black men.

Scheper-Hughes draws from Michael Taussig (1989) in emphasizing that while this may seem nightmarishly unreal to the middle class, it is "terror as usual" for the lower class, which bears the brunt of state-sanctioned violence. Although the Brazilian state underwent a transformation from military dictatorship to formal "democracy" in the course of her fieldwork experiences between 1964 and 1989, the terror did not end. In the "democratic" era, disappearances, executions, and torture have been inflicted upon shantytown dwellers in general rather than political "subversives" in particular. Such events have become an expected part of everyday life among the poor, resulting in a profound

desensitization to horrific violence.

The harsh realities of poverty contribute to this often macabre atmosphere in other ways as well. The high rate of infant mortality in the community fosters a collective mentality that regards infant death as routine, views babies as easily replaceable, assumes that some infants "want" to die, and allows for the fatal neglect of babies who are considered to be "doomed." And in hospitals, the inability to pay for high-quality medical care often translates into preventable deaths, needless amputations, and patchwork treatments that leave patients disfigured.

With the exception of Gutmann, who tends to rely on purely "cultural" explanations of violence, the authors cited above attempt to place the phenomenon of violence within a larger political and economic context. Although these books don't deal with SAPs per se, they are relevant to the study of SAPs in that they address some of the more dramatically destructive aspects of life in poverty. All three of the nations that are the settings for these works--the United States, Mexico, Brazil--suffer from extreme inequality that is only being exacerbated by the neo-liberal economic policies of which SAPs are a part. Poor communities in each have suffered under the weight of "adjustment" and "restructuring"

during the years in which the studies were conducted. These books give life to dry economic statistics on poverty rates and income distribution, translating them into graphic descriptions of everyday life and death. They illustrate well that policy decisions made in board rooms and government offices have flesh and blood consequences that are often fatal.

New Social Movements and the New International Division of Labor

While some recent observers have focused on violence and the harsh struggle for survival in impoverished communities, "new social movement" (NSM) theorists have devoted themselves to the study of mass movements that arise in opposition to the many complex and alienating features of life in the modern world. Since the end of World War II, and especially since the early 1970s, societies everywhere have become more interconnected through transnational corporations, global markets, and electronic mass media. The proliferation of nuclear weapons and toxic waste has taken on global dimensions. Meanwhile, movements for social change come in as many forms as the problems they must confront. As a result, many social scientists have concluded that world history has moved on to a "post-industrial" stage in which flows of information and patterns

of consumption are more important than who owns what. And they view seemingly "new" social movements as the harbingers of this transformation (Castells 1983, Escobar & Alvarez 1992, Laclau & Mouffe 1985, Melucci 1989, Slater 1985, Touraine 1981)

In order to understand the larger social context within which NSM theory has developed, it is necessary to examine fundamental changes in the global political economy that have taken place over the past several decades. The second half of the 20th century has been marked by the international dominance of the United States and the rapid expansion of the multinational corporate system which took shape at the end of the 19th century. Under the auspices of the United States and its European allies, the world economy has become ever more tightly integrated under a transnationalized system of production. In order to avoid the minimum wages, labor laws, and environmental regulations of the First World, corporations producing for international markets locate many of their manufacturing and assembly operations in the Third World. Profits are kept high by employing politically unorganized workers, especially young women, and by establishing subcontracting arrangements with "informal" enterprises outside the purview of state labor legislation. This process has

also occurred within the First World itself, as industries abandon the cities and move to suburban and rural areas to take advantage of low cost, non-unionized workers--leaving behind impoverished inner-city communities with high rates of unemployment and underemployment (Mullings 1987; Nash & Fernández-Kelly 1983; Portes, et al. 1989; Safa 1982, 1986).

A major effect of this new international division of labor has been to undercut the bargaining power of labor unions and labor-based political parties around the world. Striking workers are easily replaced when capital is highly mobile and the productive process is divided into a series of repetitive tasks that don't require a high degree of skill (Portes & Walton 1981, Sanderson 1985). This trend has only accelerated as a result of the foreign debt crises of the 1980s and 90s and the fall of the Soviet Union. Bankrupt nations throughout Latin America, Africa, eastern Europe, and parts of Asia have become fresh feeding grounds for transnational corporations looking for new investment opportunities in the production and sale of electronics, computers, appliances, cars, and clothes (Gereffi & Hempel 1996, Henwood 1996, Onimode 1989, Walton 1989).

Moreover, the labor movement and the Left in general have been weakened by other forces at the same time. There have been decades of factionalism and in-fighting over authoritarian leadership, bureaucratic corruption, and the "correct" analysis of Cold War politics. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the free-market reforms of China have added to the sense of ideological confusion. Meanwhile, workers and activists of many stripes have suffered forms of repression ranging from dictatorships and counterinsurgency operations in Latin America to the slaughter of Communists in Indonesia to military invasions of Central America, the Caribbean, and Indochina by the United States (Black 1988, LaFeber 1984, Zinn 1980: Chps. 16, 18, & 20).

In the face of these external and internal threats, many political parties and labor unions have seen their power decline with every passing year. But political opposition has not disappeared. Since the 1960s, Europe and the United States have been home to countless movements for nuclear disarmament, environmental conservation, and the rights of ethnic groups, indigenous peoples, students, and homosexuals.

After 1968, some analysts of these movements, such as Alain Touraine (1981) and Manuel Castells (1983), created the idea of NSMs that operate outside the realm of formal political institutions and focus on issues of identity, lifestyle, and ethics rather than on strictly economic and political goals. The concerns, tactics, and constituencies of these mobilizations are thought to be distinct from those of "older" movements that are based on notions of socio-economic class and political-economic transformation as defined by Marxism. The appearance of these seemingly unique social mobilizations has been viewed as evidence that societies have moved on to a post-industrial stage in which class contradictions are no longer paramount.

According to this perspective, NSMs are different from "older" movements in that they are organized around issues that are not specific to any one socioeconomic class. These movements therefore have constituencies that cross class lines. In addition, they place a high value on autonomy, decentralization, grass-roots participation, and the creation of a more democratic, self-managed society. However, they don't strive to achieve these goals by means of established institutions, such as those of the state, which embody the very relations of hierarchy that the

movements oppose (Calhoun 1993; D'Anieri, et al. 1990; Hannigan 1985; Scott 1990).

This perspective is shared by more recent theorists such as Alberto Melucci (1989), who argues that NSMs are rooted in the diffuse and heterogeneous power relations of everyday life in post-industrial Western societies. These societies are thought to be shaped more by consumption patterns and information flows than by relations of production and the factory regime, which were characteristic of earlier stages in the history of capitalism. Within this context, social movements seek to create new collective identities for their members and to carve out democratic "spaces" in which they can operate beyond the hierarchical power relations of the state and larger society.

In the case of the Third World, NSM theorists have had to adapt their perspective to address the political-economic realities of mass poverty and unemployment. Many Third World mobilizations differ from their European counterparts in that they are concentrated among the poor, especially the urban poor, and are characterized by a territorial identity that is centered on the community. In general, such movements concentrate on the improvement of infrastructure and the winning of land

rights and basic services from the state. Many of these movements grow out of the social networks formed by women as they work to ensure the day-to-day survival of their families and communities (Eckstein 1989, Hellman 1997, Jelin 1990, Schuurman & van Naerssen 1989).

However, the central tenets of NSM theory are still applied in the analysis of these movements. Observers of neighborhood associations, indigenist associations, Catholic base communities, and squatter movements, particularly in Latin America, emphasize the decentralized, anti-authoritarian, and democratic character of such mobilizations compared to traditional political parties and labor unions. As in the case of European and North American NSMs, the main accomplishment of these movements is seen to be their re-definition of social relations at the local level (Escobar & Alvarez 1992, Laclau & Mouffe 1985, Slater 1985).

The main problem with the concept of NSMs is that the exercise of power is not as diffuse and unfocused as many of its proponents would like to think. All it takes is a walk through any big city in the world to recognize the fact that some people live in mansions and wield incredible power, while others live in slums and have only numbers on their side.

Regardless of how many single-issue and local-level movements arise throughout the world, it is the same relatively small group of military-industrial conglomerates that monopolize most of the strategic resources, manufacture most of the weapons, prop up most of the repressive states, and produce most of the toxic waste.

Moreover, it is impossible for a community to fundamentally re-fashion social relations at the local level when the exercise of power from "outside" impinges on the community in so many ways and at so many levels. This ranges from macroeconomic forces such as inflation and unemployment that create mass poverty and all of the social ills that come with it (higher rates of hunger, crime, gang warfare, domestic violence, and drug and alcohol abuse) to direct expressions of military force by the state (armed patrols, extrajudicial executions, torture, "disappearances," etc.). No community can create a "social space" that somehow exists beyond or outside of these larger systems of socio-economic inequality. In addition, no social movement has any chance of significantly changing social relations at the local level without directly challenging the power of "outside" institutions that create and maintain these systems of inequality: governments, armed forces, corporations,

banks, etc.

More concretely, the modern history of Latin America--home to many "new" social movements--doesn't herald some radical change in the nature of social conflict. The revolutions, covert actions, and counter-insurgency programs of Central America have been a reminder that basic issues of ownership and military force haven't lost all historical weight (Black 1988, LaFeber 1984). Although guerrilla movements in Guatemala and Peru have declined, the continued activity of such movements in Colombia and the appearance of new ones in Mexico don't seem to presage the end of armed struggle (Chernick 1994, García de León 1995, Ross 1996). Riots, strikes, and street demonstrations against dictatorships, economic austerity programs, political corruption, state repression, and the policies of transnational banks and corporations indicate that "old" forms of protest have yet to become historical relics (IPS, NotiSur & Waterbury 1995; Walton 1989).

The NSM perspective suffers from two other logical shortcomings as well. First of all, even in the case of a genuinely "collective" protest, participants can not be **assumed** to have a larger political plan or motivation that would qualify them as members of a "movement." A

protest against a prolonged water shortage, for instance, may represent a larger challenge to the power of the state and a reclaiming of "social space" by the community, or it may be exactly what it appears to be: a protest by people who want water. Secondly, a protest by a group of people who are consciously trying to challenge state hegemony is still not necessarily a "movement." If the group lacks a firm grass-roots base and is unable to garner widespread popular support, the protest will amount to little more than vanguardism.

As Judith Adler Hellman (1997) notes, the "transformative" potential that may be inherent in a grass-roots mobilization is not automatically realized. Such potential can only be translated into action through a broader political vision and alliances with other groups at a higher level of political organization. In Hellman's words:

> "Increasingly, then, the small-scale victories of social movements can be seen for what they are: the culmination of the courageous, energetic drive of powerless people to gain more control over their lives and immediate circumstances. As long as they limit their efforts to the struggle for relatively narrow, concrete goals, they are easier to get off the ground and easier to sustain. As such, however, they risk political insignificance" (pg. 18).

There are a wide range of other inaccuracies in the NSM perspective as well. Tom Brass (1991) notes that NSM theory is very anti-state in its orientation, but regards the state as an administrative apparatus without class interests, thereby obscuring the class nature of popular opposition to the state. Virtually all states are dominated by members and representatives of upper classes and therefore act in defense of upper-class economic and political interests. As a result, challenges to the power of the state represent challenges to the power of these upper classes, not merely to the power of some autonomous bureaucracy that operates in isolation from the rest of society.

In a very insightful article, Craig Calhoun (1993) points out a number of historical errors in the NSM perspective. For instance, in making their case for a radical break from "old" to "new" forms of protest, NSM theorists discuss "the labor movement" as if it was the only social movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries. They also portray it as a homogeneous movement of white men concerned only with the most narrowly defined economic concerns. But "the labor movement" was simply one movement among many and actually included many different forms of protest by whites and blacks, men and women, over a

wide range of issues: wages, the employment of women and children, the quality of community life, the status of immigrants, and access to education and public services. Moreover, the participants in these mobilizations were not limited by the over-simplified view of "class" that is frequently used by NSM theorists. Protests were orchestrated not just by factory workers, but by artisans, agricultural laborers, white collar and service-sector employees, and small business owners. In addition, early 19th century labor movements were not dominated by a unitary definition of the "working class," but were defined more in terms of particular crafts and professions.

Calhoun goes on to point out that the NSM view of early social movements as being more materialistic, class-based, hierarchical, hegemonic, and conventionally "political" than later ones is contradicted by historical reality. There were a wide range of movements that did not suffer from these perceived shortcomings, such as movements for women's rights, the abolition of slavery, temperance, popular education, and utopian socialism and anarchism--and even factions of the more "traditional" labor and socialist movements. To varying degrees, these movements were concerned with "identity politics," cross-class

constituencies, the "politicization of everyday life," grass-roots democracy, and the use of non-electoral tactics to achieve social change.

In Calhoun's opinion, the apparent newness of late 20th century social movements may be more a product of their youth than of some inherent uniqueness. Based on his study of 19th century history, he concludes that **all** social movements, even those for workers' rights, have features of NSMs in their early stages. It is only later in the development of a movement, when it has become institutionalized, that a hierarchical, bureaucratic form of organization and a concern with electoral politics may begin to crystallize.

According to Calhoun, there are two reasons why these similarities between 19th and late 20th century social movements have been systematically overlooked: (1.) NSM theory tends to make little use of detailed historical analysis, and (2.) both mainstream and Marxist perspectives have focused almost exclusively on the labor movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Calhoun 1993). As a result, NSM theory **appears** to pay attention to history, but it is a millenarian kind of history in which a global transition to a new era is **assumed** and events are then made to fit that assumption.

Orin Starn (1995) offers a critique from a different perspective. He notes that NSM theorists often portray "new" movements as being uniformly progressive and democratic. But this ignores the wide variety of movements that fit the definition of an NSM yet range from conservative to fascist, such as the movements of evangelical Christians, right-wing civic associations, and neo-Nazi skinheads [see also Hellman 1997]. I would also add to this list those ethnically defined organizations that make use of massacres and other forms of "cleansing" as they seek to re-shape social relations and define their collective identities through non-electoral means.

Another issue that is seldom addressed in the literature on NSMs concerns the ability of states and political parties to corrupt community organizations. From Madras to Karachi to Rio de Janeiro, people are mobilized through networks of clientelism in which votes are exchanged for political and economic favors. Grass-roots organizations that might have the appearance of social movements are actually bureaucratic extensions of mainstream political parties linked to the state. Under such conditions, popular discontent must find other ways to express itself (Gay 1990, Hellman 1997, Rosen 1996, Schuurman & van Naerssen 1989).

Venezuela offers a classic example of this kind of patronage politics. The traditionally dominant parties, AD and Copei, have for decades dominated most government posts, labor unions, and neighborhood associations. But both have found their power eroding as the economic crisis and political corruption of the 1980s and 90s eat away at the resources needed to buy support (Davis & Coleman 1986, McCoy 1989, Schuyler 1996). As a result, resistance to the status quo has grown and taken on many forms, ranging from mass rioting to the rise of opposition political parties.

Recognizing the true nature of this clientelist system, one school of thought in Venezuela finds little reason to apply the label "new social movement" to state-regulated organizations such as neighborhood associations. Government bureaucracy and party politics destroy any autonomous, grass-roots foundation that the associations might have otherwise had. Moreover, the severity of the current economic crisis has left most people with few resources and little energy for independent organization as the struggle for survival becomes more critical. Under such conditions, the level of mass political mobilization tends to be low regardless of how many "popular organizations" exist on paper (Ramos

Castro 1989).

But there is another school of thought that attempts to transplant the imported European notion of NSMs to the Venezuelan setting. Some authors are quite romantic is their assessment of how communities are reclaiming "local space" and boldly challenging the hegemony of the state (Prato Barbosa 1986, Sánchez 1989). Others, recognizing the reality of patronage and cooptation, try to salvage the concept by focusing on middle-class and upper-class neighborhood associations, which--in contrast to their counterparts in the *barrios*--tend to be better organized and less **formally** tied to state and party bureaucracies through networks of clientelism (Barrios González 1987). However, this ignores the fact that there is little need for outright cooptation in wealthier communities that have the resources necessary to purchase direct links to the centers of political power (in other words, corruption) and class interests that are not radically different from those of the nation's ruling elites. The poor, on the other hand, must be bribed to support people and policies that offer them little power over their own lives (Javier Garrido & Ramos 1993).

In reality, it is not possible to neatly distinguish between those forms of political protest that are "old" and obsolete and those that are "new" and ground-breaking. Forms of mass political organization are as diverse as the forms of oppression they must confront. Depending on the particular circumstances, this can range from squatter associations and Catholic base communities to Popular Fronts and guerrilla movements (Eckstein 1989). Under the right conditions of clientelism, something as seemingly "new" as a neighborhood association can become little more than a branch office for a corrupt, mainstream political party. Conversely, forms of protest as old-fashioned as strikes, riots, and armed uprisings can become the most powerful expressions of discontent within a society.

Furthermore, as the statistics in the previous chapter illustrate, the global distribution of wealth and power has not suddenly changed in such a way as to make "class" an archaic concept. To the contrary, inequality has been increasing on a global scale since "new" social movements were first "discovered" in the late 1960s. A fundamental divide still exists between that small portion of the population that monopolizes most of the world's resources and productive property, and the poor majority that does not. While this fact alone doesn't automatically determine the structure or

constituency of any particular social movement, it forms the larger context within which social movements exist.

Drawing on a long tradition of political economy pioneered by Marx and Engels, Susan Eckstein (1989) emphasizes the importance of various "historical-structural" variables in shaping the birth and evolution of social movements. To begin with, a social movement can be rooted in any number of settings: the oppressiveness of the workplace, the inequality of the marketplace, the authoritarianism of the state, or the conflicts of race, gender, and religion that divide societies at many levels. The kind of movement that arises will depend not only on the social setting in which it is based, but on the tradition of resistance among its people, the alliances they have forged with other classes, and the response that can be expected from the state and elites. Whether or not the movement achieves its goals depends on how each side defines the degree of social change that is "acceptable" or qualifies as a "success" (some elites are more unyielding than others and some movements more insistent on radical change than others), the balance of power among all actors concerned, and whether the enemies of the movement respond by trying to ignore it, corrupt it, or destroy it.

In order to be understood for what they are, forms of political protest must be evaluated in their appropriate historical and social contexts, not as players in some abstract battle between "new" and "old" kinds of mass organization. Among bus drivers suffering from low wages in a city dependent on public transportation, a strike is still the form of political struggle that carries the greatest weight. Street demonstrations are the most direct kind of protest in communities plagued by water shortages and unsanitary conditions. In a country devastated by government budget cuts and austerity programs, a national political movement might offer the best chance to change the economic policies that shape daily life. When confronted by starvation and military oppression, armed revolution is often viewed as a matter of survival among those seeking to change the status quo. The tendency of NSM theory to engage in an *a priori* categorization of various forms of protest only serves to obscure this.

In conclusion, it is easy to view power as something diffuse and formless in the face of the countless consumer goods and media images that fill the modern world. But someone owns the factories, stores, and studios where these commodities are created and marketed. Behind these

businesses and their owners stand well-armed states that protect the system of which they are a part from any threat, be it a foreign invasion or a home-grown revolution. No social movement can fundamentally alter the balance of social power at any level without confronting the beneficiaries of this system. And no movement can confront the keepers of the status quo without expecting some sort of response, whether it comes in the form of a bureaucrat mouthing empty promises, a politician carrying a bag of cash, or a soldier holding a gun.

Chapter 3:

From El Dorado to Oil Empire: A Brief History of Venezuela

In 1492, when Christopher Columbus was "discovering" the Bahamas and mistaking them for islands off the coast of Asia, most of Venezuela's original inhabitants were enjoying the last years of life as they knew it. There were anywhere from 350,000 to 500,000 "Indians" in Venezuela at the time of the Spanish Conquest, most of whom lived in the mountains and valleys near the coast (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo I: 34-35). Unlike the Europeans who would soon come to dominate them, the first Venezuelans had constructed societies that were relatively cooperative and egalitarian. Although "chiefs" and *piaches* (shamans) had more authority and influence than others, especially during times of war, they were part of societies with none of the carefully structured inequality that was the hallmark of civilization north of the equator (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo I: Chp. 2).

The Spanish conquerors would make much of the fact that many of these "savages" fought with one another, or that they sometimes enslaved captives of war. But none of these forms of aggression even approached the level of brutality represented by the colonial regime the Spanish were building, which destroyed entire societies and was applied to generation after generation of human beings: first the Indians, and then African slaves. Nor did warfare among the first Venezuelans come close to rivaling the long tradition of murder and torture embodied in the Spanish Inquisition, or in the nature of the Conquest itself (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo I: Chp. 2).

The Timote of the Andes were the most "advanced" by European standards: living in large villages and building water-storage tanks and irrigation ditches to grow potatoes, corn, cassava, cacao, coca, and cotton. The Timote wove their own textiles on looms, made their own ceramics, and built suspension bridges to link the different areas of their mountainous domain. Beyond the Andes, there was a wide range of different cultures. In the Llanos (Plains) of the interior, groups such as the Yaruro and Guamontey lived along river banks and subsisted mainly by fishing and gathering food in the wild. Others, like the Guahibo and

Chiricoa, were more nomadic in their way of life, roaming throughout the Llanos in search of wild plants and animals. The Panare and Camaracoto of the tropical forest, and the Warao of the Orinoco Delta, made their living by fishing, hunting, gathering wild foods, and growing manioc (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo I: Chp. 1; Roseberry 1983: 40-43; Steward 1963: Vols. 3 & 4).

It was during Columbus' third voyage to the Americas in 1498 that he came upon the territory that would become Venezuela. When he stepped onto the shores of the Gulf of Paria in the east, he was so impressed by the beauty of the land that he called it *Tierra de Gracia* (Land of Grace). The presence of naked natives and the vast Orinoco River also led him to believe that he was near the Garden of Eden. The following year, an expedition led by Alonso de Ojeda reached Lake Maracaibo in the west. Since the inhabitants of the area built their homes on stilts above the water, he and his companions were reminded of Venice, Italy--leading to the name Little Venice, or Venezuela (Bauman & Young 1989: 815; Ewell 1984: 2).

However, the Spanish--and their financial backers in Italy--had not sailed across the Atlantic in search of Asia just to give quaint names to unknown lands. They came in search of wealth. And if the "New World" wasn't the direct link to the profitable spice and silk trade of the Orient, as they'd originally hoped, then they would acquire wealth through other means. At first, they focused their efforts on the search for gold and the power it brings (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo I: 63-69; Wolf 1982: 123-25, 135). As Columbus himself wrote in a letter from Jamaica in 1503, "Gold is a wonderful thing! Its owner is master of all he desires. Gold can even enable souls to enter Paradise" (quoted in Marx 1977 [1867]: 229).

