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**Class/race polarisation in Venezuela and the electoral success of Hugo Chávez: a break with the past or the song remains the same?**

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## **Abstract**

*Polls have repeatedly shown a class based polarisation around Chávez, which some political science analysis on Venezuela has recognised. This paper seeks to show, however, that this class based division needs to be placed in historical context to be fully understood. Examining Venezuelan history from the colonial to the contemporary era the paper shows, unlike most previous work on Bolivarian Venezuela, that race is an important subtext to this class based support, and that there is indeed a correlation between class and race within the Venezuelan context. Furthermore, class and race are important positive elements in Chávez's discourse, contrasting this with their negative use in opposition anti-Chavismo discourse. Finally the paper briefly reviews the Chávez government's policy in tackling the class/race fissures in Venezuelan society, and concludes by asking whether these policies represent a change in the historical patterns of classism and racism within Venezuelan society or are simply reproducing past patterns.*

**Key words:** *Venezuela, Chávez, Class, Race, Polarisation, anti-Chavismo, Neoliberalism.*

## Introduction

President Chávez of Venezuela and the movement led by him has repeatedly triumphed at the ballot box since first being elected to the presidency in 1998. In the presidential elections of 2000, the revocatory referendum of 2004 and the latest presidential election in 2006, Chávez has maintained or increased his percentage of the vote. But who is voting for Chávez in Venezuela and why?

In this article we find that Chávez's support is primarily amongst the poorer sections of the Venezuelan people, the popular classes, and that in Venezuela, generally speaking, class interacts with race 'in the production of inequalities'.<sup>1</sup> This class/race interaction in Venezuela has deep roots in the country's history, and the social fissures which stem from that fusion have been repeatedly glossed over by successive governments, aiming instead to create a myth of a united Venezuela, where class and race are elided from public discourse.<sup>2</sup> Chávez, on the other hand, in his discourse and in his government's policies, has repeatedly drawn attention to class differences in the country, by attacking the privileged classes and favouring the popular classes – *el pueblo* - while also drawing attention to race issues in a number of his pronouncements.

This class/race fusion is an essential element needed to explain Chávez's continuing popularity but most political analysis has paid little attention to the impact of race on Venezuelan politics.<sup>3</sup> This paper aims to redress this by evaluating the role of race within wider based class divisions in the emergence of Chávez. Furthermore, and equally importantly, the paper seeks to show that

race, or rather racism is an essential but extremely subtle, ingredient in opposition discourse rejecting Chávez and those who follow him.

The paper will examine these issues by firstly reviewing poll data on support for Chávez proving the class based nature of support for him. We will then go on to provide a theoretical exploration of the complex relationship between race and class, and illustrate this by examining class and race based prejudice in Venezuelan history. The paper will present both quantitative data on ethnicity and refer to studies on media content in contemporary Venezuela, to illustrate the persistence and prevalence of racist discourse there. We will then go on to look at the role of class and race in the discourse of both Chávez and the opposition, showing how the latter uses it positively to engage with the poorer, darker skinned majority, while the opposition uses it negatively to provoke a negative reaction to Chávez and his supporters, mostly amongst the middle and upper classes. Furthermore, we will review positive policy measures looking to reverse these classist and racist historical trends implemented by the Chávez government and ask if this is a genuine attempt to break from this past, or whether it is simply the reproduction of behaviour from previous governments. In summary, it is argued in the paper that while class remains the defining fissure of current Venezuelan politics, race is its rarely examined subtext.

### **Class based polarisation in Venezuela.**

Although historically class was elided from discourse in Venezuelan politics, support for President Hugo Chávez is largely polarised along class lines,

a fact that has been recognised by a number of political analysts. Using poll data from 1995 and 1998, Canache (2004) finds that it was the poor who mostly supported Chávez's failed coup in 1992 against President Carlos Andrés Pérez, and in a survey in 1995 his support was strongest amongst the lower economic sectors.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1998 presidential elections Roberts (2003) points to strong support amongst the poor for Chávez, whereas his chief rival Henrique Salas Römer's appeal was amongst the middle and upper sectors.<sup>5</sup> Canache provides further evidence of this support, showing that in a pre-election survey conducted just before the 1998 presidential elections, 55% of the urban poor declared their intention to vote for Chávez, whereas only 45% of the non-poor expected to back him.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly in the 2000 presidential elections one poll found that 50.5 per cent of socioeconomic sector E intended to vote for Chávez as opposed to 24 per cent for Arias Cardenas, his principal opponent and co-conspirator in the 1992 coup, while 66.7 per cent of socioeconomic groups A/B intended to vote for the latter.<sup>7</sup> A poll published by Venezuelan polling firm Datanalysis in 2001, found a similar tendency.<sup>8</sup>

Canache, however, predicts that the urban poor of Venezuela would become disillusioned with Chávez and cites poll data to prove this at the conclusion of her study. Nonetheless, poll data posterior to publication of that study reinforces rather than negates the tendency of support for Chávez amongst the poor. In a poll by Greenberg, Quinlan and Rosner in 2004, shortly before the

revocatory referendum held on President Chávez's mandate, 80 per cent of those polled in the A/B/C+ social category intended to vote for his removal from office (*Sí*) while close to 60 per cent of those in the E social category would vote against (*No*). Canache bases her prediction on Chávez's failure to deliver promises made to the poor yet when asked for reasons in this poll why they chose to vote in favour of Chávez, 62 per cent said they believed that Chávez helped the poor and almost 60 per cent evaluated the government's *misiones* or social programmes (see below) favourably, reinforcing the link between Chávez and the lower class in popular opinion.<sup>9</sup>

More recently still, similar data was found in an Evans/Mc Donough Company Inc./Consultores 30.11 poll published on November, 29, 2006 just over a week before the December, 6 presidential elections of that year.<sup>10</sup> In this poll 76 per cent of social stratum A/B and 47 per cent of stratum C said they would vote for Manuel Rosales, Governor of Zulia province and Chávez's main rival, while 64 per cent of stratum D and 68 per cent of stratum E intended to vote for Chávez. These two strata made up the majority of respondents, representing jointly 62 per cent of the total. In the event Chávez won that election by 62 per cent, while the turnout was 75 per cent of registered voters. Chávez's support amongst the poor has therefore remained relatively consistent over the eight years since he was first elected in 1998.

**Table 1 Here**

Chávez's rise therefore signifies 'a repoliticisation of social inequality in Venezuela' with mostly the popular sectors identifying with Chávez and the middle and upper sectors with opponents of the president.<sup>11</sup> The main argument in this paper, however, is that there is a racial subtext to this support. On the one hand the poor's support for Chávez