Hernán Cortés's conquest of the vast Aztec Empire in Mexico from 1519 to 1521 helped to feed many dreams of untold riches in the minds of Europeans. Francisco Pizarro's conquest of the Inca Empire in Peru from 1530 to 1533 only added fuel to the fire (Wolf 1982: 131). Throughout the 16th century, expeditions were launched into the interior of South America to search for mythical kingdoms of gold. One such myth was that of El Dorado, the Golden Man (Ewell 1984: 2). It was said that he was the master of a kingdom so wealthy that he had a fresh coat of gold

dust sprinkled on his body every morning when he awoke. He was rumored to be somewhere in the northern part of South America, so it was inevitable that the first European colonizers of Venezuela would set out in search of his riches.

But this search was slowed by the fierce resistance of the Indians who lived along the coast and didn't take kindly to being colonized. The first settlers had to content themselves with living on the offshore islands of Margarita and Cubagua, harvesting the pearl beds of Paria using Indian slaves taken from the mainland. Unfortunately for the settlers, pearl fishing was only profitable during the first half of the 16th century (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo I: 63-69). It wasn't until 1523 that the first permanent mainland settlement was established at Cumaná in the east. This was followed in 1527 by Coro in the west (Ewell 1984: 2). With these settlements in place, the quest for gold could begin.

The German banking house of the Welsers was the most active in pursuing this dream. They had been given the colony of Venezuela by King Charles I, who owed them money. After occupying Coro in 1529, they financed many expeditions into the interior of the country in search of El Dorado. Although a few small deposits of gold and silver were

eventually found and mined, it soon became clear that Venezuela was not going to be a land of instant riches. The Welsers left Venezuela in 1546 and never came back. So while Indians were enslaved by the thousands to work the gold mines of neighboring Colombia, and the more profitable silver mines of Bolivia and Mexico, Venezuela was left to stagnate as a backwater of the Spanish Empire (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo I: 66-69).

Not until the second half of the century were the first attempts made to enter the Valley of Caracas. Francisco Fajardo, son of a Spanish father and a Guayqueri mother, set out from Margarita island in 1555 to establish relations with the Indians of the central coast. Since Fajardo spoke their language and brought gifts, these relations were friendly at first. But when he returned in 1557 with a settlement expedition, the Indians weren't so amused. And when he founded the small settlement and cattle ranch of San Francisco along the banks of the Guaire River in 1560, things turned ugly (Troconis de Veracoechea 1992: 39-48).

The valley was already home to about 25,000 Toromayma Indians, whom the Spaniards called "Caracas" after the Toromayma word for a large-leafed plant common throughout the area (Troconis de Veracoechea 1992: 30). The Indians had their own way of life based on the cultivation

of corn, cassava, fruits, tobacco, and coca--and saw no reason to change this for the sake of the Spaniards. The settlement of San Francisco and everyone in it were destroyed within three months. Two other attempts at settlement met a similar fate (Troconis de Veracoechea 1992: 39-48).

As a result, Diego de Losada was chosen to "pacify" the Toromayma and their neighbors (the Mariches, Chagaragatos, and Teques). In 1567 he founded Santiago de León de Caracas, which would later become known simply as Caracas. After Losada left Venezuela in 1569, the work of conquering the valley and protecting Caracas was continued by Garci González de Sílva, who pursued his task with enthusiasm (Troconis de Veracoechea 1992: 39-54). An example of how he helped to establish "civilization" among the "savages" is provided by the case of Tamanaco, an Indian chief who led the Mariches in their fight against the Spaniards. When he was finally captured, Garci González offered to spare his life if he could survive a one-on-one fight with a dog. But the dog won and decapitated him.

While this work of settlement was being carried out, a major change was occurring in the population of Venezuela and of Latin America in general. It was known as the Great Dying (Wolf 1982: 133-

35). This is often portrayed as a simple matter of Indians falling victim to European diseases to which they had no resistance, such as measles and smallpox. But it was much more complex. For every Indian who died in actual combat with the Spanish, there were countless others who were killed by the Conquest in other ways. Every time an Indian population rose up in warfare against the Spanish invaders, or was displaced to make way for cattle and European crops, or was enslaved to work in mines or fields, the Indians had to abandon the land where they had traditionally grown and gathered food. This inevitably meant starvation, malnutrition, and a lowered resistance to any kind of disease. Moreover, as the Indians watched their societies being destroyed, they either chose not to have children in a situation that appeared hopeless, or were unable to as a result of the severe depression that followed. The results were devastating. In the Valley of Caracas alone, the Indian population dropped from 25,000 in 1567, when Caracas was founded, to 6,000 only 22 years later in 1589 (Troconis de Veracoechea 1992: 54).

The Spanish took control of Indian land and labor throughout the Americas in several different ways. After defeating the Indians of a particular area and establishing a settlement, the conquerors were

rewarded by the Spanish Crown with a *merced* (land grant) upon which to build a house and grow crops. In addition, they were each given the right to use a group of Indians to tend their fields or work in the mines (an *encomienda*). In theory, an *encomienda* was granted by the Crown and was not the personal property of the person who received it (the *encomendero*). But, in practice, control of Indian land and labor by the *encomenderos* was often a much more personalized affair (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo I: 75-89; Roseberry 1983: 43-47; Wolf 1982: 142-43).

In the core areas of the Spanish Empire, the enslavement of Indians was officially abolished in 1542. Henceforth, the *encomiendas* were to be replaced by a system known as the *repartimiento*. Anyone who needed Indian labor had to petition a royal official to use them for specific tasks, for a specific amount of time, and to pay them wages in return (Wolf 1982: 142-43). But in the frontier zone of Venezuela, the *encomienda* system wasn't even introduced until 1545, and *encomenderos* were given an exemption from the new law. As a result, the *encomienda* and the *repartimiento* were one and the same. Indians were required to provide three days of labor per week in exchange "for their teaching, care and

good treatment"[1] (in other words, for free), and to be paid for any additional days that their master might require. Payment usually came in the form of extra "days off" later on. This system lasted until 1718 (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo I: 75-89).

However, no sooner had the *encomienda* system been established than it began to suffer from a shortage of workers due to the Great Dying that was sweeping the continent. As the Spaniards ran out of Indians to exploit, they turned increasingly to the growing world trade in African slaves. Most slaves were taken to Spanish colonies in the Caribbean and to the Portuguese sugar cane plantations of Brazil (Wolf 1982: 157, 195-96). But even the impoverished colony of Venezuela participated, legally importing 6,595 slaves during the 16th century; 10,147 in the 17th; and 34,099 in the 18th--plus tens of thousands more who were imported illegally (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo I: 97).

Venezuela thereby became part of the great triangle of commerce that took human beings from Africa, used them to extract wealth from Latin America, then funneled this wealth to Europe. Although the profits first went to the monarchs of Spain and Portugal, they soon passed into

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[1] *Actas del Cabildo de Caracas*, 1609. Quoted in Brito Figueroa (1966, Tomo I: 80).

the hands of their Italian, Dutch, German, English, and French creditors, who controlled the bulk of world trade. It was this wealth that helped to lay the foundations for the emergence of the capitalist system, while the original societies of Africa and Latin America were left in ruins (Marx 1977 [1867]: Chp. 31; Rodney 1972; Wolf 1982: 123-25, Chp. 7).

Throughout the 16th century, the lives of Venezuela's "pacified" Indians and the African slaves who gradually replaced them were consumed by the pearl fisheries and the gold and silver mines. But these activities were already dying out by the turn of the century and the colonial economy became increasingly dependent on the coastal plantations of cacao, which was the dominant export until the end of Spanish rule. Indigo, tobacco, coffee, sugar cane, cotton, wheat, and corn were also grown, and the ranches of the Llanos produced mules, cattle, and hides. The Catholic Church became an investor in these activities as well, controlling plantations and slaves and making profits from money-lending (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo I: Chp. 3).

Although the Spanish Crown tried to keep the economy under tight control, it was never able to do so. The Dutch, English, and French were already taking over the islands of the Caribbean in the 17th century,

setting up sugar cane plantations that by the 18th century were major players in the world trade of both sugar and the African slaves used to grow it (Wolf 1982: 151-54, 195-201). For Venezuelans, this offered the chance for illegal trade free of the taxes and restrictions imposed by their own monarchs.

Spanish authorities tried repeatedly to stop this contraband commerce, banning the carrying of merchandise by foreign ships in Venezuelan waters, and--in 1728--creating the royal Guipuzcoana Company, which was supposed to monopolize all trade within the colony. But Venezuelan planters and merchants continued to exchange their crops and cattle for the slaves and manufactured goods offered by the rivals of Spain. At one point, in 1749, half of the ships docking in the ports of Holland came from the coasts of Venezuela. In 1751, there was even an armed uprising against the high prices charged by the Guipuzcoana Company, as well as the brutality of its private security force (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo I: 101-110; Troconis de Veracoechea: 93-100).

As Venezuela entered the 19th century, it was a very different society from that which had existed at the beginning of the Spanish Conquest. There were about 900,000 people within the Province of

Venezuela[2], 45 percent of whom were considered *mestizos*: those of mixed Spanish, African, and Indian ancestry. The *mestizos*, along with the "free" blacks (who made up 4 percent of the population), were a class that was forbidden to marry whites, participate in political institutions, or carry weapons. In general, they survived by raising crops on land rented from the owners of large plantations (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo I: Chp. 5).

In addition to the *mestizos*, there was also the 10 percent of the population legally defined as slaves. The Indians who once ruled the land were now only 18 percent of the total population, about a third of whom lived in isolated parts of the Llanos and tropical forests still beyond the reach of Europeans. The Llanos were also home to thousands of fugitive slaves and their descendants who lived in a state of permanent warfare against the Spanish regime (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo I: Chp. 5).

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[2] The Province of Venezuela (also known as the Province of Caracas) was created in 1528. In 1739 some of what would later become the nation of Venezuela was made part of the Viceroyalty of Nueva Granada, which was dependent on the *Real Audiencia* of Santa Fe de Bogotá. However, other areas remained dependent on the *Real Audiencia* of Santo Domingo. These regions were unified with the creation of the *Real Audiencia* of Caracas in 1786 (Bauman & Young 1989: 816-17; Troconis de Veracoechea 1992: 86).

At the top of the social hierarchy were whites: those from Spain and the Spanish-owned Canary Islands (about 1 percent of the population) and those who were born in Venezuela (the *criollos*, who were 19 percent of the population) (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo I: Chp. 5). Many of the whites, especially *criollos*, had economic and political interests that didn't always coincide with the interests of the Crown. This was especially true when it came to Crown efforts to reign in the profitable contraband trade with the Dutch from which so many *criollos* benefited. They resented royal control over their way of life, and--inspired by the ideologies of the American and French Revolutions--were just waiting for a chance to break free (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo I: 189-92; Ewell 1984: 4-5; Troconis de Veracoechea 1992: 133-39).

That chance came in 1808, when Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Spain and put his brother Joseph on the throne. Two years later, as Napoleon completed his conquest of the Spanish mainland, *criollos* in many parts of the Americas established their own governments, claiming to rule in the name of their deposed King, Ferdinand VII. But the drive for independence continued even after Ferdinand was restored to the throne in 1814. Throughout the northern part of South America, this

movement was led by Simón Bolívar, the son of a wealthy *criollo* family in Caracas. Bolívar, together with Francisco Miranda and José Antonio Páez, led the armies that achieved Venezuelan independence in 1821. It was also Bolívar who led decisive battles of independence in Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia (then called Upper Peru) (Bushnell & Macaulay 1988: Chp. 2; Troconis de Veracoechea 1992: Chp. 4).

However, the wars that were fought during these years weren't simply between rich *criollos* and agents of the Spanish monarchy. They were also waged on the big plantations between slaves and their owners and between small farmers and their landlords. While *criollos* were struggling for the right to carry on their business without interference from the Spanish state, the rest of the population was looking for true independence. At first, it was the Royalists who took advantage of these sentiments, offering freedom and land to the slaves and *mestizos* who joined them in fighting the pro-independence armies. But Bolívar soon turned the tide, convincing these same groups that they had more to gain from independence than from continued domination by the Spanish (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo I: 192-220; Bushnell & Macaulay 1988: Chp. 2; Troconis de Veracoechea 1992: Chp. 4).

Bolívar had envisioned a united Latin America in which slavery was a thing of the past. But the other elites who emerged as leaders after independence weren't quite so idealistic. Attempts at political union failed, and Bolívar's proposal to abolish slavery was rejected. The new Venezuelan Constitution granted the right to vote only to men who were literate and owned property--which excluded most of the population. *Mestizos* who'd risen through the ranks of the military became the new big landowners, making use of the same impoverished farmers and enslaved blacks as their predecessors in the colonial era (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo I: Chp. 8; Bushnell & Macaulay 1988: Chp. 2).

Throughout the continent, it was also these soldiers-turned-landowners who became the new power brokers. They were the *caudillos* (strongmen) who fought each other for dominance in countries where there was no central state powerful enough to exert control over all of the national territory. The *caudillos* cloaked themselves in different ideologies: Conservatism (pro-Church), Liberalism (anti-Church), Centrism (strong central government), and Federalism (weak central government). But they were more concerned with acquiring personal power and wealth than with following the tenets of any particular ideology (Bushnell &

Macaulay 1988: Chp. 2).

Upon Bolívar's death in 1830, José Antonio Páez became the first *caudillo* of Venezuela. For almost two decades, he ruled the country in conjunction with the Conservative Oligarchy of landowners and merchants based in Caracas. However, opposition to his regime grew among Liberals and Federalists who wanted a more decentralized government, less power in the hands of the church (specifically, privatization of Church lands and the elimination of ecclesiastical taxes and the Church's control of credit), and the abolition of slavery--a system that was becoming increasingly costly and outdated in a society of *mestizos*, especially since the world trade in African slaves was coming to an end and prices for slaves were therefore rising as the supply dwindled. After all, it was much cheaper to take crops and labor from people who subsisted (or starved) on their own, rather than pay for the maintenance of slaves who themselves had to be bought (Bushnell & Macaulay 1988: Chp. 2; Ewell 1984: 7-8; Troconis de Veracoechea 1992: Chp. 5).

In 1848, then-President José Tadeo Monagas, a protege of Páez, switched to the Liberal side and instituted liberal reforms, including the abolition of slavery in 1854. But *caudillos* of all ideological stripes united

to overthrow him in 1858, resulting in years of conflict known as the Federal Wars. As with the battles of Independence, the Federal Wars were also fought between landowners and the small farmers who sought freedom from the plantations and *haciendas* (large, landed estates) that kept them in poverty. As a result, the *caudillos* who battled each other also had to restrain the masses they mobilized, or else they would lose control of the people and land which were the basis of their own power (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo I: Chp. 8; Ewell 1984: 8; Troconis de Veracoechea 1992: Chp. 5).

The semblance of a central government was restored in 1864 by Juan C. Falcón and his advisor, Antonio Guzmán Blanco. From this point on, the political history of Venezuela was marked by the consolidation of a single state and the gradual end of the *caudillos*--something that was also taking place throughout the continent. This process accelerated when Guzmán Blanco himself assumed power in 1870 and established a dictatorship that lasted almost two decades. During his rule, Caracas became the true center of power as he modernized the city by building highways, railroads, schools, and an electrical system with English, French, and German capital (Ewell 1984: 8-9; Troconis de Veracoechea

1992: Chp. 5). By 1891 there were 72,429 people living in Caracas out of a national population of 2,323,527 (Troconis de Veracoechea 1992: 193).

Since the fall of the Spanish Empire, Venezuela had been shifting away from the cultivation of cacao to the growing of coffee for the markets of Europe (Roseberry 1983: Chp.3). But the destruction wrought by the Wars of Independence and the Federal Wars had left the economy in ruins. It was therefore during the rule of Guzmán Blanco that export agriculture resumed its growth. Throughout the 19th century, the main market for both imports and exports was England, the first country in Europe to develop a society based on industrial capitalism. But this was soon to change as the nearby United States also became an industrial and imperial power (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo I: Chp. 9).

Following Guzmán Blanco's retirement to Europe in 1888, various *caudillos* competed for power while the old dictator continued to choose sides from across the Atlantic. Meanwhile, the British were trying to gain control of the country's eastern gold mines and the mouth of the Orinoco River by extending the boundaries of their colony in British Guyana. The United States mediated the dispute, allowing Venezuela to keep control of

the Orinoco Delta, but giving British Guyana 60,000 square miles of Venezuelan territory in 1899. Venezuela had no choice but to accept the decision, although--to this day--the country's maps still refer to the land as a disputed area (*zona en reclamación*) (Ewell 1984: 27-28).

1899 was also the year that Guzmán Blanco died and Cipriano Castro assumed power. This marked the beginning of almost half a century of rule by dictators from the coffee-growing Andean state of Táchira. The main feature of Castro's own short reign was his nationalist confrontation with foreign creditors. At the same time he came to power, world coffee prices dropped and left the state unable to pay off the loans that Guzmán Blanco had taken from Germany, England, and Italy. At first, Castro was unwilling to send money abroad during an economic crisis at home. He eventually agreed to reach a settlement, but the foreign governments still decided to send ships and blockade Venezuela's coasts in 1902 (with the consent of the U.S. government) (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo I: Anexo; Ewell 1984: 38-46; Troconis de Veracoechea 1992: 196-98).

However, by the following year, the United States government had grown tired of European meddling in its own backyard. The United States had removed the Spanish from Cuba and Puerto Rico in 1898 and did not want any foreign power other than itself to flex its military muscle in the Caribbean Basin. It was therefore the United States that arranged the end of the blockade and the terms of a settlement agreement. Later, in 1908, when Castro was being treated by doctors in Europe, three U.S. warships sat off the coast of Venezuela to ensure the smooth takeover of government by Juan Vicente Gómez, a one-time ally of Castro's who was much more friendly towards foreign states and businesses than his mentor (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo I: Anexo; Ewell 1984: 38-46; Troconis de Veracoechea 1992: 208-09).

The 27 years of Gómez's rule were marked by the growing importance of oil and the corporations that extracted it. Even before the first wells were drilled, foreign oil companies bought up the exploration rights to huge tracts of land. This business was at first dominated by British companies such as Royal Dutch Shell, but it wasn't long before the Standard Oil Company of the Rockefellers and the Gulf Oil Company of the Mellons became major competitors. The first commercially profitable

well was drilled in 1914 by Shell. By 1930, Venezuela was the world's first exporter of oil and the second largest producer after the United States (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo II: Chp. 12; Ewell 1984: 57-58; McBeth 1983: Chps. 1 & 3; Troconis de Veracoechea 1992: 216-18). The productivity of these wells was vividly illustrated in the oil-rich state of Maracaibo during the 1930s, when the surface of Lake Maracaibo twice caught fire, burning to death hundreds of oil workers and their families who lived in homes built on stilts over the lake (Colby 1995: 91).

Most of the population didn't share in the enormous wealth that was produced by this growing oil economy. Thanks to the low taxes and tariffs imposed by the Gómez government, the foreign oil companies--led by Standard and Shell--took home four times as much revenue as the Venezuelan state. Meanwhile, Gómez and his allies used much of their cut to buy up huge amounts of land for their private *haciendas*. The oil boom also brought other U.S. companies to Venezuela, where they took over even more of the economy through investments in electric power and the mining of copper, gold, and iron ore (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo II: Chp. 12).

This expansion of U.S. corporate activity in Venezuela coincided with the growth of U.S power throughout the Caribbean. In 1904, Theodore Roosevelt issued his famous Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, in which he pledged that the United States would act as the hemisphere's policeman and punish "chronic wrong-doing" by the states of Latin America. In practice, this meant protecting the interests of U.S. companies when they were threatened by political leaders who objected to foreign domination or by popular uprisings against U.S.-backed dictators. The result was a series of military invasions throughout Central America and the islands of the Caribbean (LaFeber 1984: 49-54). The growing power of U.S. oil companies in Venezuela was just another expression of this policy, although the Gómez dictatorship was able to maintain "order" and the flow of profits without the aid of U.S. troops.

Even after the death of Gómez in 1935, the system he had established was continued by his successors: Eleazar López Contreras (who ruled from 1936 to 1941) and Isaías Medina Angarita (who ruled from 1941 to 1945). However, opposition to the regime was growing on many fronts. A major student uprising broke out in 1928 and a strike by oil workers took place in 1936. Both were crushed, but those who had

participated in the 1928 uprising went on to form the leadership of the *Partido Comunista de Venezuela* (Communist Party of Venezuela, or PCV) in 1931 and the Social Democratic *Acción Democrática* (Democratic Action, or AD) in 1941. In addition, the *Unión Patriótica Militar* (Military Patriotic Union, UPM) of young military officers was founded on the belief that their career advancement, as well as the modernization of the Armed Forces and the country in general, was hindered by López and Medina (Ewell 1984: 69-78, 88-92).

In 1945, as World War II ended and the U.S. became dominant on a global scale, the UPM and AD collaborated in overthrowing the government of Medina. The leader of AD, former Communist Rómulo Betancourt, ruled the nation by decree until 1947, when elections were held that, for the first time in Venezuela's history, were open to everyone regardless of whether they were male or female, literate or illiterate. Having been the only party to organize the majority of the population in the countryside, AD candidate Rómulo Gallegos won the elections by a landslide, easily defeating his rivals in the Communist Party and two other parties that had been founded the previous year, in 1946: the Christian Democratic Copei (*Comité de Organización Política Electoral*

Independiente, Committee of Independent Electoral Political Organization), and the pro-Medina URD (*Unión Repúblicana Democrática*, Democratic Republican Union) (Ewell 1984: Chp. 4).

It is important to note that, during the final years of World War II, the previous consensus that had existed within the U.S. government for support of Latin American dictatorships had broken down. The causes of this were two-fold. First of all, the pro-fascist sympathies of some dictators--especially the Peronists in Argentina--led to deep distrust on the part of U.S. policymakers who were pre-occupied with the defeat of European fascism. Secondly, there was an ideological split within foreign policy circles between liberals who advocated some degree of social justice and political democracy due to their experience of the Great Depression and the New Deal, and conservatives who were more concerned with increasing U.S. economic power through unqualified support of free markets and free enterprise. However, these debates were short-lived. Once the United States emerged as the dominant world power at the end of the war, and once the Cold War had replaced concerns over fascism with concerns over communism, U.S. government support for free-trade, anti-communist dictatorships resumed with little

internal opposition (Pike 1995).

During its brief rule, AD increased the share of oil profits going to the Venezuelan state rather than to the foreign oil companies. The party also instituted a mild program of agrarian reform that gave back to the rural population some of the land that had been gobbled up by the Gómez dictatorship and the oil companies. This, together with AD's aggressive policy of organizing workers and peasants, represented a threat to the power of military officers who had allied themselves with the party during the 1945 coup. In 1948 the leaders of the UPM put an end to the growing power of their one-time allies (Ewell 1984: Chp. 4).

Defense Minister Carlos Delgado Chalbaud was the first to assume control of the country. Another UPM leader, Marcos Pérez Jiménez, became ruler of the nation in 1950 when Delgado was killed during a kidnapping attempt. In many ways, the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship marked a return to the glory days of Gómez: foreign companies were given free reign and political opposition was brutally repressed. Much of the land distributed by AD during the agrarian reform was returned to its old owners, and AD and the Communist Party were outlawed--along with the peasant and workers unions that were affiliated with them (Ewell

1984: Chp. 4).

As all of these political changes unfolded, Venezuelan society was undergoing a profound transformation that was also beginning to sweep the rest of the continent. However, this wasn't the product of some mass revolutionary movement. It was the result of a booming population that was moving from the countryside to the cities. Diseases such as malaria were being brought under control, cities had become the true centers of economic and political power, and the industrial investments of foreign corporations were generating the rapid creation of urban infrastructure. As a result, life expectancy and birth rates went up, mortality rates went down, and people followed the flow of wealth to the cities. In 1926 there were 3,026,878 people in Venezuela, only 15 percent of whom lived in cities. By 1961 the population had jumped to 7,523,999 and 62.5 percent of Venezuelans were urban dwellers (Brito Figueroa 1966, Tomo II: Chp. 16; Ewell 1984: 112).

Caracas was the city most affected by these changes. The population went from 135,253 in 1926 to 1,336,446 in 1961. The government of Pérez Jiménez undertook a massive construction program that included highways, hospitals, parks, markets, and sports stadiums.

He built huge housing projects at the same time he outlawed the construction of unsightly *ranchos* (makeshift homes) by migrants from the countryside. Continuing a policy implemented under the previous, short-lived government of AD, he encouraged the arrival of Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Chinese, and Lebanese immigrants (Troconis de Veracoechea 1992: 239-51). The rationale for this was that the underdevelopment of the nation could be compensated for by filling the country with workers and merchants from more "advanced" parts of the world (Kolb 1974: 38)--rather than by seeking to alter the inequities of the economic and political system that created underdevelopment in the first place.

However, the Pérez Jiménez regime was repressive and stifled opposition. Soldiers, workers, and students united to overthrow the dictator on January 21, 1958, and he fled the country two days later (Ewell 1984: 118-20). Ironically, the protests leading to his downfall began among students at the 400-acre *Ciudad Universitaria* (University City) that he had ordered built as the new home for the Central University (Villalobos 1958). The departure of Pérez Jiménez marked the last time a military dictatorship would rule in Venezuela. From this point on, the government would lie in the hands of civilian political parties, while the

rest of South America suffered through many more years of military control. AD emerged as the dominant party, followed by Copei. Together, they took turns in the Presidential Palace, undemocratically appointed governors and other political officials, and controlled the majority of labor unions, peasant unions, and community-based organizations (Ewell 1984: Chps. 5-7).

However, this new era of civilian rule did not imply mass democracy. The economy remained dominated by U.S. corporations, which were more active than ever as U.S. elites turned their attention away from the post-war reconstruction of Europe and towards the Third World. The first President, Rómulo Betancourt of AD, governed by rewarding his political allies and repressing the opposition, especially the Communist Party. Both of the dominant parties made policy from the top down, buying votes in exchange for favors. And most of the nation's people were as powerless as they were poor, despite large-scale government programs to improve health, housing, and education (Ewell 1984: Chps. 5-7).

In the early 1960s, opposition to the system set up by AD took the form of guerrilla warfare. The way was led by the Communist Party and the *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* (Movement of the Revolutionary Left, MIR), which was founded in 1960 by disaffected members of AD. Inspired by the successful Cuban Revolution of 1959, both groups took up arms in the cities and the countryside to topple the government of Betancourt. However, neither represented a broad-based movement and, much to their dismay, the masses weren't inspired to revolt by their example. In fact, the decision to join an ill-conceived guerrilla movement with little popular support caused the Communist Party to lose much of the credibility it had achieved during the struggle against Pérez Jiménez, as well as the in-roads it had made in some labor and peasant unions (Ewell 1984: Chp. 5).

Compared to the turmoil of the 1960s, the 70s was a time of tranquility and prosperity. By the beginning of the decade most guerrilla groups had abandoned their struggle and accepted offers of amnesty by the Copei government of Rafael Caldera (1969-73). The Left in general was too weakened by the failed guerrilla movement and its own divisions and in-fighting to pose any threat to the state, and was attracted by the

prospect of incorporation into the political system following the failure of armed conflict. Oil prices were high after 1973, which provided ample resources for the vote-buying machines of the mainstream political parties (Ewell 1984: Chp. 6).

After the end of Caldera's term, the AD government of Carlos Andrés Pérez took advantage of these conditions to increase the state's control over the economy. In 1975 he bought out the nation's steel industry from U.S. Steel and Bethlehem Steel. In the same year he also nationalized the oil industry, meeting little opposition from foreign companies that were well-compensated with $1 billion and lucrative technical assistance contracts. In 1976 he required foreign companies such as Sears and the Rockefellers' CADA supermarket chain to sell 80 percent of their stock to Venezuelans (Ewell 1984: Chp. 7).

But this patriotic facade of progress and stability didn't change the nature of the system underlying it. The gap between rich and poor remained enormous. The state treasury was used as a feeding trough for corrupt politicians including Pérez himself. The government took out enormous loans from foreign banks to cover the cost of large-scale industrial projects such as plants for the production of steel, aluminum,

and petrochemicals--none of which created many jobs for the urban masses. In response to a resurgence of guerrilla activity, death squads for the elimination of leftists were formed within military intelligence and the judicial police. In 1976, Jorge Rodríguez, leader of the Trotskyist *Liga Socialista de Venezuela* (Socialist League of Venezuela), died during interrogation by the state security police (Disip) (Ewell 1984: Chp. 7).

Showcase industries and a flourishing middle class didn't change the fact that most of the population lived in poverty and had little say in the policies that shaped their lives. In the tradition of Gómez and Pérez Jiménez, the new democratic regime maintained its power by rewarding its friends and repressing its enemies. But allies could only be bought as long as high oil prices and low interest rates kept state revenue rolling in. However, all of this was soon to change.

Chapter 4:

The Downward Spiral: Debt, Austerity, and Repression

"Venezuela's external debt burden is not exceptionally high."
--World Bank, 1996

Just as happened during the Great Depression of the 1930s, the economic crisis of the 1980s further destabilized nations throughout Latin America that were already fractured by class inequality and political conflict. In many cases, this helped precipitate a change in government from military to civilian. Military governments didn't want the responsibility of governing economies that were collapsing, and popular opposition to these governments increased in the face of a declining standard of living (Drake 1989). But in Venezuela, where civilian government was already the norm, there was a growing trend towards repression by state security forces as the crisis fueled political opposition movements and social unrest (Ewell 1989). Neo-liberal economic policies that reduce state budgets and state control over the economy have also drained the lifeblood out of the traditional system of patronage politics,

leaving old elites without credibility and, more importantly, without the economic and political resources needed to buy loyalty.

As Venezuela entered the 1980s, the signs of impending doom were already on the horizon. The state, now in the hands of Copei President Luis Herrera Campíns, was in debt to foreign banks for about $35 billion. Foreign exchange reserves were falling and a devaluation of the nation's currency (the *bolívar*) seemed imminent. Meanwhile, the wealthy began moving their money to overseas bank accounts by the billions (Martz 1984). Peru and Jamaica had already defaulted on their loans in 1976, but leaders of other Latin American countries hadn't thought that this was any reason for them to worry (Walton 1989). They were wrong.

The oil price increases of 1979-80 may have been good for Venezuela in the short run, but they marked the beginning of an economic depression that would devastate countries around the globe. The U.S. and its European allies raised interest rates, thereby increasing the amount of Third World debt, while prices fell for the agricultural and mineral exports on which most of the Third World depended for foreign exchange. As a result, governments owed more at the same time they were taking in less. In 1982, Mexico became the first major nation in Latin America to

default on its debt payments. When world oil prices dropped the same year, Venezuela was the next to fall in 1983 (Dornbusch 1989, Walton 1989).

As occurred throughout the Third World, draconian programs of structural adjustment were implemented in Venezuela in response to the debt crisis. The results have been devastating. From 1982 to 1992, inflation totaled 738 percent, the *bolívar* was devalued 1,240 percent, and the price of food rose 1,330 percent. Between 1989 and 1993 the cost of medicine increased by 1,923 percent (Peraza 1994). The 1994 inflation rate of 71 percent was the highest in Latin America (Schuyler 1996). Scarce resources are diverted to payment of the foreign debt--amounting to over 40 percent of the national budget in 1995, compared with 1% devoted to social programs (LCHR & PROVEA 1996: 72). Meanwhile, schools and hospitals crumble to the ground and basic urban services collapse, resulting in water shortages, power outages, crater-filled streets, and mountains of uncollected trash. However, the policies that created these conditions have done nothing to lessen the nation's debt burden. Between 1980 and 1991, the total external debt of Venezuela actually increased from $29 billion to $34 billion (SALA 1995: Table 2901).

Meanwhile, Venezuelans continue to suffer from deepening poverty after nearly two decades of SAPs ostensibly designed to alleviate the country's economic crisis. The United Nations estimates that 30 percent of urban Venezuelans (who account for over 90 percent of the population) and 42 percent of rural Venezuelans lived in poverty in 1990 (UNDP 1995: Table 12). But other researchers claim that anywhere from 62 percent to 80 percent of the more than 20 million people in the country are living in some degree of poverty (Hellinger 1996a, LCHR & PROVEA 1996: Chp. 3, Schuyler 1996, Ungar 1996).

The dimensions of this poverty are revealed by other statistics. Between 1988 and 1991, the share of national income going to the wealthiest 10 percent of the population jumped from 30.3 percent to 43 percent, while the share going to the poorest 10 percent dropped from 2.3 percent to 1.8 percent. In 1990 alone, 60,000 public sector workers lost their jobs. In 1991, half of Venezuela's population lived in slum housing, 27 percent of children suffered from chronic malnutrition, one child died from hunger every day, and over 1 million children between the ages of 6 and 15 didn't attend school. In a January 1993 survey, 71 percent of respondents said that their standard of living had declined

during the previous year (Schuyler 1996).[1]

Faced with such dismal conditions, families struggle to keep their heads above water as their incomes are consumed by run-away prices. People work longer hours, often at more than one job, and are joining the work force at a younger age. Most new jobs are in the informal sector of the economy and range from self-employment as taxi drivers and *buhoneros* (peddlers) to work in auto repair shops and boutiques. Countless homes have been converted into informal day care centers or stores selling beer, soft drinks, and food. Households also rely on family and friends for help, making use of money and labor from those who have some to spare (Cariola 1989,1992; Gutiérrez 1990). Between 1981 and 1986, individual incomes in urban areas declined by 34 percent, while household incomes decreased by a lesser margin of 22 percent, reflecting the increased reliance of families on informal economic activities and the pooling of resources (González de la Rocha 1995).

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[1] According to the IMF, however, "[t]he results of this program were highly positive. After the shock of the major adjustments required in 1989 caused GDP to fall 8.6 percent, GDP rose on average by 7.4 percent a year over 1990-92. Investment fell 53 percent in 1989, and a further 8 percent in 1990, but then rose 81 percent in 1991 and a further 37 percent in 1992. Private exports (in current dollar terms) were almost three times higher over 1989-92 than in 1988" (IMF 1996). No mention is made of poverty or income distribution.

As the struggle for survival has intensified in the face of this economic collapse, crime has skyrocketed--particularly violent crime that occurs predominantly in the *barrios*. According to official statistics, from 1990 to 1993 the number of murders in Venezuela increased by 73 percent, assaults by 16 percent, and robberies by 26 percent. In a 1990 nationwide survey, 43 percent of respondents listed crime as their main concern, while the cost of living came in second at 15 percent (Ungar 1996).

However, worsening conditions have done more than test the survival skills of the average Venezuelan family. They have sent shock waves throughout the entire society. As state revenues fall and budget cuts required by the IMF and World bank take their toll, there is less money available to grease the wheels of patronage politics. Elites and their political parties are no longer able to buy the support necessary to keep most sectors of society quiet and content. Party-sponsored labor unions and neighborhood associations can't compensate for the combined effects of inflation, unemployment, and budget cuts. The "social pact" that kept the have-nots at home has broken apart (McCoy, et al. 1994).

The extent to which the old system has deteriorated became painfully obvious during the mass riots of February 27 and 28, 1989. The second AD government of Carlos Andrés Pérez had only been in place for less than four weeks when, in keeping with the demands of the IMF and World Bank, an increase in gasoline prices was announced on February 26. The following morning, bus drivers responded by raising their fares well over the 30 percent allowed under their agreement with the government. Street demonstrations against the increase began in the commuter cities around Caracas: Guarenas, Guatire, los Valles del Tuy. But the protests soon spread to Caracas itself and to other cities, where mobs looted and burned stores and barricaded streets. Over the next two days, as the Armed Forces regained control of the country, over a thousand people were shot dead in Caracas alone and many of them buried in mass graves in the city's main cemetery (AI 1993, El Nacional 1990, Schuyler 1996, Sonntag & Maingón 1992: Chapter 3). Similar riots broke out in the cities of Argentina only three months later in response to the effects of hyperinflation, revealing that the social devastation created by deepening poverty was not confined to Venezuela alone (Serulnikov 1994).

Three years later, with the memory of the riots not far behind, a group of mid-level military officers led by Lt. Col. Hugo Chávez Frías tried to kill President Pérez and take control of the government, citing his brutal economic policies and the corruption of his administration. The coup attempt began on the night of February 3, 1992, and culminated in the early morning hours of the following day with attacks on the presidential palace (Miraflores), the presidential mansion (La Casona), and the part-private / part-military La Carlota airport. Meanwhile, other rebel troops were mobilizing in the cities of Maracay, Valencia, and Maracaibo. Although the coup failed, Chávez became a national hero for trying to overthrow the widely unpopular Pérez, and for going on television before his surrender and saying that his people would lay down their arms "for now" (Norden 1996, Schuyler 1996, Sonntag & Maingón 1992: Chapter 1).

Pérez survived another coup attempt led by high-ranking military officers on November 27, but he was unable to survive the string of high-level corruption scandals that had followed him since the beginning of his term. The Venezuelan Senate impeached him on May 21, 1993, for misuse of government funds. By the time elections were held the same

year, AD was thoroughly discredited thanks to a decade of SAPs and political corruption. People were increasingly resentful of mainstream politicians who continued to use the public treasury as their own private bank account while the rest of the country suffered through an economic depression (Ellner 1993).

The elections of December 1993 transformed the political layout of the nation. For the first time since the overthrow of the dictatorship in 1958, the presidency went to a third group: *Convergencia* (Convergence), a diverse coalition of small parties led by former president and Copei-founder Rafael Caldera. Although far from being a radical, Caldera implemented price and foreign-exchange controls at the beginning of his administration in an attempt to slow the nation's economic collapse and prevent a repeat of the 1989 riots.[2]

Two leftist parties also made gains: MAS (*Movimiento al Socialismo*, or Movement Towards Socialism) and the Causa R (*Causa Radical*, or Radical Cause). Both benefited from the 1989 electoral reform that allowed the direct election of governors and mayors and, by

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[2] Predictably, the IMF immediately opposed the imposition of these controls (*The Daily Journal*, June 30, 1994, p. 4) and the World Bank responded by suspending credit to the Venezuelan state, thereby paralyzing education, health, and economic development programs (*El Nacional*, 1 July 1994, p. A/1).

the time of the 1992 gubernatorial elections, had truly become national players.[3] In the 1992 elections, the Causa R spread well beyond its base in the labor unions of Bolívar state to capture the mayoralty of Caracas. In the national elections of 1993, MAS joined with *Convergencia* in its rise to the top (Ellner 1995, 1996).

This political mix was made even more complicated in March 1994, when Hugo Chávez was freed from military prison and formally resumed his leadership of the group that had attempted the February 1992 coup: the MBR-200 (*Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario*, Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement). The MBR-200 called for a broad-based coalition of independent community groups that functions outside of the electoral system and rebuilds society from the bottom up. But the exact ideology of the group was unclear, and it remained to be seen how its egalitarian rhetoric would be reconciled with the messianic, *caudillo*-like image of Chávez himself.

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[3] Although MAS had been the nation's third largest political party since its creation in 1970, it wasn't until the elections of 1989 and 1992 that it succeeded in claiming more than 10 percent of the national vote (Ellner 1996, Venevision 1988). The Causa R had existed as a labor movement since 1972, but did not achieve political prominence until 1989, when it captured the governorship of Bolívar state (Hellinger 1996b).

Despite all of these new political developments at the national level, most Venezuelans remain disenchanted with the political system in general. Since 1989, rates of electoral abstention have remained at or above 50 percent (Delgado Osuna 1992, Schuyler 1996). As a result, political protest has come primarily in the form of street demonstrations organized by workers, neighborhood residents, and students in opposition to budget cuts, wage freezes, deteriorating public services, crime, and inflation. Between 1989 and early 1992 there were, according to official statistics, over 5000 such protests. In 1993 alone there was a national teachers' strike, a strike by 14,000 doctors in public hospitals, and walkouts by bus drivers, civil servants, judges, oil workers, and employees of the Caracas metro (Schuyler 1996).

In the midst of this social upheaval, from rampant crime and price riots to street demonstrations and the rise of opposition political parties, state security forces have responded with increased repression. The favored targets of this repression are members of the MBR-200, Causa R, small leftist political parties, and student groups. But abuses also take place during *operativos* (street sweeps) by the police and National Guard as they search for weapons, drugs, and illegal aliens (especially

immigrants from neighboring Colombia, who--like Mexican immigrants in the United States--are blamed for "stealing" jobs and draining state resources).

During the first ten months of 1996, there were 103 extrajudicial executions in Venezuela (HRW 1996). Ninety-nine cases of torture inflicted by security personnel were reported in 1995. From October of 1994 through September of 1995, 13,941 people were arbitrarily detained by security forces (LCHR & PROVEA 1996: Chp. 3). Moreover, political activists are routinely detained without charge and the *Ley de Vagos y Maleantes* (Law of Vagrants and Undesirables) allows people who have committed no crime to be held in administrative detention for up to 5 years without any judicial appeal or review (AI 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996).

Repression is especially common during times of social unrest, when Constitutional guarantees are suspended and the military is put in charge of restoring public order, such as during the riots of 1989 and the coup attempts of 1992 (AI 1993). However, the same thing can also take place even when no insurrection is at hand. On June 27, 1994, President Caldera suspended several Constitutional guarantees under the pretext of

allowing the government to more effectively deal with the financial crisis caused by the collapse of the nation's banks. But the action also led to more *operativos* than usual by the police and National Guard in Caracas-area *barrios* such as La Vega, 23 de Enero, and Petare. In addition, the Disip (state security police) took advantage of the opportunity to round up political opposition leaders, especially those of the MBR-200. Nationwide, 1,995 people were detained by security forces during the month of July, of whom only 42 percent were being sought for the commission of any crime (LCHR & PROVEA 1996: Chp. 3). In neighboring Brazil, the *favelas* (slums) of Rio de Janeiro experienced an even more profound militarization five months later, as the army took control of the streets in a massive anti-crime operation.

Frontier areas tend to be hot spots for abuse as well. The Venezuelan-Colombian border, for instance, is a zone active with cocaine traffickers and Colombian guerrillas who kidnap wealthy ranchers and fire on National Guard patrols. In this sort of environment, the murder and torture of peasants and Native Americans by security forces searching for political "subversives" and drug dealers is a recurring event. In October of 1988, Venezuelan special forces killed 14 unarmed fishermen in

El Amparo, claiming that they were either guerrillas or traffickers. In April of 1994, mass graves were unearthed in Zulia state, uncovering the remains of people presumably killed by Venezuelan police and soldiers.

Venezuelan prisons are also centers for the abuse of human rights, ranking as some of the most dangerous in Latin America. Extreme over-crowding, lack of sanitation, rampant drug abuse, widespread possession of weapons, turf wars between gangs, and shortages of water, food, and medicine force prisoners to live in subhuman conditions. Moreover, inmates must often wait for years before their cases even come to trial (AI 1993). As of 1992, only 32 percent of Venezuelan inmates had actually been sentenced (LCHR & PROVEA 1996: Chp. 2). A prison system that was designed to hold 15,426 inmates is now home to between 24,000 and 27,000. Under such conditions, it's not surprising that, in 1994, 354 prisoners died and more than 700 were seriously injured in Venezuelan jails (Ungar 1996).

The depth of the crisis in Venezuelan prisons became dramatically clear during 1994. On January 3 more than 100 inmates of Sabaneta Prison in Zulia state were burned or shot to death during a mass riot and the subsequent efforts of National Guard troops to regain control of the

prison. In December of the same year, seven prisons were placed under military control following the mass escape of over a hundred prisoners from Tocuyito prison in Valencia. Inmates of the Catia prison in Caracas protested this militarization out of fear, remembering the more than 60 prisoners who were executed by police in the midst of an escape attempt during the November 27, 1992, military insurrection (Cadenas 1993). Similar mass escapes by prisoners living in unbearable conditions have also occurred in Argentina and Brazil in recent years (Ungar 1996).

As Venezuela enters the 21st century, it is a society on the edge. The economic crisis nears the end of its second decade while political corruption remains the norm and state security forces continue to operate above the law. Predictions of another mass riot and another coup attempt are forever circulating in the mass media and the *barrios*. Meanwhile, much of the population remains cynical about the new alternatives that have appeared on the electoral scene. Most people see only empty rhetoric from political parties that lack either the power or the will to change the worsening conditions of everyday life.

Chapter 5:

Welcome to Caracas: Crime, Corruption, and Poverty[1]

Before my fieldwork, most of my knowledge about Venezuela came from books and articles I read in graduate classes: the academic analyses of political scientists and economists, and the sometimes graphic scenes of poverty and human rights abuses described by journalists and sociologists. I supplemented my work in the classroom with a brief visit to Caracas in the summer of 1991, but it wasn't enough to really give me an idea of what it was like to live in the city. That chance came in November of 1993 when, fellowship in hand, I was finally able to spend over a year in Venezuela.

My first six months as a resident of Caracas were spent in the trendy Sabana Grande district of the city. It's a place popular with both foreign tourists and middle-class Venezuelans looking to enjoy the trappings of U.S.-style modernity: fast food, fine restaurants, outdoor

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[1] Accounts of the events described in this chapter are taken from a survey of the four major Caracas newspapers (*El Nacional*, *El Diario de Caracas*, *Ultimas Noticias*, and *The Daily Journal*) from November 2, 1993 to April 30, 1994.

cafes, and trendy clothes. At first, my understanding of life beyond the business suits and cellular telephones came mainly from newspapers. But, over time, my experience of the city and its many faces grew to include the sporadic violence of student protest and the never-ending violence of poverty in the *barrios*.

When I first arrived, the news headlines were filled with stories of political corruption and intrigue. President Ramón J. Velásquez, in power only a few short months since the impeachment of former President Pérez, had just "accidentally" pardoned a cocaine trafficker named Larry Tovar Acuña, who had walked out of prison and disappeared into Colombia. Meanwhile, a war of words was escalating between Defense Minister Radamés Muñoz León and the Causa R over whether or not the Secretary General of the party, Pablo Medina, was in possession of weapons stolen from Fort Tiuna during the February 4, 1992, coup attempt.

Since November happened to be the month before important national elections, the Defense Ministry was also busy rounding up "anarchists" and other "subversives," especially members of the MBR-200. At the same time, Amnesty International was releasing yet another report on the growing number of abuses committed by Venezuelan police and

soldiers against the people they all too frequently harass, torture, or kill. But this trend towards repression wasn't enough to stifle all protest. On one day alone, the streets of the Caracas area were home to four protests by university students, high school students, workers at the national telephone company, and employees of the national housing institute--all of whom were demonstrating against the devastating effects of budget cuts and roll-backs.

Despite the protests and the rumors of an impending military coup, the elections of December 5 went smoothly and Rafael Caldera was selected to become the country's next president. Allegations of vote fraud began to circulate immediately, especially when boxes full of pro-Causa R ballots were found that had been tossed in a garbage dump by the Army. But government officials insisted that the trashed ballots were only copies, and everyone agreed that Caldera had won first place regardless of any "irregularities" that might have occurred during the election.

Besides, the attention of most people was now turning to Christmas, a traditional time of parties and pay bonuses--although bonuses were few and far between this year. But Christmas was also a time when tempers flared and frustrations boiled over thanks to the free flow of alcohol and

emotion during the holiday season. The first four days of this vacation week brought 94 murders to the city, most of which were shooting deaths. The four days of the New Year's weekend witnessed 73 more. Even in a city accustomed to 20 or 30 murders per weekend among a population of less than 5 million, this level of killing seemed unusually grotesque.

But the New Year seemed to usher in a wave of violence and turmoil quite apart from the skyrocketing homicide statistics. On January 3, just two days after the beginning of the Zapatista rebellion in Mexico, the Sabaneta prison riot left over 100 burned and mutilated corpses. Eleven inmates of a prison in Maracay died during an escape attempt the next day. The following week, the closing of Banco Latino marked the beginning of a series of bank collapses that would continue throughout the year. The bank failures wreaked havoc on the entire economy and set off countless protests by bank employees and depositors, as well as workers who depended on government and corporate accounts for their paychecks.

Meanwhile, the out-going government of Velásquez insisted on imposing an unpopular sales tax known as the I.V.A. (*Impuesto al Valor Agregado*, or Value-Added Tax [V.A.T.]) that Caldera had vowed to eliminate during his campaign. But now the incoming Caldera

government was saying that the I.V.A. might be preserved in some "modified" form. Most people viewed this tax as unbearable in any form, especially when placed on top of inflation and the rising cost of public transportation. The reply to all of this contradictory double talk was two weeks of street demonstrations by students around the country.

My wife and I saw the end of one of these demonstrations while walking to the Central University one afternoon. As we started heading towards the campus, we saw columns of black smoke streaming from fires in the middle of the street. Police were gathered in a grassy area to the side of the road by the freeway, standing behind the cover of trees as they shifted their riot guns from one hand to another. We waited with some other onlookers for a few minutes, not sure if it was safe to continue. Finally, not hearing any shots fired, we all started walking. We passed by an armored police truck with a smashed windshield, a tire and two bags of trash that had been set on fire, and the burned out shells of two small trucks--which we later found out belonged to Pepsi and Frito-Lay. As we walked under the arch that leads onto the campus, we also passed by 20 or so young men with T-shirts wrapped around their faces, proudly standing in a line at the side of the road.

It didn't take long for demonstrations like these to escalate. At the end of January the police killed a 16-year-old girl during a high school protest near Caracas, sparking another week's worth of demonstrations around the country. Bus drivers were then brought into the mix at the beginning of February when students in Barquisimeto seized 30 buses to protest high fares. The drivers responded quickly with a strike, since they were as opposed to students who called for low fares as they were to politicians who supported the I.V.A.

Other events of February were a reminder that social conflict carries racial overtones even in a "mixed" nation of *mestizos*. On the second day of that month, one day after the U.S. State Department issued a report criticizing human rights abuses in Venezuela, the National Guard killed three Yucpa Indians in Zulia state while allegedly "confiscating" a load of firewood that was intended for "illegal" sale. The Yucpa community struck back by blockading roads and seizing five *haciendas* nearby. Only two weeks later, mobs looted Chinese-owned businesses throughout the city of Turén after the Chinese owner of a supermarket hit a woman and kicked her 6-year-old daughter down some stairs because the girl had surreptitiously picked up a can of condensed milk. The Army was called

in to regain control of the streets after the police and National Guard were unable to do so. The event bore chilling similarities to the Los Angeles riots of 1992, which were sparked in part by the killing of a 13-year-old girl at the hands of a Korean shopkeeper.

February was also the month that Caldera took the reigns of government and tried to demonstrate how different his administration was from those of his predecessors. He oversaw the months-long process of pardoning the coup plotters of February 4 and November 27, 1992, and finally got around to suspending the I.V.A. once and for all. However, the 70 murders of the Carnival holidays were a grim sign that things were not going to change quickly in the streets of the capital. Over the months that followed, banks continued to collapse while workers and students continued to take to the streets.

Ironically, it was one evening during this bloody February that allowed me and my wife to catch a glimpse of what life is like closer to the top of the social ladder. The U.S. Embassy was holding a reception for three new attachés and invited recipients of Fulbright fellowships to come and mingle with the upper crust. The reception was held in a two-floor, two-balcony, penthouse apartment of the Sebucán district, where the

typical residential building has a guard booth and tall walls to keep out the general population. The party itself, on the upper-most balcony, was a high-society affair: waiters with plates of appetizers, wine, and whisky made their way through the crowd of over-dressed people while members of the press took pictures.

Our main companions at the party were two other "Fulbrighters," both of whom were looking very self-important in the midst of a crowd that included the U.S. Ambassador. They were graduates of Ivy League universities who had never visited a *barrio*, but who felt confident in pontificating about the need for more budget cuts and multinational corporate investment in Venezuela. While we looked down on the lights of the *ranchos* that filled the horizon, they tried to figure out why many poor people had voted for the Causa R when structural adjustment and foreign investment were so obviously the paths to "progress." Standing in a luxury apartment with imported drinks in our hands, it was easy to envision the kind of "progress" to which they were referring.

Up until this time, the closest I had come to the people of the *barrios* was an occasional walk among the *buhoneros* who sold their wares on the sidewalks downtown. My landlord in Sabana Grande assured me

that what made us different from most Venezuelans was the Northern European blood that flowed through our veins. Needless to say, I found his view of the world to be somewhat limited. I had visited one of the poor suburban neighborhoods outside of Caracas a few times, but it was a quiet and roomy place without the congestion and gunfire of the city.

I got my first chance to take a closer look at a Caracas *barrio* in March, when I went on a tour of La Vega with three inspectors of the *Fundación de Vivienda Popular* (Foundation of Popular Housing) who were checking to see if those people who had received home-improvement loans had spent the money in accordance with the terms of their contracts. We met early in the morning near the National Guard post at the entrance to the *barrios* and took a small bus up into the hills. The rest of the morning and part of the afternoon were spent journeying to houses around the area, from the cracked cement streets below to the crumbling paths of rock and dirt above, through all of the winding staircases and alleyways in between. It was a fast tour, but it was also the perfect chance to see in a matter of hours the kinds of problems that most people faced on a daily basis.

Garden hoses ran from house to house across the alleys as people shared water that was in short supply thanks to the dismal state of underground pipes that were forever leaking and bursting. Piles of trash and the stray dogs that fed on them were an indication that garbage collection was a rare event. Signs outside of many homes advertised "Pepsi" and the domestic "Polar" beer, two of the informal economy's top sellers. The thick metal bars that lined every storefront and the windows of every house, not only in this community but throughout the entire city, were a hint that crime was more than a minor problem.

The tour may have lasted only a day, but it was my introduction to a side of Venezuelan society that was the mirror image of life in neighborhoods like Sabana Grande or Sebucán. The people of middle-class and upper-class communities tried to re-create the ideal of U.S.-style modernity by importing consumer goods and pop culture from North America, and by relying on iron gates and private guards to protect this ideal from the impoverished masses that surrounded them on all sides. Meanwhile, the majority who lived in *barrios* such as La Vega were left to fend for themselves.

Chapter 6:

La Vega: Past and Present[1]

La Vega has undergone a radical transformation over the course of the 20th century. Once a rural zone dominated by fields of sugar cane, it is now an urban sprawl that is home to modern industries, middle-class apartment buildings, and vast slums. Although no corner of the *parroquia* has escaped the effects of economic collapse and government neglect, the hillsides of the *barrios* are where the day-to-day drama of *La Crisis* (The Crisis) is played out with the greatest intensity and the greatest human cost.

La Vega: A Thumbnail History

The history of La Vega dates back almost as far as the history of Caracas itself, although there is no exact date known for the foundation of either. The lands that would eventually become La Vega were the site of one of the first *encomiendas* granted in the Valley of Caracas. It was

[1] The historical information contained in this chapter is drawn primarily from María Luisa Herrera de Weishaar's history of La Vega (1981). Additional background material comes from Ermila Troconis de Veracoechea's history of Caracas (1992).

probably in 1568, about one year after Diego de Losada had established the settlement of Santiago de León de Caracas, that Garci González de Silva was given an *encomienda* in La Vega as reward for his ongoing work of "pacifying" Venezuela's indigenous inhabitants. In 1592 he requested and was granted formal possession of the land itself, as well as vast tracts extending far beyond the present-day limits of the *parroquia.*

La Vega was not only strategically located between the Valley of Caracas and the plantations of Aragua, but was itself a prime agricultural site thanks to the presence of the Guaire River and the rich alluvial soils that it had created. As a result, from its earliest days the area was devoted not only to small subsistence plots of corn, cassava, and vegetables, but large plantations of sugar cane and wheat as well. This agricultural economy continued to dominate the region for hundreds of years. The *haciendas* of Garci González and his descendants eventually passed into the hands of the powerful Tovar family and were later fragmented among many different owners. Meanwhile, the community of small farmers, who lived on land rented from the *haciendas*, was fed by the arrival of foreign immigrants. Most came from the Canary Islands of Spain, but Chinese farmers also moved into the area at the beginning of

the 20th century.

The early 20th century also marked the beginning of urban expansion beyond the old colonial boundaries of Caracas and into the surrounding countryside of which La Vega was a part. The sugar-cane fields of El Paraíso, adjacent to the original town of La Vega, began to give way to mansions and *quintas* (villas), forming the very first *urbanización* (urbanization) for upper-class residents of the capital. This process only accelerated as the nation's oil economy grew. As land values rose under the pressure of continuous urban development, the few farms that remained became increasingly unprofitable. In only a few short decades, there was nothing left of the vast *haciendas* that had once dominated the entire region.

At the same time agriculture was collapsing, industry was on the rise. This industrial boom was sparked in 1907 with the founding of the privately owned *Fábrica Nacional de Cemento* (National Cement Factory), which took advantage of La Vega's limy soil to produce cement that, up until then, had to be imported from Europe at high cost. The factory flourished as the demand for cement grew along with expansion of the urban construction business. During its first year of operation the factory

employed 60 people and produced only 500 sacks of cement. By 1978 there were 124 office personnel and 613 workers who produced over 20 million sacks per month (Herrera de Weishaar 1981: 190).

The factory also served as a magnet for other industries, both big and small. The first to enter the area were devoted to the production of textiles, but others soon came that specialized in food packaging, construction materials, machinery, electrical appliances, plastics, and chemicals. During the 1970s, the first administration of Carlos Andrés Pérez issued several decrees ordering industries to relocate outside of the congested Caracas Metropolitan Area. Many factories in La Vega responded by moving to other cities such as Valencia, La Victoria, and Maracay. But others chose to stay. Except for the cement factory, most are located in the industrial zone of La Yaguara, which is now dominated by the massive steel-smelting plant known as Sidetur.

The explosive growth of La Vega's *barrios* didn't begin in earnest until after the fall of the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship in 1958. Steady migration from the countryside had been going on for well over a decade, but the dictator had prohibited the building of *ranchos* that might destroy the beauty of his capital city. So while middle-class apartment buildings

sprang up throughout El Paraíso, La Paz, and Montalbán, poor migrants were channeled into massive housing projects elsewhere in the city (especially in the 23 de Enero). Once civilian rule was re-established, however, rural immigrants flooded into virtually every inch of unoccupied space in the Caracas area, including the hillsides that surrounded the colonial-era town of La Vega and its modern cement factory. According to an official census, by 1978 there were 74,227 people living in 12,581 homes in the *barrios* of La Vega (Herrera de Weishaar 1981: 220). This represented a little over half the population of the entire *parroquia.*

Today, there is barely a hint of La Vega's rural past. All that remains of Garci González de Silva's great *haciendas* is the mansion he had built in 1590, which was declared a national monument in 1970. The Guaire River has been reduced to an open sewer that carries garbage alongside the freeway and into the center of Caracas. Unlike the farmers and field hands who came before them, residents of the parish must now live with all the problems of an impoverished metropolis, ranging from pollution and traffic jams to gang violence and water shortages. Although everyone experiences these problems to some degree, it is the people of the *barrios* who suffer the most. According to official statistics, which are

frequently criticized for being far too conservative, 37.6 percent of the *parroquia*'s 158,882 inhabitants live in poverty. Of these 60,000 people, 21,000 live in extreme poverty (Alcaldía de Caracas 1994: 12).

The Barrio: A Walking Tour

Any tour of the *barrios* would have to begin at *La Redoma de la India*, the point at which the major roads of the *parroquia* converge. To the east of *La Redoma*[2] lies the *urbanización* of El Paraíso and the *barrios* of the Cota 905. To the north is La Paz, the industrial zone of La Yaguara, and what remains of the Guaire River. To the west is the *urbanización* Montalbán and, beyond that, the *barrios* of Antímano. And to the south is the original town of La Vega, now lost among the hillsides filled with *ranchos*.

La Redoma itself is a major landmark thanks to the presence of a statue that stands in the middle of the intersection and is known simply as *La India* (the Indian Woman). The statue was created in 1911 by the artist Eloy Palacios to commemorate the June 24, 1821, Battle of

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[2] This is a term that defies easy translation. The literal meaning of "redoma" is "flask." Given the shape of a flask (wide at the bottom, narrow at the top), the word in this context refers to the fact that the traffic of four major streets is channeled into the relatively narrow space of the intersection.

Carabobo, in which Spanish forces were defeated once and for all, securing the independence of Venezuela. From the base of the statue rise the figures of three intertwined women, each of which represents a republic of Gran Colombia, Simón Bolívar's ill-fated attempt to unite Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador. Above the women are three palm trees, at the top of which stands an Indian woman who represents Liberty.

The romantic idealism of the statue's symbolism fades quickly, however, as you begin to ascend the hillsides that lie only a few yards away. On a typical morning, the entrance to the *barrios* is filled by the thousands of people who come down from the hills on their way to work: some on foot, others crammed into the busses and cars that clog the one major road leading out of the area. Road-side vendors of fruits, vegetables, meat, and fish set up their tables for the day's work, while passing commuters buy cheap, greasy breakfasts at little stands that cook *empanadas* (fried, flour pouches filled with meat or cheese) and *arepas* (corn-meal biscuits that are also filled with meat or cheese).

Most of the time, there is also a Metropolitan Police or National Guard post at the entrance as well. The post serves as a checkpoint in the search for illegal aliens (mainly Colombians) and a staging area for

periodic street sweeps of the *barrios*. During these *operativos*, people are picked up in the hillsides above for not having *cédulas* (identification cards), for drinking in public, for possessing drugs or weapons, and--if they are teenagers--for being in the street in violation of the curfew on minors. They are then brought down to the post before being bussed away for processing, and are all too frequently brutalized--sometimes even killed--in the process. The post also provides a place where the National Guard can "recruit" young men for the *recluta* (draft) by snatching them off the street. Ongoing actions such as these, and the continual threat of such actions, are what Michael Taussig (1989) calls "terror as usual" among the poor.

As you head up the main street into the central part of the *barrio* that dates back more than 400 years, you pass by more vendors, most of whom are clustered in a small plaza where you can buy anything from Chicago Bulls T-shirts to toilet paper. On the weekends, flatbed trucks haul in cages filled with live chickens that are stacked on the street corners and have usually all been sold by noon. The street is also lined with restaurants, grocery stores, bakeries, and hardware stores--many of them owned by Portuguese and Italian merchants who still cringe at the

thought of the destruction they suffered during the riots of 1989. Garbage is everywhere, including huge piles that are never cleared away fast enough by the trash trucks. Sometimes, when the stench becomes too unbearable in the equatorial heat, someone sets fire to a pile and temporarily deprives the stray dogs of some extra food.

Not far from the plaza is the colonial-era town center, which is home to the *Junta Parroquial* (Parish Council), a police station, a church, the community theater, and two schools--one of which was built by the cement factory. A little further uphill sits the cement factory itself, as well as the medical dispensary and community center that the factory's owners built to placate residents enraged by the pollution that has been spewed onto their homes for decades. The factory is technically illegal, but has stayed in business thanks to powerful friends in high places and a team of well-paid lawyers who ignore studies revealing that cement dust leaves the people of La Vega with an extremely high incidence of respiratory ailments such as asthma (La Vega Dice 1982, SIC 1994: 265). The furnaces of the factory haven't burned since 1993, when the owners shifted this more polluting phase of production to another factory in another *barrio* with less organized opposition. But dust is still generated

from the processing and packaging of cement at the La Vega plant, and its huge trucks continue to rumble through the *barrio*, breaking up the small streets that are rarely fixed by the municipal government.

Further up in the hills, away from the cement factory and the *Junta*, the *barrios* become a maze of small, winding alleys and secondary roads. The further away from the main roads you travel, the more severe become problems such as lack of running water and garbage collection. When it rains, both the roads and the alleys literally become small rivers thanks to the lack of a drainage system, leaving behind mountains of trash and debris when the water subsides. Heavy rains can also leave behind any number of landslides, collapsed houses, and injured or dead family members on particularly unstable terrain.

When the weather is dry, however, these streets and alleyways are the lifelines of the *barrio*. This is where children play basketball and stickball, and where neighborhood residents, especially men, hang out to gossip and talk politics. On Friday and Saturday, debates can last until late at night thanks to the many houses that "informally" sell beer. This street life is clearly a male-dominated affair that often invokes the disdain or wrath of women who are left at home by their men or who must make

due with depleted household budgets that have been imbibed during countless alcohol-filled sessions of male bonding.

As Matthew Gutmann (1996) points out in the case of Mexico City, there is a considerable amount of bravado and *machismo* involved in such socializing. Masculinity is often evaluated in terms of drinking prowess, displays of aggression, flirtation with dangerous situations, and *aventuras* (extra-marital affairs; literally "adventures"). The sexism of street life is also reflected in the vocabulary employed by men in their conversations. In Caracas, the most common exclamation uttered by men is *¡coño!*, which literally means "cunt," but is invoked in the same way that men in the United States might use the expression "shit!."

In contrast to the networks and social lives of women, which tend to revolve around visits to other households, men are usually in the streets and highly visible. As Philippe Bourgois (1995: Introduction) notes in the case of East Harlem, the activities of men--economic and otherwise--are much more public affairs than those of women, and consequently expose men to a greater risk of violence at the hands of both gangs and security forces. In La Vega, most gangs consist of armed teenagers who control the trade in *bazuko* (crack) and cocaine, with all of the shoot-outs and

revenge killings that come with it. Most of the murders in the *barrios* occur during battles between gangs, or between gangs and the police, or when someone just happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time when someone else is shooting. And you never know when a lone gunman might decide to kill you for your shoes, your watch, or your money--or when you might be swept up in an *operativo* by the police or National Guard.

This ever-present danger has created a climate of fear that can be seen not only in the steel bars that line almost every window and doorway, but in the fact that many streets become deserted soon after sunset. Michael Taussig (1987) refers to this phenomenon as the "culture of terror." Bourgois (1995) addresses the same issue in his analysis of drug dealers in East Harlem. He points out that although drug dealers may be a minority of the population, they dominate public space and therefore create a climate of insecurity that affects everyone. As Bourgois (1995) also notes, and as Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) discusses in the case of Brazil, this constant exposure to violence leads people to become desensitized to the various aspects of terror with which they are forced to live. In the *barrios* of Caracas, the sound of gunfire and the presence of

armed gangs, National Guard patrols, and dead bodies have become commonplace.

However, as will be illustrated in the following chapters, it would be a mistake to assume that this forbidding atmosphere forces people to live forever imprisoned in their homes, cowering in fear. While people must adapt to the volatile nature of their neighborhoods, most do not let it break them. Men continue to socialize in the streets, women continue to walk these same streets on their way to each other's homes, and efforts at political mobilization and community organization continue to arise.

Chapter 7:

The View from the Bottom: Scenes from the *Barrio*

"If I leave [my home] for the street to stop for a little while, I'm dying from fear because from one moment to the next--you know. When one is most relaxed, a shooting happens. It's not the first that they've killed in the doorway of their own home."

--A woman in her sixties who had lived in La Vega for forty years.

"The police are abusive, corrupt, evil. You shouldn't be in the police. It's bad. I know how they mistreat the people here. I work for the police [as a secretary] and I've seen how they mistreat people. And you can't do anything! You can't do anything! Because if you interfere, you'll be punished too....One day, my brother left for the bank to work and the National Guard arrived [during an *operativo*]. They hit him, they maltreated him. After everything they did to that poor boy, he arrived here dirty and beaten. And you couldn't do anything, anything."

--A woman in her twenties who had lived in La Vega for four years.

"People have to go to bed early because Venezuela in general is a prison. Because people have their home for a prison. You already have to live locked up inside of your house, in your home, for fear of crime.....

"The government, the police.....profit from drugs. One can't tell who is the criminal and who is the police."

-- A man who had lived in La Vega for 30 years.

During May of 1994, when I moved into a *barrio* of La Vega, there were serious problems brewing in Venezuela. The value of the *bolívar* was collapsing fast relative to the all-powerful U.S. dollar, moving from a little over 100 per dollar in May to almost 200 by the end of the following month. The Caldera government responded on June 27 not only by imposing foreign exchange controls, but by suspending several constitutional guarantees concerning freedom from arbitrary arrest, the inviolability of the home, and private property rights. Within days, the police and National Guard were conducting massive *operativos* throughout the Caracas-area *barrios* of La Vega, Cota 905, El Valle, 23 de Enero, and Petare.

But as Simón once pointed out to me, constitutional guarantees are always suspended in the *barrios*. Not just because security forces have always acted with impunity among the poor, but because life in the *barrios* is permeated with many other levels of violence. There is the violence of the economic crisis, which makes itself felt every time someone goes to bed hungry or suffers through an illness without medication. There is the violence of alcoholism and drug addiction, as people seek to escape the hardships of daily life. And there is the

violence of crime, which increases constantly as people are left with fewer and fewer viable options in the struggle for survival.

During my time in La Vega, there were three days that illustrated the many shades of this violence. Some of my most enlightening experiences came on Friday and Saturday nights, usually after meetings of the housing association, when I was relaxing and trying not to engage in a formal study of anything. As is so often the case in ethnographic studies, it is during these "off duty" periods that the anthropologist is most caught up in the natural flow of daily life, which can yield some of the most valuable insights of fieldwork.

High on Life

Beer is the most common instrument of chemical self-abuse in the *barrio*--followed by rum. Much of it is consumed during the formal and informal parties that are held every weekend in homes and on the street, but for many people this goes far beyond the level of social drinking. It has become the kind of mind-numbing drug addiction that you expect to find in communities where never-ending poverty has produced a profound sense of despair. For some people, alcohol isn't quite enough and cocaine

provides that little extra jolt that makes the world look better. There was one night in particular that gave me a glimpse of this kind of addiction. Strangely enough, this was also a night when I had one of my few encounters with someone who had a complete and utter hatred of all North Americans.

I'd been living in the *barrio* for about two months and this was my fifth Saturday-afternoon meeting of the housing association. Only two people had shown up for the start of this particular meeting, and the president of the association was mad as hell about it. He complained that the association represented nothing more than opportunism, with people showing up long enough to get a loan and then never participating in anything. But about twenty people eventually arrived and he was finally able to get some work done. He collected copies of loan-repayment receipts from those people who had them, then complained about those members of the association who get a loan and never pay it off. He made plans for the upcoming city-wide housing conference that the association was hosting that year, then criticized everyone for the dismally low level of attendance at meetings. And that was it.

Afterwards, I went into the street for a few beers with Simón and a couple of other community activists: Roberto and José. Our beer came in little plastic cups this evening because of all the police and National Guard patrols that had been passing by over the past few weeks to crack down on public drinking. As the sun went down, a red-faced old man who I'd seen many times before came up and blessed us like a priest. He must have felt pumped up by all the alcohol that filled his body, because he was shouting political commentary at us: something about how Pérez Jiménez, the dictator of the 1950s, was the best leader Venezuela ever had. My friends decided to have a little fun with both of us, so José asked him, "What do you think of the *gringos*?" "They are all our friends," he replied. A minute later, José told him that they were planning a bomb attack on the U.S. embassy and asked if he was with them. "I'm with you," he answered patriotically, revealing that his political views were shaped more by blood-alcohol level than by ideological conviction.

The old guy stayed for a while, always telling us to "come here" every time he wanted to share a profound thought with us--even though we were all standing about three feet apart. At one point, he started to get religious again and wanted all of us to kiss the imaginary papal ring

on his finger. He put his hand against José's lips, then mine, then tried to do the same with Roberto. But Roberto just knocked the filthy claw away with a look of annoyance and disgust. Simón got the biggest kick out of the old man, bursting into laughter about every thirty seconds and giving him a big hug. But José had enough when the man grabbed his beer and started waving it in the air during one of his political speeches, spilling most of the precious liquid on the ground. José said that it was time to leave and the four of us headed down the street, while the old man continued on his way uphill.

José got on a bus and went home to his wife in another *barrio*, while I had another beer with Simón and Roberto in front of another house that informally sells the stuff. We'd only been there a few minutes when we saw a local teacher walking by who was also busy raising his blood-alcohol level. My wife is a teacher and was looking for some kind of volunteer work at the time, so Simón decided to ask him if there were any La Vega schools that might be able to make use of her.

The two of them said hello very formally, then Simón explained my wife's situation and said that she wanted to help out in a classroom anyway she could. "For what reason?" asked the teacher coldly, doing his

best to sound as arrogant as possible. Simón explained it all again, saying that she was here in Caracas because I was. So then he asked what I was doing in Venezuela. Simón replied that I was an anthropology student working on a dissertation for a U.S. university, and the teacher answered with a long and knowing "Ahhhh!" as if a great secret had just been revealed. And then he said, "They are of no interest."

"It's okay, it's not important," I said to Simón, trying to ignore the comment. But Simón asked the teacher to explain his position. That was a mistake, because the guy launched into a long tirade about how Venezuela is for Venezuelans and there shouldn't be any *gringos* here for any reason. I quickly got tired of listening to nationalism from a Venezuelan with a very British, Beetles-style haircut, so I moved a few feet away and drank my beer alone. I probably should have maintained an air of professional detachment and joined in the discussion for the sake of my research, but the unexpectedness of the attack had made me defensive. Besides, I had been trying to unwind after a long day and didn't really want to be an anthropologist for the next few hours. Simón and the teacher kept debating, while Roberto just stood there silently and listened.

I wasn't alone for long thanks to Nelson, a skinny young man who lived in the neighborhood and was usually in the street drinking beer on Friday and Saturday nights (and a lot of week nights, too). I didn't know much about him except that he spoke in a deep, resonating voice and almost always seemed a little messed up. He came over and greeted me as his best friend and his brother, which he also did with just about everyone he met. I told him about the debate between Simón and the teacher that my presence had provoked, and he said that I had to understand the teacher's position since I was an outsider here. He also said that the teacher was like a brother to him (big surprise) and that if I was mad at the teacher I was mad at him too.

He then got pulled away by some friend of his who was walking down the street, so I was left alone with my beer again. I noticed that the teacher had taken time out from his argument with Simón to tell someone else that there was an evil *gringo* in the neighborhood. When he saw me looking at him, he gave me a sideways glance and said, "Who are you!?" I resisted the urge to say "the monster from the North" or something like that and said nothing instead.

He jumped back into his debate with Simón after a minute or two, and Nelson came back from the conference he'd had with his friend. We'd both run out of cigarettes by this time, so Nelson led me down the street to another house that specialized in selling tobacco and snacks. "Do you know who you're walking with?" he asked me twice with a smile on his face. I had no idea what he was talking about, so I just said "no."

We'd bought our pack of cigarettes and were heading back up the street when an old man on his way down called and waved to Nelson. "Who's he?" I asked. "A criminal," he replied simply. Nelson introduced us and we shook hands. The guy took out a little vile of cocaine, poured some on his thumb, and snorted it down. "Give me some of that," said Nelson, taking the vile from the old man. "I'm vulgar," he added proudly. Then he poured some white powder on his thumb, snorted, and licked his finger with a flare of theatrical flourish. He offered me some, but I turned it down. So he had the old guy show me the other goods he had to offer: a little rock of *bazuko* and a small bud of marijuana. Nelson said that I could go behind a school bus that was parked nearby and smoke some, but I refused again, nightmare visions of Venezuelan prisons floating through my head. I said that I couldn't because I was a foreigner

in a foreign land, and the old man seemed annoyed that I wouldn't show my solidarity with them by taking even a little hit of something.

Nelson changed the subject by showing the man the viles of coke he had in his jacket pocket. The man got mad, complaining that Nelson was using all of his stuff and not sharing his own. Nelson just ignored him and led both of us back to the street bar that had grown up around the house where the beer was being sold. Then he bought another round and tried to impress me with a doubtful story of how he used to walk around with a gun in one pocket and bullets in the other when he was younger. After a while he suggested that we go to a garage nearby and hang out with some friends of his. I knew that it wasn't a real good idea to wander off at night with a coke head in a Caracas *barrio*, but I thought that this might be a good chance to see a side of street life that I probably wouldn't see again once my common sense had returned. Besides, Simón was still discussing nationalism with my good friend the teacher.

As we walked to the garage, he introduced me to almost everyone we met in the street. The old man came along too, but didn't say anything. In the back of my mind, I could just imagine people talking about the druggie from the United States who they saw hanging out with

Nelson. And then I imagined Simón's reaction when people asked him why a community leader of his moral stature was playing host to such a depraved foreigner. But I decided not to worry about it and went along anyway--although I ended up spending the next few days re-convincing Simón and Roberto that I really was a serious anthropologist and not a drug fiend.

Nelson's friends at the garage were a little less hyperactive than he, probably because they were only drinking and not snorting. One of them was anxious to practice his English with me, which was limited to "Have a nice day," "Good afternoon," and "How are you?" He also told me that English was the favorite second language of Venezuelans, which I already knew. "It's because my country has so much power here," I said. He agreed, then cautiously asked me why this was so, unsure if I was a Communist or a C.I.A. agent. "Because my country is imperialist," I replied. He agreed again, but seemed surprised that all *gringos* weren't unconsciously programmed to wave the flag.

Nelson also tried to get in on the conversation in his own manic way, telling me about how everyone in the neighborhood was like family to him--about the pure Venezuelan blood that coursed through his veins

(although I wasn't sure what that meant in a nation of *mestizos*)--about how he could walk anywhere day or night because he was a real man--and about how Venezuelan *barrios* were multi-racial paradises of Latino solidarity. His friends warned me that he was crazy and that I shouldn't take him seriously, but he didn't seem to care. He looked at the world through a veil of cocaine that filtered out anything bad. The sweeps by the police and National Guard, the shootings, the gangs, the water shortages, the trash in the streets, the crumbling schools--none of it really mattered as long as there was white powder to be had.

While we were having our deep discussion, we were also enjoying rounds of beer and shots of *anís*, a cheap licorice liqueur that vaguely resembles anisette. After about an hour of this I was more than ready to go home and was grateful when the men in the garage told us that it was closing time. Nelson and his silent friend led the way out, stopping on the corner for a little more coke to close out the evening's festivities.

As they poured and snorted, Nelson's foot began moving to the sound of salsa music coming from a window somewhere nearby. "That's Latin music!" he said to me with pride, putting all the emphasis on the word "Latin." He and the old man started to sing along, and I started to

feel a little uncomfortable again, standing on a dark and desolate corner of La Vega with two singing coke heads at one o'clock in the morning, on a street that could be raided at any moment by the police. But we didn't stay there for long, and I soon found myself back in the comfort of my little room, laying in my bed listening to the sound of a giant cockroach crawling on the wall.

Most of the people who I met on this particular night were examples of a common response to the stresses of living in an impoverished community. Faced with economic and social forces beyond their control, people often rely on some chemical to temporarily relieve their anxiety and make the world a little more bearable. For the white-haired man who made speeches and for the teacher who seemed to blame me personally for the problems of his country, beer was the answer. For the men in the garage it was *anís*. And for Nelson it was cocaine. As for Nelson's friend, he not only used cocaine to numb his mind, but sold it as well to make ends meet in an economy offering jobs that were relatively few and low-paying. Although the line between using a substance recreationally and abusing it is often hard to define, it was quite clear that life in La Vega pushed many people far beyond the point of just "having

a few drinks" with friends.

Work and Play

One of the biggest concerns of anyone who lives in Venezuela is crime, regardless of whether they live in a lower-class *barrio* or a middle-class *urbanización*. As the economic crisis deepens with every passing year, the number of murders and robberies throughout the city continues to soar, although the bloodiest crimes take place in the *barrios*. The ever-present danger of an attack means that you have to keep your guard up at all times, as I found out the hard way one Friday night. As if by some morbid quirk of fate, my experience of crime in the *barrio* came in the midst of my most active period as an informal member of the housing association.

It was the day before the city-wide housing conference and I was standing on the street corner waiting for Roberto. As a member of the association sponsoring the event, he had been entrusted with buying food and refreshments and I was coming along to help. He was running late, so I passed the time by watching all of the sleepy-eyed workers who were also looking at me: wondering what in the hell a pasty *gringo* was doing

standing in the middle of the *barrio* at eight o'clock in the morning. When Roberto showed up we jumped on a bus and stood all the way downtown, enjoying the aroma of stale sweat and bad breath emanating from our fellow passengers.

Once we reached the center of the city, we got off the bus and made our way through the crowds of morning rush hour that filled the sidewalks. We stopped long enough to have a couple of strong, espresso-style coffees, then went to the bank to cash a check from the housing association. A relative of Roberto's worked there, so we were able to skip the long lines in which everyone else had to stand. Once Roberto had his wad of cash in hand, we got on a little commuter van bound for the Coche market where we were going to do our shopping.

Along the way we got a scenic tour of Caracas. The La Bandera bus terminal, which was shut down before it even opened because the Mayor's office had neglected to assign any security guards to it once construction was finished, and it had been stripped clean of absolutely everything. El Valle, which was one of the most violent areas during the price riots of February 1989. Soldiers at the *Conejo Blanco* (White Rabbit) military fort had shot it out with armed *barrio* dwellers across the

El Valle highway, much to the distress of people who happened to be driving by at the time. Finally, we were in the sprawling *barrios* of Coche, which is home to the largest mass marketplace in the city. The market was administered by the Mayor's office and had recently been the site of protests and a National Guard occupation because the mayoralty was now in the hands of the Causa R, while the labor unions were still dominated by AD.

The market itself was like a small city. Row after row of warehouses, stores, and stands sold every kind of fruit, vegetable, meat, dry good, and canned good imaginable. In the center of it all was a building that housed branch offices of just about every bank in Venezuela. A high wall surrounded the whole complex, protecting it from the inhabitants of the hills on all sides. We were shown around by Raúl, a native of La Vega who worked for a restaurant and knew where to go to get the good deals. We moved through the market slowly, dodging workers pushing giant hand trucks loaded down with produce, as thousands of other shoppers busily filled their bags along with us.

While Raúl and Roberto spent most of their time looking at tomatoes and onions, I watched the people around me. Three street kids hung out by a small coffee shop where we rested at around noon. They were fighting over a small space on a step and the older boy was clearly the dominant one, hitting and pushing his companions repeatedly. Later, at one of the indoor vegetable stands, a man covered with scars came up to us and asked Roberto for money, seeing the stack of bills that he was carrying around. Roberto said that the money wasn't his own and the man walked away angrily, muttering under his breath. Outside, a few people picked through a pile of damaged and rotten fruits and vegetables on the ground, looking for anything free and edible that might have been thrown out by mistake.

After a few hours, we finished buying the hundreds of pounds of food that would feed about 140 people at the next day's conference. Raúl borrowed a hand truck and we loaded all of our stuff onto it and walked to the corner by the entrance to the market. Then Raúl said goodbye and went back inside to finish out his day's work. Roberto hired a pickup truck to take us and our merchandise back to La Vega, and we piled into the back with all of our bags and boxes.

We were dropped off at the house of a woman who'd agreed to do most of the cooking. She and Roberto went through the food to take out what she was going to use, while I sat on the couch and dozed. Then, not having a hand truck or a car, he and I carried the remaining food three blocks uphill to the house of the next woman who'd volunteered her time and kitchen. Roberto did a little more sorting, and then we carried a final load one more block to the last home on our list. My entire body felt like an old piece of spaghetti after that, so I went to Sabana Grande to spend the rest of the afternoon resting, while Roberto went back downtown to take care of more business.

I returned to the *barrio* half an hour late for the final, pre-conference meeting of housing association that had started at eight o'clock. The president of the association was already busy working out last minute details when I arrived, so I just stood outside with some of my community activist friends who were beginning to gather in the street. Two of them, Miguel and José, went inside for a minute to talk to the president about something, which left only me and Francisco to search for beer. The house where we usually did business was already closed for the evening, but we saw a few men with bottles in their hands not far

away. Francisco asked who was open, and they pointed down a dark alley that ran along the side of a school. "I know where," I said to Francisco, who wasn't sure which place they meant. So I took the lead, proud that I knew the area even better than a Venezuelan who'd lived in La Vega all his life.

I led Francisco to a house at the end of the alley, but it was closed. There were three teenagers sitting in a small grassy area nearby, and when Francisco asked them where the beer was, they pointed down another alley that ran behind the school. We went to a couple of houses, but it was soon clear that we were wasting our time. So we headed back the way we'd come. As we approached the teenagers, one of them got up and quietly said, "Give me your money." We were too surprised to say anything. Francisco stood in front of the alley leading back to the street, looking for anyone he knew. And I just stood there looking at Francisco.

"Give me your money," said one of the teenagers still sitting down, repeating the question in case we hadn't heard it the first time. "I don't have any money," said Francisco, still looking out at the street. The kid started to argue with him and I noticed that he was holding some kind of metal tube in his hands. It actually looked like something out of which

you might spray seltzer water. But I was smart enough to realize that Francisco wouldn't have such a nervous expression on his face if we were only dealing with a frustrated bartender, and that it was probably a gun of some sort.

José showed up right about then, greeting Francisco with a smile before he realized what he was walking into. The kid who'd first spoken to us came up to me and felt my right pocket, mistaking the shape of my passport for a wallet. "It's my passport; the money's here," I said, pointing to the other pocket. He clumsily took out the rent money I was stupid enough to still be carrying (about 3000 *bolívares*, or $18), then removed José's wallet from his pocket and took the 300 or so *bolívares* inside. Meanwhile, Francisco was arguing with the kid who had the tube, trying to convince him that his criminal ways were not in the best interests of working-class solidarity. But he was unimpressed. "I'm a killer," he repeated twice in a slow, slurred voice. It was obvious from his twisted tongue and bleary eyes that he was very high on something, probably *bæzuko*.

Miguel was the next to walk into the middle of it all. He slapped Francisco on the back as he said hello, not paying much attention to the three strangers who were with us. One of the kids went up to him and started to reach into his pocket, but Miguel pushed his hand away. "I don't know you," he said as he shoved his way past. He called the teenagers a bunch of druggies[1] and then pushed the kid with the tube. The kid jumped up and pointed it nervously at Miguel as we tried to calm them both down. I'd known that Miguel was a little high strung, but I'd never seen him so mad, yelling at and pushing some drugged out, armed adolescents who probably wouldn't think too long and hard about killing someone. I was especially surprised since it had only been a year since he was hit in the gut by a stray police bullet while standing on the street.

The kids were starting to move away by now since the situation was getting out of hand. Francisco looked at me and said, "Let's go, Walter." I walked over to where he was and said jokingly, "Now I'm broke." "Did they take your money?!" he asked with surprise, not realizing that I'd been cleaned out about five minutes earlier. I said "yes" and he turned back to the three teenagers, who were slowly backing up

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[1] *Marihuaneros*, which has a more generic meaning than just "pot smoker."

towards the alley behind the school. He started to argue with them again, and Miguel joined in too, screaming and waving his hands like a madman. One of the teens pulled out a small knife and scraped it on the sidewalk, warning Miguel not to come any closer. Then the three of them started running away down the alley.

Francisco picked up a small rock and threw it at them as they ran. The kid with the tube pointed it at us, and José and I jumped into the alley leading to the street. We came back out when we didn't hear a shot, just as Francisco ran after them. Meanwhile, Miguel ran past us towards the street yelling, "You know where they're going!" José and I followed after him, while Francisco stayed with the teenagers. We ran down the middle of the street and around the next corner, just in time to see them emerge from behind the school and disappear up another alley that heads into the hills. Francisco and Miguel started to follow, but changed their minds when they looked up at the darkness into which the alley vanished. A man who'd been standing in the street watching came up to us and said that it wasn't worth our lives to follow them up into some desolate place where no one would ever see what happened. We agreed and headed back to the meeting of the housing association.

As we walked up the street, Miguel kept cursing and yelling about the robbery, even though he hadn't lost anything. I asked José what the tube was that the one teenager had been holding and he told me that it was a *chopo*: a tube for soda water that's mechanically modified to fire one bullet. It's only good at close range (like during a holdup, for instance), but can kill you just as easily as a real gun. So it's not a good idea to argue with someone who has one, especially if that person happens to be saturated with *bœzuko* at the time.

The meeting was letting out when we arrived, so we stood around in front of the community center not saying much of anything. Another friend and activist, Juan, came down and joined us for a few minutes, and spoke with his usual air of intellectual detachment when we told him about our adventure. "What's the problem?" he said with a smile, "You live in a society with a high incidence of crime." And then he went back inside. The president of the association called us upstairs a little while later and told us that we were looking at about two hours of work preparing a banner and information packets for the conference. Miguel and I started to laugh when he asked us all what we thought, and we explained what had happened. The president then told Francisco and I

what we'd already learned the hard way: that it's real stupid to walk around in an alley behind a school at nine o'clock at night.

I drove with Francisco and Roberto down to a restaurant near the entrance to the *barrios*, where we bought chicken and beer to keep us fueled for the night's work, and where Roberto loaned me 1500 *bolívares* since I now only had empty space in my pockets. I didn't do too much work once we returned, but spent most of my time smoking cigarettes and thinking about how easy it is to become a grim statistic. I never went into that alley again, and I don't think my friends did either.

Although experiences such as these occur rather infrequently to any particular person, they do happen to someone somewhere at virtually every hour of every day and night--and often with fatal consequences. This fact creates a perpetual atmosphere of uncertainty and fear that goes far beyond the actual incidence of crime, as high as this may be. It acts as a social weight on entire communities, rendering some places unsafe at any time, and practically every place unsafe late at night and before dawn. It is for this reason that the issue of crime is among everyone's primary concerns and is an emotionally charged topic for most people. Yet one must also keep in mind that the forces of desperation and alienation that

foster crime are the same forces that lead so many people to alcohol and drug addiction. As long as larger economic and political processes prevent the majority of the population from earning a decent living and having any real say in the policies that shape their lives, some people will continue to seek their own measure of upward mobility and power by picking up a knife or a gun--in the same way that others try to forget about their poverty and powerlessness by losing themselves in alcohol or cocaine.

Street Sweep

Criminals are not the only armed people who walk the streets of the *barrio*. Police and soldiers also carry guns and can often make life perilous as they carry out their mission of keeping the streets safe from crime. But the problem isn't that they sometimes arrest murderers and thieves. The trouble starts when they engage in *operativos* that throw a net over an entire area, scooping up anyone who is drinking a beer in public or walking down the street without a *cédula*. Even when they don't beat or rob the people they detain--which they do all too often--this kind of random street sweep amounts to a form of mass repression, adding to

the climate of insecurity that is already created by the gangs. During my time in La Vega, I witnessed one such operation.

The final weeks of my stay in Venezuela were drawing to a close, and--as usual--Francisco and I were spending our Friday evening in the street. We were driving around in his pickup, looking for any friends of ours who might be in the mood to socialize. What we found was a National Guard patrol loading a group of young men onto a truck. The area had been chosen for an anti-crime sweep that seemed to be netting mostly teenagers who were outside in violation of curfew. As we pulled up, a woman was arguing with one of the Guardsmen over a male relative of hers who had been put on the truck. She was yelling that he hadn't done anything wrong and shouldn't be taken away like a criminal.

Francisco recognized a distant cousin of his who was also being loaded on board, so he pulled the truck over about half a block downhill. While he walked back up to the scene of the action, I waited by the pickup in the same spot where I'd watched a National Guard patrol chase down two twelve-year old thieves a few months earlier. I was beginning to think that Francisco had been swept up as well when he finally returned with three of his cousin's relatives.

We got in the pickup and headed down to the entrance of the *barrios*, where all of the detainees were being gathered together in the spot normally reserved for police checkpoints and National Guard units searching for good draft material. Francisco's cousin hadn't been brought in yet, but there was already a batch of young men sitting in the middle of the road who had been told to keep their heads down and their mouths shut. Guardsmen with machine guns stood over them, while civilians waited to track the movements of their relatives. A small bus was commandeered to take the current group of detainees to the nearby National Guard headquarters in El Paraíso, where they would be processed and checked for criminal records.

Francisco's cousin still hadn't arrived, so he and I decided to take a break from waiting and go to a bar nearby while the boy's family stood watch. Ironically, it was a bar on the same street where we'd found ourselves one Saturday night three weeks earlier, looking down at the body of a man who'd been shot in the head. The body had been lying on the ground in a puddle of blood and brain tissue for over half an hour without anyone coming to get it, even though it was near the entrance to the *barrios*. As the onlookers waited, a man with a bag of groceries had

stood nearby and said that the guy was a human being and didn't deserve to be left there like that. Another young man had passed by in such a hurry that he accidentally kicked the body in the head.

There wasn't a body in the street on this particular night, so Francisco and I contented ourselves with a couple of beers inside. He happened to run into an acquaintance of his and told him about the National Guard sweep nearby. The man immediately started talking about the dire state of the country, saying that common workers such as himself could only look forward to another mass riot like that of 1989. He said that nothing more was possible because most people in Caracas were disconnected from the political process and lacked the kind of complete popular culture you found in cities such as Mérida (in the Andes) that still had strong ties to tradition. Then he added a comment all too familiar to a *gringo* from a country where Mexican and Caribbean immigrants are blamed for just about every social ill imaginable. He said that the flood of Colombians and other foreigners into the nation had diluted the Venezuelan character of the society and helped turn it into the anarchic mix of poverty and violence that it was today.

Francisco and I finished our beers and went back to the National Guard post to check on his cousin. A new batch of detainees had been brought in and the boy was seated among them. Francisco commented that they were all just regular kids, with not one criminal among them. I said that all the gangs were up in the hills, far away from the street sweep. He agreed, adding that it's easier for the National Guard to stick to main roads rather than make their way through the maze of alleyways. Three arcade machines had been brought down to the post as well, probably taken from an illegal bar and amusement room in someone's house.

One of the detainees questioned the criminality of his actions, saying that he'd done nothing wrong by standing in the street. But one of the Guardsmen replied that none of this would have happened if he'd been at home watching T.V. Another bus was then commandeered and half of the current detainees were loaded on, leaving Francisco's cousin still seated on the ground. Francisco was clearly growing weary of the long wait, so the boy's family thanked him for bringing them this far and said that they would follow the next bus to National Guard headquarters on their own.

Francisco and I left and headed back up into the *barrios* in his pickup. We found a house that was still selling beer and decided to have a couple more to finish off the evening. Nelson, my favorite friendly cocaine addict, was also hanging out in front of the house, which made me a little nervous considering the number of National Guard troops roaming the area, and given the fact that he was probably carrying one or more illicit substances on his person. But I bought him a beer anyway and listened to him rant about some people with whom he'd just gotten in a fight. Fortunately, he was in a bad mood and went home after a few minutes.

That just left myself, Francisco, and a group of drunken partyers in front of a house nearby. Francisco knew some of them, so we joined their small but loud group for about an hour while they played charades, truth or dare, and other alcohol-induced party games. As the only tall, very white guy from the North, I was a popular object of dares among the women of the group, such as 'clean the *gringo*'s glasses' and 'kiss the *gringo*' (my personal favorite). However, all the while, I couldn't help but wonder where Francisco's cousin was at that moment, and what his family was doing as they waited for him to be released from some detention cell.

The people of the *barrios* are assaulted from all sides by the violence that permeates their communities. At one level is crime and the violence of gangs that control much of the criminal activity. Although households may include members who bring in needed income via crime, the violence that is involved in turf wars and revenge killings is not very discriminating. Anyone can be hit by a stray bullet, and the relatives of gang members are even more likely than others to be caught up in the deadly competition among rival gangs. At another level are the forces of state security, those entrusted with protecting "law-abiding" citizens, but who often act like just another gang in their frequently brutal quest to "maintain order." Moreover, the battles between security forces and criminal gangs create a deadly cross fire that claims lives on a regular basis.

In the same way that poverty and powerlessness tears apart the social fabric by leading some people to violence against themselves through drug and alcohol abuse or against their neighbors through gang violence, so too does it lead the state to try holding that fabric together by force, preserving its dominance at the expense of "it's own people." But, amazingly enough, this doesn't cause everyone to hide in their homes and

fatalistically resign themselves to a life of isolation. As Francisco's partyers reminded me, even in a community plagued by many levels of violence, it is still possible to carve out a small space in which friends and family can exist without letting fear destroy them.

Chapter 8:

Hallow Words and Empty Promises: Patronage Politics in Action

"We have always considered politics to be the dirtiest thing there is."
--A woman who had lived in La Vega for 30 years.

Patronage politics exists at many levels in Venezuelan society. In the government, key bureaucratic posts are granted to allies of the party in power. In the workplace, union leaders are party faithfuls who respond more to the party line than to the needs and desires of workers. In the community, patronage operates through the *Junta Parroquial* and the neighborhood associations that are affiliated with the political parties of its members. Ideally, this system is supposed to keep the political aspirations of the general population in line with the interests of elites who dominate the state and the economy. But when the system is upset by financial crisis, things don't run so smoothly. Without money to grease the wheels of patronage, politicians are viewed with indifference or outright hostility by the majority of the population. This sets the stage not only for mass withdrawal from the political system, but for popular

protest as well.

Party Politics in 1994

During my stay in La Vega, the *Junta Parroquial* consisted of nine members: 3 from the Causa R, 3 from AD, 2 from Copei, and 1 from MAS. The presence of the Causa R was a recent development, dating back only to the 1992 municipal elections. But most neighborhood associations were still affiliated with AD. As a result, much of the *Junta*'s political activity revolved around in-fighting between the Causa R, which held the presidency of the *Junta* as well as the mayoralty of the city, and AD, which now found itself in the uncomfortable position of being a second-place party.

This situation was complicated by the fact that the Causa R had been unprepared for its electoral victory in Caracas. Although the party did have a grass-roots organization in the *barrios* of Catia (Hellinger 1996b), it found itself without enough loyal members to fill all of the government posts that it won city-wide. As a result, new recruits had to be found at the last minute. Not surprisingly, more than a few opportunists with their own personal agendas took advantage of this to

become "elected" officials, filling seats that the party had gained in the municipal and local governments.

In the case of La Vega, none of the Causa R members of the *Junta* had belonged to the party prior to the 1992 elections. Two of them were fairly consistent in their support for the party, but a third switched sides and joined with AD in opposing the party he supposedly represented. The members of AD, Copei, and MAS spent part of 1994 engaged in an unsuccessful effort to have him instated as the new president of the *Junta* and to have the current one removed. Their rationale was that the current president had broken the law by keeping her job as a teacher at the same time she sat on the *Junta*, and that this other job also took time away from her work as *Junta* president.

This was technically correct, but it also applied to every other member of the *Junta*, all of whom had been accused of having other sources of income ranging from second jobs to influence-peddling to taking bribes from the cement factory. Moreover, the turn-coat member of the Causa R who was being nominated as the new president had a reputation more dubious than anyone. He was rarely seen, had an unknown address, and was rumored to make his money from extortion or

drug trafficking or some other shady business. Although he was expelled from the Causa R and never became president, he remained on the *Junta* in the pro-AD camp.

At the same time, the *Junta* was divided over another issue. Members of AD wanted to create a separate local government for the middle-class zones of La Vega: Montalbán and El Paraíso. They argued that the *Junta* was only concerned with the problems of the *barrios* while the people beyond were ignored. The Causa R argued that this was not only a completely class-biased proposal that sought to jettison the poor majority of La Vega, but that it would needlessly create another expensive layer of government bureaucracy at a time when money was scarce. Several months after I left Venezuela, the proposal was approved.

As a general rule, the *Junta* had no budget and was limited to writing letters to higher levels of government. However, while I was in La Vega, the *Junta* had 30 million *bolívares* (a little over $176,000) at its disposal that had been granted by the Mayor to replace the crumbling building that was the current seat of local government. But the *Junta*, realizing how bad it would look to spend money on itself in the midst of a depression, voted to spend the money on public works. It was decided

that two-thirds would be given to Valle Alegre, the newest and most impoverished *barrio* of La Vega, and the remaining third reserved to buy construction materials for use by communities elsewhere that needed to build stairways, sewers, retaining walls, and other necessary infrastructure.

In theory, the *Junta* was supposed to serve as the voice of the people before the municipal government. Residents of the parish would bring their problems and complaints to the *Junta* during its weekly public meetings, and the *Junta* would then debate the issues and vote on whether or not to petition the appropriate state agency for assistance. In practice, the functioning of the *Junta* was much more partisan. Most of the 10 to 20 people who usually attended and spoke at the public meetings were presidents of neighborhood associations affiliated with AD and grouped together in Freindeco (*Frente de Integración de la Comunidad*, or Front for the Integration of the Community). If someone spoke who was not the president of a neighborhood association, that person was normally invited beforehand by a member of the *Junta* who would serve as their champion and make an impassioned yet pre-planned speech on their behalf. Someone who just showed up out of the blue might be heard, but they wouldn't have access to the political connections of a particular *Junta*

member--and would therefore have little chance of success.

Since neighborhood associations were a key element in the system of patronage built by the political parties, they were subject to formal state regulation. Associations were legally recognized by the state in the 1978 *Ley Orgánica de Régimen Municipal* (Organic Law of Municipal Regimen). The following year, the *Reglamento No.1* (Bylaw No. 1) of that law required that each association consist of at least 200 families and that its territorial limits be fixed by the municipal government prior to legal recognition. In the face of these bureaucratic limitations, a national campaign was initiated for reform of the law. The result was the 1990 *Reglamento Parcial No. 1* (Partial Bylaw No. 1), which required an initial membership of only 50 people to form an association (Yi Ng 1993: Chp. 2). Control of associations by parties was explicitly forbidden, but the realities of political and economic power made that part of the law meaningless.

There was a proliferation of party-controlled associations beginning in 1989 as a result of the milk-distribution program instituted by then-President Pérez to help soften the blow of his government's harsh economic policies. Milk was to be distributed to communities through

their neighborhood associations, resulting in the creation of thousands of fictitious *asolecheras*, or milk associations, that existed only for that purpose. Unfortunately, these associations did little but foster corruption and party clientelism as their leaders sold the milk for profit or distributed it in a highly selective manner. This milk program is no longer in existence, but its legacy remains. The neighborhood association "movement" of the 1990s is characterized by an unprecedented level of party control, with as many as 70 percent of associations functioning as extensions of the parties they serve (Yi Ng 1993: 32-33).

Most neighborhood "associations" are really made up of only one or two political party functionaries. Far from being social movements, they are bureaucratic machines in which community residents take their problems to the "president" of the association, who then makes use of a personal contact with someone on the *Junta*, who in turn utilizes the privileges of *Junta* membership and the political connections provided by his or her individual party affiliation. Of course, the main problem with this setup is that it only works when political connections yield concrete results. In the case of AD and its neighborhood associations, there were two major obstacles to the smooth functioning of the system in 1994:

budget cuts left few resources for anyone, and the municipal government was now in the hands of the Causa R.

As a result, the political party activists of the *Junta* and the neighborhood associations were able to do very little other than make speeches and pronouncements. There was some party money available before elections to get potential voters drunk and take them to polling places in hired jeeps, but the rest of the time there was nothing. Throughout 1994 the people of La Vega were still waiting for the start of public works projects scheduled for the previous year--let alone those due to begin that year. The politicians of the *Junta* devoted a lot of time and energy to arguing over who was to blame for this, but excuses meant little to the average person who had no running water or whose home turned into a small lake every time it rained.

Theater of the Absurd

Although I sat through more Tuesday morning sessions of the *Junta* than I care to remember, it was the third such meeting I witnessed that captured the true flavor of official politics in La Vega. The meeting was held outside in the old historic plaza of the La Vega, surrounded by

school children and stray dogs. The usual small group of political party activists was in attendance, seated in folding chairs set out in front of a long table where the members of the *Junta* were slowly coming to order. Simón had also dropped by to enjoy the show.

The meeting began with a short speech by the former member of the Causa R who was trying to become the new president of the *Junta.* He said that he had been democratically voted in by the other members of the *Junta* and should be given his rightful position. But the current president cut him off and said that he was wasting everyone's time with matters of no interest to the community. So he sat back down and read the newspaper, which is what he usually did during the few meetings he attended.

From there the discussion shifted to how the *Junta* should divide up the 30 million *bolívares* that it had decided not to spend on new offices for itself. The presidents of different neighborhood associations then took turns telling the *Junta* why the problems of their communities made them most deserving of the money. A representative from Valle Alegre gave the most impassioned speech, arguing that her *barrio* was in imminent danger of an epidemic due to the complete lack of sewers, paved streets,

and just about every basic urban service. The *Junta* agreed with her and voted to give 20 million to her community and 10 million to everyone else. Several of the other association presidents were less than pleased with this lopsided distribution of funds.

The debate continued even after the vote was taken. The representative of MAS on the *Junta* said that at least half of the people living in Valle Alegre were illegal immigrants from Colombia, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. He argued that it would be unfair to give them money ahead of Venezuelans who have lived in La Vega all their lives. It was therefore decided that a census of the area should be taken to find out who was who, but I never heard any more about this census at future meetings.

While this was going on, Simón showed me a letter that was circulating through the group. It was an announcement from the leadership of MAS regarding their representative on the *Junta*, the very person who was speaking at that moment. Evidently, his decision to back AD in its drive to replace the president of the *Junta* had not been sanctioned by higher-ups in the party, who viewed it as illegal and a waste of time. They had decided to "discipline" him by removing him

from the *Junta*--and, as I later found out, by rewarding him with a higher position within the party.

Next, the head of an AD neighborhood association came forward to answer allegations that he had misappropriated funds designated for a school. He was joined by teachers and students from the school who had come to show their support for him. After presenting some financial documents showing where the money had gone, he said that the president of the *Junta* was waging a personal war against him. She replied that the complaint they had issued was signed by all members of the *Junta*, not just her. One of the members of AD denied that he had ever approved the complaint, even though the president said that it had his signature on it. Then the ex-Causa R member moved the debate in a new and irrelevant direction by proudly telling everyone that he had used his own money to buy shoes and books for the poor children of the school, at which point they all cheered him loudly. Several people, including me and Simón, burst into laughter at the sight of such obvious grandstanding.

Now that the ex-Causa R member was back in action, the discussion again turned to the struggle over the presidency of the *Junta*. The would-be president handed out copies of an article that had appeared

in that day's edition of the newspaper *Ultimas Noticias*. It boldly proclaimed that "neighborhood leaders" had sacked the current president of the *Junta* for corruption. A man in the audience objected that neither he nor any other neighborhood leader he knew had taken sides in this on-going power struggle, and he resented that they were being dragged into the middle of it all. Upon closer inspection of the article, it became clear that the "neighborhood leaders" who had been quoted were the ex-Causa R member himself and two of his friends.

This debate inspired an odd speech by a *Junta* member from Copei. He talked of how neighborhood associations were rendered useless by the political parties that controlled them--even though he himself, as a politician from a mainstream party, was part of that system. He also said that the current fight over who was president of the *Junta* was meaningless since it was impossible to choose "between one who's negligent [the current one] and one who's corrupt [the would-be one]."

A legal advisor from the *Concejo Municipal* (Municipal Council) then informed everyone of the Council's position: that the current president was the legal president. Evidently, the presidency of the *Junta* goes to the party with the most votes--in this case, the Causa R--and since

the ex-Causa R member was no longer in the party, he could not take over as president. He replied that the Municipal Council knew nothing about the law, and swore that he would prove his case within 15 days (which he never did). Then he walked away and that day's meeting came to an end.

Pre-Fab Protest

There were also times when the political machinations of the parties took on the appearance of popular protest. One such time came on a Tuesday in November of 1994, when AD and its allies decided to block the major intersection at *La Redoma de la India* to protest the lack of public works in La Vega. Although the issue was valid, it was an action that AD would not have been so enthusiastic about undertaking were it not for the fact that the Causa R municipal government was the main target of the protest.

The demonstration was scheduled to begin at about 6 a.m., but I didn't wake up until 7 o'clock thanks to the fact that I had no alarm. There hadn't been any running water in my house for a couple of days, so I quickly poured a bucket of water over my greasy head and went outside.

There were no busses on the street and long lines of angry commuters were standing at every corner, slowly coming to the realization that they would have to walk this morning. I took this as a sign that the intersection below had been successfully closed off and headed for the entrance to the *barrios*.

When I got there I saw about 200 people milling around in the road. The intersection was blocked in all directions by parked busses, broken pieces of concrete, and anything else that wasn't nailed down. The center of attention was the core group of people who were gathered beneath the statue of *La India*, taking turns speaking into a microphone connected to a couple of old speakers on top of an even older car. Contingents of police and National Guard troops with riot gear stood on the edges of it all, watching with boredom.

Many of those who gave speeches that morning were politicians from AD. They ranted about how the Causa R had betrayed the trust of the people and asked why the Mayor was then enjoying a visit to the United States while the *barrios* fell apart from neglect. The many presidents of AD neighborhood associations who were among the crowd of on-lookers cheered and applauded their party patrons. One even

walked among the people with a megaphone making his own political pronouncements, even though he was drowning out his fellow speakers.

There were also a few independent community activists who took the microphone and tried make the event something more than an AD love-fest denouncing the evils of the Causa R. They raged against the corruption of the political parties and the useless rhetorical posturing of the *Junta* and its different factions. They also talked about rising bus fares and recent attempts to eliminate the preferential fare for students. The points they raised were important, but the whole event was too contrived to be transformed into a genuine mass protest.

The demonstration began to fall apart as noon approached. A call was made to the AD governor of the Federal District, demanding that he come and explain what the state was going to do about the dire condition of the *barrios*. But the only official to show up was a functionary from the governor's office who refused to speak into the microphone. Meanwhile, the crowd had dwindled to fewer than 100 and more police and National Guard troops arrived, forming lines on either side of the protesters to make sure that the streets were clear for the mid-day rush hour. Someone suggested that they all march to the Congress, but it was

a ridiculous idea considering how few people were left. Instead, a resolution of some sort was quickly drawn up, the demonstration was declared a success, and we all went our separate ways.

In the end, the protest accomplished very little except to enrage all those people who had to spend hours making their way through monstrous traffic jams to get to work. For one thing, the organizers of the event had chosen, in their infinite wisdom, to block the entrance of the *barrios* on the 15th of the month, which was payday for many workers. More importantly, however, the event had no grass-roots foundation. It was staged by political parties that not only lacked the resources to mobilize many supporters, but that were held in low regard by most of the community. As a result, it wasn't a protest for most people--just another headache that they had to endure.

The implications of events such as this are especially important at a time when NSM theory has become increasingly popular in social science. There is a romantic tendency among many analysts to assume that any collective mobilization or protest is indicative of some larger challenge to the bureaucratic hegemony of the state on the part of "civil" society. However, as this particular "protest" illustrates, the state and political

parties (and non-governmental organizations [NGOs] as well) are fully capable of orchestrating events that, on the surface, have the appearance of popular protest, but which in reality serve their own interests. Failure to recognize this can lead one to mistake events such as the *Junta*'s "Toma de la India" for a genuine mass action, when--in reality--it was little more than a political party pep rally.

What Good is a Politician?

As the above examples make clear, being a member of the *Junta Parroquial* was not a position that meant much to the people of the community. It was a job that only had value to *Junta* members themselves, who were granted a title, a 20,000 *bolívar* ($118) per month paycheck, and various opportunities for corruption and influence-peddling. However, there was a night in September of 1994 that revealed one situation in which it was helpful to have a politician from a discredited political party at your side.

The Saturday afternoon meeting of the La Vega housing association had just ended, and now I was standing in front of a liquor store with Simón and Roberto enjoying our usual evening of beer-drinking and small

talk. We were also in the company of an AD politician from the *Junta* who was engaged in a debate with Simón over exactly what a member of the *Junta* does. Simón said that the politician's title was merely "decorative"--a position that carried no real power and produced no real results. The politician objected to this, but he wasn't able to give us any examples of exactly what he had accomplished during his years on the *Junta.*

While they were in the midst of this discussion, an old ambulance drove up the street and stopped in front of us. Three men suddenly leapt out through the rear doors, one wearing military fatigues and carrying a machine gun, and two others wearing civilian clothes. An old man standing next to me jumped when he saw them and instinctively started to move away. But the soldier in fatigues patted him on the shoulder and said jokingly, "Did we scare you?" The man smiled nervously and muttered something in reply and the soldier told him to relax.

I was a little nervous myself since we were all engaged in illegal public drinking at the time, but--fortunately--the three men didn't seem to be part of an *operativo.* The soldier in fatigues ordered a round of beers for all of us as a sign of goodwill, while one of his friends greeted a

young woman at a nearby house and went inside with her. Then he handed the machine gun to his other companion, who silently took it and leaned against a wall behind me. Mr. Fatigues told us that they were all off-duty and had just dropped by for the rendezvous between his friend and the woman next door. He was never rude or menacing during the next half hour of small talk, but he had that air of over-confidence that you'd expect from a slightly drunk soldier with a big gun and the right to use it.

We didn't get around to formal introductions until the man visiting his girlfriend had finished his meeting and reappeared on the street. Everyone said their name, and the politician mentioned that he was a member of the *Junta.* "*¡Coño!* Excuse the bother," said the soldier, suddenly becoming a little more deferential. Then he and his friends headed off down the street while my companions and I parted company for the night. As we said our goodbyes, the politician turned to Simón and said, "My position **does** have validity." Simón laughed and agreed. Finally, they had found something that made a politician useful.

Chapter 9:

Fighting Back: The Forms of Political Protest

"When I arrived [in downtown La Vega on February 27, 1989], people were already looting, but very timidly. Even people who I knew, responsible people, adults. I suddenly had to see them this way, with their [bag of] sugar on their shoulder, and they would look at me with a certain embarrassment.....It was like a chain reaction, in that people who didn't participate at the beginning said later, 'Well, if we don't participate we're going to be left without food'.....That was when the great mass of people came down from the hills, and that was for about two days, at least in La Vega, a little over two days, the people looting. After a day and a half the police were already deploying, shooting, and.....the criminals [*malandros*] took control of the protest because they were the only ones who were armed.....In any case, the popular organizations of La Vega tried to support the people; we tried to organize around some issues.....After that, what came was terror. The government had an excuse to bring the army into the street, and the army indiscriminately killed many people--I don't know if it was more than six hundred, more than a thousand--the exact figure has never been known. This was practically an epoch of terror that lasted a little more than a year."

--Francisco

The traditional political parties may try to stifle protest through their system of patronage, but they don't always succeed. This is especially true in times of economic and political crisis, when scarce resources and declining popularity leave the parties with little real power and few loyal followers. While party leaders preside over their hollow

network of coopted labor unions and neighborhood associations, the rest of the population finds other means to make its presence felt. This can take many forms, ranging from street demonstrations to new political movements to high rates of voter abstention to mass rioting.

From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, there were three types of neighborhood-based mobilizations in Caracas: (1.) lower-class mobilizations to oppose the displacement of communities and to gain access to potable water and adequate sanitation; (2.) middle-class mobilizations to protest violation of zoning ordinances, ecological degradation, and the irregularity or low quality of basic urban services; and (3.) cross-class alliances to oppose the destruction of historic districts by urban renewal programs. Between 1974 and 1983 there were 206 such mobilizations in lower class communities; 111 among the middle class; and 43 in historic districts (Sánchez 1989).

Throughout Caracas, especially in the *barrios*, such protests tend to be fleeting and often involve the participation of party functionaries. But this doesn't mean that the frustration and anger of the participants is any less real, or that the problems being confronted are any less serious. What it does mean is that grass-roots mobilization is mostly reactive in

nature: a problem arises, people demand action from the state, and then--once the problem is resolved--the mobilization disappears until the next problem surfaces. There is no on-going, grass-roots political movement that seeks to fundamentally alter the balance of power throughout the society. Given the relatively recent crisis in the decades-old system of patronage, no community-based movements have yet arisen to fill the political vacuum that now exists.

During my stay in La Vega, there was very little active protest. When the residents of a particular neighborhood could no longer bear the effects of a prolonged water shortage or the absence of garbage collection, they took their concerns to the *Junta Parroquial* by way of a community leader who was usually affiliated with AD or Copei. The *Junta* was normally very slow to act, and residents of the neighborhood might threaten to demonstrate in the streets, but the channels of party patronage always managed to defuse the situation. The protest staged by AD against the Causa R mayor was the most direct action taken to address the problems of the *barrios*, but it was an event pre-programmed by the party hierarchy and was not widely supported.

Beyond Clientelism

However, there have been episodes in the recent history of La Vega when protest has taken a much more militant form.[1] The most dramatic, of course, came during the price riots of 1989, when people took to the streets throughout the entire city. In La Vega the looting lasted about two days and--in an overtly racist fashion--was aimed especially at businesses owned by Italian, Portuguese, and Chinese merchants. Initially, state security forces blocked the entrance to the *barrios* to prevent the rioters from spilling into the surrounding middle class communities, although these were looted by their own people anyway. When the police and the army began to take control of the situation by indiscriminately shooting people, the protest quickly passed into the hands of the gangs since they were the only armed groups other than the security forces.

Although this level of violence was unprecedented, La Vega had already experienced another violent protest only three years earlier. In the fall of 1986, a landslide in the *barrio* of Las Fresas not only took many lives and destroyed many homes, but also blocked the one road leading to the more remote communities of Las Manzanas. Although the

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[1] The accounts which follow are taken from interviews with Francisco and Simón, both long-time community activists in La Vega.

government took its time re-opening the road, it was quick to order the immediate relocation of the remaining families in the slide zone to a city one hour outside of Caracas, on the grounds that the entire area was geologically unstable. So, while the people of Las Manzanas were left to walk many miles through crime-infested streets and alleyways in order to get to work or school, the police were busy pulling families from their homes in Las Fresas. A series of assemblies was held to discuss ways of pressuring the government to deal with the problem by means other than forced eviction. When there was no response to letters and petitions, a decision was made to take stronger action.

Residents blocked *La Redoma de la India*, but were quickly dispersed with a barrage of tear gas from police who were unwilling to discuss the situation. The protesters re-grouped further up in the hillsides and blockaded streets there, at which point a gun battle erupted between the police and those residents who were armed. Amazingly, no one was hurt or killed. Another "Toma de la India" was staged a few weeks later, and this time the protesters managed to pressure the governor into talking with them. Although houses outside of the city were guaranteed to those residents of the affected area of Las Fresas who wanted to leave, those

who chose to stay with their friends, families, and jobs were out of luck. Since then, other "Tomas de la India" have been organized to protest various problems such as water shortages, the lack of drainage systems, and rampant crime.

There have also been attempts at independent community action that were less dramatic than riots and "Tomas de la India." The neighborhood of Las Naranjas was one of the few communities in La Vega that had tried to build a completely self-sufficient neighborhood association. In 1984, and again in 1987, leaders of the association were democratically elected and put in charge of activities such as improving water service and building stairways to link the more remote parts of the hillsides with the street below. This was done using the resources and labor of residents themselves, without dependence on the money or contacts of the political parties.

Although the association achieved concrete results in terms of improving infrastructure, it was unable to foster a lasting political mobilization. The association remained active for only about two years after each election, at which point the participation of residents reached such low levels that it ceased to function. Former leaders of the

association blamed this on the fact that a single poor community can achieve only limited goals in a society dominated by severe economic crisis and political patronage. In the absence of a larger political movement, the association collapsed once it had accomplished its immediate aims.

Although the level of mass political mobilization was extremely low during my time in the *barrio*, there were popular organizations of many kinds. Since the mid-1970s, a civil association in the area had been a home for many types of community groups and activities. Some of these were no longer functioning, such as an adult education program, an audio-visual team that documented the social problems and struggles of the *barrio*, and a workshop offering classes in the repair of household appliances. But others remained: a training program in popular education and a housing association. There was a community press in the vicinity, *La Vega Dice* (La Vega Says), which analyzed social issues affecting the *barrios*, the city, and the nation as a whole. There were also many neighborhood cultural organizations throughout the *barrios* that set aside time and space for music, dance, and street festivals. In addition, sports teams were organized to give young people something to do other than

join gangs.

However, none of these was a substitute for a grass-roots political movement. The housing association might have seemed to offer a forum for the debate of political issues, but few people attended the meetings and it was viewed by most members simply as a means of getting money. *La Vega Dice* was overtly political, but since its founding in 1979 it had been the creation of a very small number of community activists, many of whom were growing weary after nearly two decades of struggle with few tangible results. Cultural organizations helped to foster a sense of community solidarity and collective history, but they did little to challenge the political and economic system that people had to confront on a day-to-day basis. Of course, the seeds of political action were there. The neighborhood association of Las Naranjas arose from the work carried out by a cultural organization. But, as the fleeting and solitary nature of that experience reveals, this is far from being an easy or automatic process.

On a less pessimistic note, the brief history of community mobilization outlined above reveals the existence of committed activists who are engaged in an on-going struggle to translate mass cynicism into political action within their communities. Although the groups and

movements that they are instrumental in organizing often crumble, the never-ending work of these activists is a testament to the fact that not everyone responds to the harsh conditions of everyday life by withdrawing from all political activity. Moreover, such activists do succeed in mobilizing their neighbors, if only for a short time. But even after a particular mobilization has dissipated, the activists themselves remain and go on to play key roles in organizing future mobilizations.

Environmental Politics

According to the history of La Vega written by the owners of the *Fábrica Nacional de Cementos*, the factory is nothing less than a national symbol of progress and modernity, a shining example of how one private company almost single-handedly built the *parroquia* and the city from the ground up (Empresas Delfino 1992). Missing from this wildly distorted view of the world is the obvious fact that any big industry sitting in the middle of a residential zone is an exporter of pollution and sickness. Also missing is any mention of the numerous political struggles that had been waged to force the factory and others like it out of La Vega.

The factory was ordered to leave La Vega in 1975 by then-President Pérez, as part of his policy to move all large industries outside of Caracas. The owners were given until 1981 to comply, but in 1982 the factory was still there and the owners filed an appeal with the Supreme Court. After 11 years of inaction, the Court finally denied the appeal in 1993 and the factory was once again ordered to leave. The owners responded by shutting down the furnaces, which were the main cause of pollution, but continued to use the factory for the processing of cement. Two years later, the factory had yet to close its doors even though the Venezuelan Senate reaffirmed the decision of the Supreme Court in 1994.

Behind all of these legal and bureaucratic proceedings was a social struggle that spanned more than two decades. Many people in the *barrios* had long been opposed to the factory that billowed forth mountains of dust that not only covered their homes with cement, but also made them more susceptible than any other community in Caracas to ailments such as asthma and bronchitis. Protest against the factory ranged from petitions to street demonstrations and involved everyone from independent activists to politicians of MAS. In 1979 a committee was formed that devoted itself not only to ridding the *barrios* of the factory, but to closing down two

other industries in nearby La Yaguara: Sidetur (a steel-smelting plant) and Procter & Gamble.

Over the years, however, the nature of this struggle changed. The owners of the cement factory defused some opposition by donating a small part of their profits to the community, building a school and a cultural center. The closing of the furnaces at the end of 1993 eliminated the main health hazard about which most people had been worried. As a result, the focus of the local environmental movement shifted to the middle-class communities of Montalbán and Juan Pablo II, which were the main victims of the still-active Sidetur plant. Opponents of the cement factory remained, but their main concerns were now eliminating the giant trucks that damaged streets not built to carry so much weight, and--as one community activist put it--making the owners of the factory "pay for their crimes" of the past.

While I was in La Vega, I went along on two judicial inspections of the cement factory and one of Sidetur (Procter & Gamble had announced that year that it was leaving the country, so it was no longer on the list). All three were part of the on-going bureaucratic process of establishing the legal grounds for closure of both enterprises. There should have been

only one inspection of the cement factory, but the scientific "expert" who accompanied the group on the first one was unwilling to admit that the gray layer of grime coating the factory, the trees, and the surrounding houses was actually cement dust. She would only say that it "could be" cement, which was not good enough for legal purposes. Other members of the team said that she must have been "bought" by the factory.

In all three cases, the team was led by a judge from Montalbán who was personally tired of living next to an industrial zone. Other than the judge and a scientist, the team consisted of various observers: presidents of neighborhood associations, community activists, a representative of MAS, and hangers-on such as myself. Tours were conducted by plant managers who were the most cynical people I'd ever met. They indignantly insisted that the technology of their factories was 100 percent clean--which is impossible even in theory, let alone in practice. I was unsure if they were simply liars, or if they had really convinced themselves that what they were saying was true. But their motivations didn't really matter in the end. What did matter was that they had access to well-paid lawyers and influential political contacts who had kept the factories running through two decades of illegality.

Ballot Box Protest

In the years just prior to my arrival in Venezuela, discontent was expressed in two ways at election time: by not voting at all, or by voting for opposition political parties. They were two sides of the same coin in that they reflected the alienation of people who had little faith in any political party. Both choices were a vote against the status quo rather than a vote for some clearly defined alternative. In that sense, they both represented the same powerful yet unfocused anger that had precipitated the price riots of 1989.

It's no coincidence that 1989 was the year that electoral abstention reached unprecedented levels, estimated to have been between 54 percent and 80 percent (Delgado Osuna 1992, Schuyler 1996). The elections came on the heels of the IMF austerity program implemented by the administration of President Pérez, and the riots and military repression that followed. The decision of most people to stay at home was significant not just because voting was supposed to be obligatory, but because these were "landmark" elections in which governors and mayors were directly chosen for the first time. Although parties such as MAS and the Causa R did benefit somewhat from the elections, the big winner

was no one, revealing that "democratic" elections mean little when there are few alternatives from which to choose.

Since that time, abstention rates have remained at over 50 percent (Delgado Osuna 1992, Schuyler 1996). Even during the elections of 1992 and 1993, which brought the Causa R and the *Convergencia* coalition to new heights of power, the majority of the population was not inspired to vote. The fact that none of the "victorious" parties had achieved an electoral victory based on a strong grass-roots movement became clear during the municipal elections of 1995. In the midst of an abstention rate approaching 60 percent, AD emerged victorious while *Convergencia* and the Causa R watched their power slipping away a mere two to three years after they had acquired it.

In La Vega, the 1993 municipal elections gave leadership of the *Junta Parroquial* to the Causa R, with AD coming in a close second. Ironically, it was the middle-class communities of the parish that gave most of their votes to the Causa R, while AD was dominant in the *barrios*. But since the local abstention rate was near 70 percent, this said little about the strength of either party. Instead, it reflected the inability of either to mobilize many supporters. It was especially enlightening that, in

barrios suffering from severe economic and social problems, the Causa R couldn't muster more votes than a party as discredited as AD.[2]

The MBR-200: The Newest Alternative

Once Hugo Chávez Frías was released from military prison and pardoned for leading the coup attempt of February 4, 1992, he assumed leadership of the MBR-200 and immediately began to transform it into something more than a small cadre of military officers. In press conferences and lectures, he called for a broad-based popular front of independent community organizations and labor unions that would usurp power from the bottom up. A key element of this process would be the election of an *Asamblea Constituyente* (Constituent Assembly) that would replace the Congress and re-write the Constitution so as to eliminate the special rights and privileges of parties and politicians. After years of corruption and inaction from political parties of all stripes, there were many people who found this idea very appealing.

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[2] This information comes from conversations with community activists in La Vega, one of whom was a university student who had participated in an analysis of the 1993 election results.

Not only was Chávez a national hero in the eyes of many, but he had the advantage of coming from outside the realm of traditional politics. He was a military man who seemed to be committed to building a movement, not another political party. However, there were some inconsistencies in the goals of his group. In addition to forming a popular front, the MBR sought to create "Bolivarian Circles" at the community level as the basis for their movement. Members of the MBR were actively recruiting people in the *barrios*, while Chávez said that he would run for president in 1998. All of which suggested that the MBR was, in fact, adopting some of the organizational structures that characterize a traditional party. Still, the ideology of the group, and the idea of the *Constituyente* in particular, drew cautious support from many sides.

Many of the problems and possibilities associated with a *Constituyente* were brought out during a forum that was held in La Vega by a group of community activists. There were only about 25 people at the forum, but it served as a starting point for some sort of political discussion. The main speaker at the event was an old-time Leftist (not from La Vega, by the way) who began by pointing out that a *Constituyente* is a very uncertain process that can easily be coopted by

political and economic elites seeking to advance their interests in the guise of democratic "reform." The Causa R, Copei, and even AD had made their own proposals concerning the nature of a future *Constituyente*, so care had to be taken that it wasn't transformed into yet another bureaucratic extension of party politics.

He went on to say that the true value of calling a Constituent Assembly was not really the drafting of a new Constitution--which, in reality, is only a piece of paper that can be manipulated by the rich and powerful in any way they see fit. What was important was the building of a grass-roots political movement as part of the process leading up to election of the Assembly. And it was for this reason that he supported the MBR. Their emphasis on a broad-based coalition of independent labor and community groups would ensure that this process couldn't be coopted by any one political party or even by the MBR itself.

A few weeks after this forum, my friends and I went to a Conference of Popular Organizations that was sponsored by the MBR in the nearby *barrios* of Catia. By coincidence, we arrived at the same time as Chávez and his associates. As we greeted him in the parking lot, Chávez seemed more than a little surprised--shocked, actually--to find

himself shaking hands with a *gringo* at a gathering that the Venezuelan state considered subversive. The woman who registered me for the conference laughed and said jokingly, "There are foreigners here!" But no one seemed too worried by my presence once the conference got underway.

About 100 people showed up, most of whom were representatives of community groups from Catia--although there were a few from other parts of the city and some student leaders as well. They spent the morning introducing themselves and describing the work of their groups to the audience. After a break for lunch, Chávez himself gave a short talk on the dire economic condition of the country, the danger of another social uprising like that of 1989, the need for a revolution at all levels of society, and the importance of mass political organization in seizing power from the nation's elites.

The audience was then divided into discussion groups to analyze the problems involved in networking diverse popular organizations. Chávez was supposed to be in my group, but he never arrived. Members of the group spent the next hour or so talking about the low level of mass organization in Venezuela, the need to keep community groups rooted at

the local level even as they focus on common issues in a popular front, and the unfortunate tendency of many Venezuelans to rely on *caudillos*: strong men who will lead them, rather than represent them. The discussion groups were then reunited and a representative of each got up and summarized their conclusions. And that was the end of the conference.

Because the MBR is so new, it remains to be seen how it will evolve as a national political force. It also remains to be seen whether or not the ideas of a popular front and a Constituent Assembly will prove inspiring enough to counteract the political cynicism of the general population. It could be that the public persona of Chávez will serve as a catalyst for independent mass organization. But this public persona also presents the danger of converting Chávez into yet another *caudillo* who will be seen as a messianic Liberator of the People, in the same way that Simón Bolívar has been mythologized into a semi-divine figure who single-handedly freed South America from Spanish oppression.

From the Classroom to the Street

"I studied in a technical school in '68. In '68, Rafael Caldera was President. During the school year in which I advanced, it was decreed that the technical schools were to be eliminated.....We had, or didn't have, three basic courses in the classroom, because the rest of the time was spent in the street with rocks, saving the technical schools [in confrontations with the police]. It was there that I was arrested for the first time. I spent fifteen days downtown, in a parish prison in the center of the city. It was there that I learned about the basic issues affecting the parish--[such as] the draft.... the police interrogated me, kept me imprisoned, made me sign a statement and answer questions."

--Francisco

Of the many kinds of social protest that exist in Venezuela, student demonstrations are the most common and the most dramatic. Sometimes these protests are isolated events, and sometimes they come in waves that hit many parts of the city or the country at the same time. The majority of such demonstrations are dominated by the *encapuchados*, hooded students who burn tires and trucks, and who battle the police and National Guard with rocks, bottles, molotov cocktails, and the occasional gun. During my year in Caracas, rarely a month went by that *encapuchados* at some high school or university weren't in the streets protesting budget cuts, rising bus fares, or the killing of a student during a previous demonstration.

Traditionally, universities have been sites for much of the nation's political unrest. Not just because *encapuchados* sometimes burn things in the street, but because they are centers for much criticism of the government and the larger system of political and economic inequality. They are also protected by a Law of University Autonomy that forbids the presence of police and soldiers on-campus (although the law has been violated more than once). Opponents of the law argue that it provides a haven for violent agitators. Defenders say that it is the only way to guarantee freedom of intellectual and political expression. In the end, it's hard to draw a clear line between violence and protest when the state that makes the laws is itself violent: subjecting the population to life-threatening economic policies and security forces that act with brutality and impunity.

On October 27, 1994, a national student march was held at the Central University to defend the preferential student bus fare. The government was proposing a new system of tickets that would only give students a reduced fare for two bus rides per day on weekdays, excluding school holidays. The demonstrators wanted the reduced fare to stay in effect 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, 365 days per year. During my

entire stay in Venezuela, bus drivers around the country had been staging strikes to demand fare hikes, while students had been demonstrating against any increase.

The marchers filtered onto campus from around the country for hours, arriving in chanting, cheering bus-loads to the central plaza of the university. Occasionally, someone would set off a firework to let everyone in the area know that something was going on. Although the crowd that gathered numbered less than 1000, some newspapers would later put the figure at around 3000 to make it seem more dramatic and newsworthy. The march eventually set out with a small herd of press cars at the front, while the students followed close behind carrying a Venezuelan flag to show the patriotism of their cause. Once the protesters reached the nearby intersection at Plaza Venezuela, a spray-painting squad took the lead, hitting just about every wall and building in sight--and even a moving bus at one point. As the marchers shouted out slogans about respecting the student fare, the spray-painters up front would adorn any surface in reach with similar messages. Whenever the march passed by one of the many failed banks now under government control, the protesters and spray-painters would respond with slogans

about punishing the corrupt bankers who'd robbed the nation instead of students who were the future of the nation.

It took about an hour and a half for the march to wind its way downtown to the Congress. There hadn't been any police in sight the whole way, but one newspaper later gave false reports about clashes with the police in an attempt to demonize the protesters. The Congress building itself was ringed with National Guard troops holding riot shields and tear gas guns. The march stopped at the closed entrance and student leaders stood on the steps and gave speeches about how the government's policies were making students and workers pay for the economic crisis, while the corrupt politicians, bankers, and industrialists who created it through mismanagement and plundering of the nation's resources continued to live in luxury. The protesters kept the National Guardsmen on edge by occasionally setting off a firework in front of them, but the situation stayed calm and there were no clashes. After about 30 minutes, the speeches were over and the demonstration broke up.

I grabbed a bus back to the university and waited with my camera in hand, expecting that some of the returning marchers might be inclined to continue the protest. I didn't have to wait long. About 40 young men

gathered by the entrance to the campus and started throwing rocks and bottles at the police who had been waiting for their arrival. Less than half of the protesters wore hoods, and some set fire to branches, dry grass, or whatever else they could find nearby. The police responded with blasts of plastic buckshot and tear gas, but never got in their battered armored truck to come closer. This dance continued for a little over an hour, with calls of "Vinegar! Vinegar!" sometimes coming from the protesters when one of them was inundated by tear gas and needed to be revived. As the sun went down, the demonstration slowly came to an end.

One month later, on November 30, the same thing happened again, this time at a national march called by university unions to defend existing laws regarding severance and unemployment benefits (*prestaciones sociales*), the student bus fare, and university autonomy. Over the past month, there had been talk in some government circles of "modifying" all of these laws--a nice way of saying that little pieces would be hacked off of them. The current systems of *prestaciones* and student bus fare subsidies were regarded as too costly, and the Law of University Autonomy as providing a campus refuge for political subversives. On November 8, the University of Carabobo in Valencia had

been raided by the National Guard in the midst of day-long street demonstrations. Protesters had even seized and allegedly set fire to the Rectorate, so the debate was on as to where you draw the line between political expression and criminal conduct.

The march was more or less the same as the one I'd seen a month earlier. Although there were a few hundred more protesters than had come to the previous one, the turnout still seemed low considering that it was a national event. As before, the demonstrators arrived on busses from around the country and gathered in the main plaza of the Central University. One thing they had that the student marchers didn't was a giant papiermache banker on a flatbed truck. It made an impressive sight when the march finally started and headed downtown. And it made an even more impressive sight when it was set on fire in front of the Congress. After the speeches by union and student leaders, I once again found myself waiting at the entrance to the university.

As I sat under a tree reading my newspaper, bus-loads of union marchers drove back on campus. I knew when the student contingent was arriving because 30 screaming young men and a bus honking its horn came tearing down the street from the freeway off-ramp. A university

guard jumped up from his chair and closed the gate to the lane leading off-campus. The police who'd been waiting by the intersection at Plaza Venezuela had already closed the lane leading on-campus. One student brought out a case of empty bottles, another set fire to a tire under the traffic light, and a few others wrapped T-shirts around their heads.

Things got off to a slow start. No matter how many insults and obscenities the students yelled, the police in the grassy area by the freeway wouldn't react. But, eventually, the protesters moved within striking distance with their rocks and bottles. The police responded with tear gas and buckshot, and the game of attack and retreat began. Strangely enough, there were a fair number of very jaded people who would still walk to and from the campus no matter what was flying through the air at the time. When one of these people wandered into the middle of things, the protesters would alert one another with cries of "Civilian!"--which gives you an idea of how they viewed themselves in relation to both the state and the general population.

After a while, the police started to get a little more aggressive, coming up closer to the road and firing more tear gas canisters and buckshot. At one point, I found myself caught between two canisters

which were working to the height of their U.S.-made technology. I watched with amazement as an old man who was heading onto campus pulled out his handkerchief, put it over his mouth, and just kept walking through the thick clouds of burning smoke. I, on the other hand, got confused as my nose and throat caught fire and the tears started streaming from my eyes. A few of the protesters yelled for me to cross the street to where they were, and offered me some vinegar to inhale when they saw my face.

Later, the demonstration heated up even more. The protesters succeeded in throwing a tear gas canister back at the police, making them scatter and drawing cheers from the demonstrators. Then they started throwing molotov cocktails. While all of this was going on, I was having my identification checked by one of the two female protesters among the mostly male group of *encapuchados*. Soon after she'd satisfied herself that I was just a very stupid *gringo* and not a spy, the police began shooting at the students from the back of motorcycles as they drove away from the freeway towards Plaza Venezuela. Eventually, some buckshot managed to find a target.

I saw a demonstrator leading a young man away from the traffic light, but I didn't know what had happened at first. A few minutes later, an ambulance coming from an emergency call was waved through to the university hospital by the protesters. But an *encapuchado* who was a little further inside the campus suddenly threw a bottle at it and kicked it, trying to make it stop. Another *encapuchado* standing next to me yelled at him, "Are you crazy!?" I walked over to the crowd that was gathering on-campus and saw the young man laying on the ground, his shirt off, with a small round buckshot hole in the side of his chest. A truck from the university fire department quickly came and took him to the hospital.

Some of the protesters followed behind the wounded student (who was just a bystander), while others went back to the campus entrance, even more ready to do battle than before. But the police, probably realizing that the situation could quickly get out of hand, had already begun to withdraw and only fired a few more tear gas canisters. Just minutes later, two barefoot women came running up from the freeway, one screaming and crying and holding a baby who had been inundated with tear gas and had stopped breathing. A student grabbed the baby and ran towards the hospital, the two women following close behind. They

soon came back and told everyone that the child was alright, but that incident and the shooting of the student had already provoked a debate between demonstrators and some of the student onlookers.

A demonstrator blamed both events on police repression of the student movement. A bystander said that the protesters asked to be shot at by creating a violent situation. The demonstrator argued that violence against a violent and repressive state was justified. Other bystanders said that such violent protests served no constructive purpose. Another demonstrator countered that both dialogue and violence had their "natural space," and he asked the bystanders why, if they felt so strongly about the issue, they hadn't come to the sparsely attended meeting that the protesters had held earlier that week to discuss their strategy and tactics. Finally, the two sides agreed to debate later at a public meeting rather than in the street, and the demonstration ended.

The place of the *encapuchados* in Venezuelan society is a contradictory one. On the one hand, their rejection of political corruption, SAPs, and human rights abuses by security forces is clearly shared by most people. But the national situation has changed since 1958, when student protesters were part of a mass movement overthrowing a

dictatorship. Today's *encapuchados* are small groups that act in isolation and often claim to be "speaking for the people." In a country without a strong and unified opposition movement, this leaves them in the position of being vanguardists unconnected with the rest of society. And it is for this reason that many people, even fellow Leftists, view their demonstrations as random acts of violence and not as part of some revolutionary struggle.

But these street demonstrations are going to be a regular part of Venezuelan life for many years to come. The economic and political conditions that motivate them show no signs of improving, and many students see no reason to restrain their rage and frustration just because the rest of the population hasn't yet organized a mass movement. During the first week of February 1996, a little over a year after I left Venezuela, another wave of student protests swept the country in the midst of bus-fare increases, more budget cuts, never-ending inflation, and the fourth anniversary of the failed military coup attempt of February 1992. Although the protests didn't mark the beginning of a popular uprising such as that of 1989, they served as a not-so-subtle reminder that the possibility of such an uprising is never far beneath the surface of everyday life.

"Promesas" (Promises)

Propaganda política con	Political propoganda with
proletarios sonrientes	smiling workers
que por desnutrición se le caen los dientes	whose teeth fall out from malnutrition
Y los niños infelices con la barriga	And the unhappy children with the belly
llena de lombrices	full of worms
se preguntan ¿donde escondieron	ask where did they hide
el vaso de leche	the glass of milk
que les prometieron?	that they promised?
Manipulan la información	They manipulate information
y mantienen atrasada la educación	and keep education backward
Les conviene un pueblo ignorante,	An ignorant people are convenient for them
por eso callan a los estudiantes	so they silence the students
más y más y más operativos	more and more and more street sweeps
este sistema es un estado represivo	this system is a repressive state
Mentiras, mentiras.	Lies, lies.
Cada cinco años vamos a escuchar	Every five years we're going to hear
las mismas promesas que no cumplirán	the same promises that they won't keep
La deuda externa jamás pagarán	They'll never pay the foreign debt
Y no nos sacarán del subdesarrollo,	And they won't get us out of underdevelopment
pero el voto es obligatorio	but the vote is obligatory
¡No!	No!

Desorden Público[1], *En Descomposición*, CBS/Columbia Venezuela, 1990

[1] Desorden Público is one of Venezuela's premier, and most political, rock bands.

Chapter 10:

Conclusion: Capitalism and Democracy

Throughout the preceding chapters, I have attempted to describe the human and the "inhuman" faces of structural adjustment and neo-liberal economic policies in general. On one level, this involves acknowledging the destructive forces of mass poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, gang violence, and state repression that are unleashed by such policies. On another level, it involves looking beyond decay and despair to those processes that provide a glimmer of hope in changing this situation: the state's loss of legitimacy in the eyes of most of the population, the rise of opposition political parties and movements, and the continual expression of popular discontent through various forms of grass-roots protest. In the particular case of contemporary Venezuela, unfortunately, such processes have yet to fill the political vacuum left by the decay of the clientelist political system. An all-pervasive mood of cynicism dominates discussions about politics and the future in general at practically every level of society

Virtually every Venezuelan I met during my fieldwork had the same bitter and incredulous feeling about the downward turn their country has taken since the early 1980s. How is it possible, they ask, that a country so rich in natural resources--from oil and iron to wheat, coffee, and cattle--could find itself so economically devastated? How could a country that had initiated the formation of OPEC[2] now find itself at the mercy of transnational organizations like the I.M.F. and the World Bank? How could a nation that had once been the world's second largest producer of oil now be such a "Third World" land? Despite the country's highly diverse natural ecology, which could serve as the foundation for an equally diverse and productive economy, the United Nations lists Venezuela in 47th place on the human development index (based on average life expectancy, adult literacy rate, educational enrollment, and per capita GDP). Meanwhile, Canada is in first place, the United States second, and Japan third (UNDP 1995: Table 1).

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[2] Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela founded OPEC (the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) in 1960 at Venezuela's initiative (Ewell 1984: 136).

As most Venezuelans are quick to recognize, there are several reasons why this is so. To begin with, the wealth of Venezuela has been extracted in one way or another by foreign powers for centuries. First came the Spanish colonial regime, which used outright force and slave labor. Then came England, which relied on unequal international trade relations and the repatriation of profits from investments in the building of urban infrastructure. And, last but not least, came the United States, first in the form of multinational corporations that repatriated profits and established direct ownership of key sectors of the economy. More recently, as a result of the foreign debt crisis, U.S.-dominated transnational banks and multilateral lenders have extracted wealth via debt repayments with compound interest.

However, not all the blame can be layed at the feet of "outsiders." If European nations and later the United States came to dominate the economy, it was with the cooperation of upper-class business and political elites in Venezuela who benefited from the establishment of an extremely unequal distribution of wealth and resources. Corruption and capital flight among rich and powerful Venezuelans have been responsible for the impoverishment of the majority of the population in conjunction with the

flow of wealth to North America and Europe. This is a fact that is recognized by most Venezuelans, who are as quick to criticize their own politicians and business executives as they are to criticize the IMF and the U.S. government.

As I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this dissertation, such political and economic inequality is the result of processes inherent to the capitalist system. Political economists of many ideological stripes have long recognized that people with superior economic resources not only have vastly superior opportunities to become wealthier, but have privileged access to the political system as well. They can use their wealth to fund political campaigns, to gain access to policy-making circles through both legal and illegal means, and to become politicians themselves if they choose--not to mention the incredible power they wield over the entire economic system through their control of "private" businesses. The ideology of neo-liberalism reinforces this structural inequality by defining economic "efficiency" in terms of profits, which provides the rationale for "structural adjustment," "downsizing," and budget cutting, which in turn increases poverty and disparity in the distribution of wealth and power.

Although these processes can be found in any capitalist country, they are especially extreme in the Third World. Due to the pressures of foreign debt, domestic policies such as SAPs are designed not only by a nation's own rulers, but by the banks and governments of other countries. Massive foreign corporations dominate markets that would otherwise be exploited by the nation's own capitalists, who stand little chance of survival in the face of "free" competition with overseas industries that are backed by powerful states and possess astronomical amounts of capital. Home-grown forms of cultural expression are swamped by the flood of pre-packaged pop culture that is marketed by these same corporations. In short, the true centers of power are far removed from the grass-roots level.

A democratic alternative to this system of spiralling inequality cannot be found in efforts to compensate for the fundamental nature of the system through the ad hoc imposition of "compensatory" measures such as "social safety nets." Rather, the solution must involve placing direct political **and** economic power in the hands of communities. Such a solution must recognize the basic right of people to control the land on which they live, the factories and offices in which they work, and the political policies that affect their lives at all levels. Until this

redistribution of power takes place, there will be a continual need for social policies that attempt to redress the inequalities created by capitalism itself.

Appendix 1:

Methodology

This study took place in four stages. The first consisted of documentary research in New York City and a preliminary, six-week visit to Caracas in the summer of 1991. The second stage was the first half of my actual fieldwork in Caracas (November 1, 1993-April 30, 1994), during which I conducted in-depth documentary research and preliminary interviews while living in a middle-class neighborhood. Stage three was the second half of my fieldwork (May 1-December 23, 1994), during which I lived in a *barrio popular*, attended political meetings and protests, and conducted more interviews. The final stage, carried out in California, consisted of further documentary research.

My study of Venezuela began during two classes in the Political Science Program of the CUNY Graduate School in 1990 and 1991. During these classes, I read English-language analyses of the country's foreign debt crisis, structural adjustment programs, clientelist political system, and deteriorating human rights record written by North American political scientists, economists, and historians. This initial research was

supplemented by more detailed information during my first trip to Caracas in June and July of 1991. In addition to becoming acquainted with the city in general, I gathered accounts of *barrio* life and community political mobilization written by Venezuelan sociologists and urban researchers. I also made contact with researchers and activists at several civic and academic organizations. Based on this information, I decided that the focus of my fieldwork would be the functioning of neighborhood associations, which account for the majority of community organizations throughout the country.

The first six months of my fieldwork, in 1993 and 1994, were spent largely at the institutions I had contacted during my initial trip to Caracas. I concentrated on conducting interviews and documentary research on neighborhood associations, human rights abuses by security forces, and the different forms of political organization and social protest in Caracas and Venezuela as a whole. During this time, I kept two journals: one of my daily activities and another recording key local and national events that appeared in the major Caracas newspapers (*El Nacional*, *El Diario de Caracas*, *Ultimas Noticias*, and *The Daily Journal*). I also took private classes in Venezuelan slang, the kind of Spanish you hear in the *barrios*

but not in standard language classes.

During this initial stage of fieldwork, I lived with my wife in a middle-class neighborhood of the city. We chose this area because of its central location and its proximity to the Metro. My experience of foreign tourists and U.S. fast food in this area provided an enlightening contrast with the harsh realities of the *barrio*. It was towards the end of this phase of my work, in March of 1994, that I made contact with an *asociación de vivienda* (housing association) in a *barrio* of the *parroquia* of La Vega. After attending a meeting of the association and a tour of the area by its financial sponsor, the *Fundación de Vivienda Popular* (Foundation of Popular Housing), I decided to conduct the more ethnographic phase of my fieldwork in La Vega.

It was also during this first six months of my stay in Venezuela that the focus of my project shifted away from neighborhood associations. I soon came to realize that most associations were middle class, that they were dominated by traditional political parties, and that the level of mass political mobilization in the *barrios* tended to be very low. As a result, I became more concerned with the economic, political, social, and historical conditions that have fostered such a lack of independent political

organization among the poor majority of the population.

For the last eight months of 1994 I rented a room in the *barrio* and experienced firsthand the many facets of everyday life: road-side vendors, markets, gangs, trash, flooding, water shortages, stray dogs, crowded busses, and *operativos* by the police and National Guard. In addition to keeping my two journals, I interviewed politicians, activists, and community residents about their lives in the *barrio*, the functioning of the local political system, and the measures that they felt needed to be taken to overcome the current economic and social crisis. Six of the most in-depth interviews were recorded.

I also attended numerous events in La Vega: 13 more meetings of the *asociación de vivienda*, 13 public sessions of the *Junta Parroquial*, a city-wide conference of housing associations, a forum of community activists called to discuss the national proposal for a Constituent Assembly to re-write the Constitution, a public meeting called by the municipal government to debate the proposed re-zoning of the *parroquia*, a street demonstration organized by the *Junta*, two judicial inspections of the local cement factory, and a judicial inspection of a nearby steel-smelting plant. In addition, I researched publications put out by the community press,

La Vega Dice (La Vega Says). In order to see more of the *barrios* than the little area where I lived, I went on two photographic tours of the entire zone. I also went outside of La Vega for key events, such as two demonstrations at the *Universidad Central* (Central University) and a meeting of the *Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario* (Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement, or MBR-200).

The political meetings, protests, and street life that were the settings for most of my fieldwork were heavily male-dominated. Although there were female political leaders and activists, the majority--and the most vocal and most visible--were male. In addition, the social lives and networks of women tended to center on activities within family homes, while those of men centered on the public realm of the street. As a result, my fieldwork involved little direct experience of women's lives. It was not my intent to study the lives of men rather than women, but the fact that I myself am male and that I was dealing with aspects of social violence that primarily involved men did result in a male-biased view of *barrio* life.

Upon returning to the United States, I spent the first half of 1995 engaged in more documentary research on the history of Venezuela in general and of Caracas and La Vega in particular. The purpose of this work was not simply to gather material for the historical chapter of my dissertation, but to achieve some understanding of crucial events in Venezuelan history that have had a major impact on the social and political consciousness of the population. For three months after my return, I was accompanied by a Venezuelan friend who continued to provide me with information on life in Caracas and who generously transcribed my recorded interviews, which I then translated. I have also maintained contact with my friends in La Vega, who've kept me informed of the latest developments there and throughout the city and country as a whole.

Appendix 2:

Socio-Economic Indicators[1]

Latin America

Number of people living in poverty

1980: 118 million
1990: 196 million (~ 50 percent of total population)

Rate of increase in poverty (1980-1990): 42 percent
Rate of population increase (1980-1990): 22 percent

Percentage of population living in urban areas

1950: 35 percent
1995: 76 percent

Total external debt

1980: $238 billion
1991: $430 billion

[1] Statistics are drawn from sources cited in Chapters 1 & 4.

Venezuela

Total population (1991): 20 million

Poverty (early 1990s)

Percentage of population living in poverty:
United Nations sources: Urban areas: 30 percent
Rural areas: 42 percent

Other Sources: Total: 62 percent - 80 percent

Decline in urban individual incomes (1981-1986): 34 percent
Decline in urban household incomes (1981-1986): 22 percent

Percentage of population living in slum housing (early 1990s): 50 percent

Distribution of wealth

Share of national income going to wealthiest 10 percent of population:
1988: 30.3 percent
1991: 43.0 percent

Share of national income going to poorest 10 percent of population:
1988: 2.3 percent
1991: 1.8 percent

Percentage of population living in urban areas (1992): 91 percent

Population of largest city (1990): 4 million (Caracas)

Percentage of total populaton: 20 percent

Total external debt

1980: $29 billion
1991: $34 billion

Inflation

1982-1992: 738 percent
1994: 71 percent

Increase in number of crimes (1990-1993)

Murder: 73 percent
Assault: 16 percent
Robbery: 26 percent

Rate of voter abstention (since 1989): ≥ 50 percent

United States

Population (1994)

Total:	262.3 million
Blacks:	32 million (12 percent of total)
Hispanics:	27 million (10 percent of total)

Poverty (1994)

Number of people below official poverty line:	38.1 million
Percentage of total population:	14.5 percent
Official poverty rate among children:	20 percent
Among black & Hispanic children:	> 40 percent
Among white children:	13 percent
Official poverty rate among adults:	12.5 percent
Among black & Hispanic single mothers:	>50 percent
Among white single mothers:	>33 percent

Number of unemployed: 12.8 million
Number of part time workers: 4.4 million

Distribution of wealth

Share of household income going to 20 percent of highest income households:

1974:	44 percent
1994:	~ 50 percent

Share of household income going to 20 percent of lowest income households:

1974:	> 4 percent
1994:	< 4 percent

Share of household income going to middle 60 percent of households:

1974: 52 percent
1994: 47 percent

Increase in crime rate (per 100,000 people, 1984-1994)

Murder: 13.9 percent
Rapes: 9.8 percent
Robberies: 16.1 percent
Assaults: 48.3 percent

Percentage of murder victims who were black in 1994: 50.8 percent

Percentage of murder suspects who were black in 1994: 56.4 percent

Rate of voter abstention (since 1972): 45 percent - 67 percent

Rate of voter abstention in 1994: 64 percent

Work stoppages due to labor disputes (1980-1995): 1,061

Number of workers involved: 6,703,000

Appendix 3:

Glossary

AD (*Acción Democrática*, Democratic Action): The dominant political party in Venezuela. The party was led by former Communist Rómulo Betancourt upon its founding in 1941 and espoused a Social Democratic ideology.

Asamblea Constituyente (Constituent Assembly): An elected assembly empowered to re-write the Venezuelan Constitution. The creation of such an assembly has been advocated by the MBR-200, MAS, and Causa R as a means of dismantling the traditional system of patronage politics.

asociación de vecinos (neighborhood association): State-regulated community associations.

asociación de vivienda (housing association): a local-level association that provides home-improvement loans to community residents with stable jobs and legal title to their land. The associations receive their funds from the *Fundación de Vivienda Popular.*

barrio / barrio popular: A lower-class community, or slum.

bazuko: The Venezuelan version of the cocaine-derived drug "crack."

bolívar: The Venezuelan currency.

buhonero: street peddler

caudillo: A "strong man." The term refers to the military-political leaders in Latin America who vied for dominance following independence from Spain, and--more generally--anyone who is or seeks to be a "leader of the masses."

Causa R (*Causa Radical*, Radical Cause): A populist, moderately Leftist political party that originated in 1972 as a labor movement in the industrial city of Ciudad Guayana in Bolívar state. The party achieved political prominence in 1989, when it captured the governorship of Bolívar, and 1992, when it won the mayoralty of Caracas.

cédula: identification card, which all Venezuelans are legally required to carry.

Convergencia (Convergence): A coalition of small political parties, including MAS, formed by Copei-founder Rafael Caldera to support his successful 1993 Presidential campaign.

Copei (*Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente*, Committee of Independent Electoral Political Organization): The second most powerful political party in Venezuela. The party was founded in 1946 by Rafael Caldera and espoused a Christian Democratic ideology.

Disip (*Dirección de Servicios de Inteligencia y Prevención del Estado*, Directorate of Intelligence and Preventative Services of the State): the branch of the Venezuelan police responsible for "state security."

encapuchado: Refers to anyone who wears a hood or mask to hide their identity. The term is often used in reference to student protesters, but is also used to refer to criminals or police officers who hide their identities in the same manner.

Fundación de Vivienda Popular (Popular Housing Foundation): The institution that disburses funds to *asociaciones de vivienda*. It receives its funding from the Venezuelan state.

gringo: A derogatory term for anyone from North America, especially the United States.

(***El***) ***Guaire***: The river running through Caracas that has now become more of an open sewer than an actual river.

hacienda: A private, landed estate.

Junta Parroquial (Parish Council): That level of local government lying between the *asociaciones de vecinos* and the *Concejo Municipal* (Municipal Council).

La Redoma de la India: The major intersection at the entrance to the *barrios* of La Vega.

malandro / landro: A criminal, or someone who has a shady or uncertain reputation.

MAS (*Movimiento al Socialismo*, Movement Towards Socialism): The third most powerful political party in Venezuela. The party was founded in 1970 by former members of the PCV and joined Rafael Caldera's *Convergencia* coalition in 1993.

MBR-200 (*Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario*, Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement): The cadre of military officers who orchestrated the February 4, 1992, coup attempt led by Hugo Chávez Frías. Chávez assumed leadership of the group and sought to convert it into a wider social movement following his release from military prison in March 1994.

MIR (*Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria*, Movement of the Revolutionary Left): The guerrilla movement founded in 1960 by disaffected members of AD to topple the AD government of Rómulo Betancourt.

operativo: A street sweep conducted by state security forces, usually in the course of an anti-crime operation.

PCV (*Partido Comunista de Venezuela*, Communist Party of Venezuela): Founded in 1931, the party joined with MIR in the armed struggle against the AD government of Rómulo Betancourt in the early 1960s, but re-entered the electoral system following the amnesty granted by the first Copei administration of Rafael Caldera.

rancho: A small home in a *barrio popular*.

(la) recluta (the draft): The form of mandatory military service that exists in Venezuela. This involves the forcible conscription of young men as they are needed by the Armed Forces. Dispensations are granted to those enrolled in a university.

Toma de la India (Seizing of the Indian): The seizing of *La Redoma de la India* at the entrance to the *barrios* of La Vega, usually as a form of protest against state economic policies, deficient public services, or repression by state security forces.

UPM (*Unión Patriótica Militar*, Military Patriotic Union): The group of young military officers formed in the 1940s in opposition to the governments of Eleazar López Contreras and Isaías Medina Angarita. The UPM joined with AD in overthrowing Medina in 1945, then overthrew AD in 1948.

urbanización (urbanization): A middle-class or upper-class community.

URD (*Unión Repúblicana Democrática*, Democratic Republican Union): The pro-Medina political party founded in 1946.

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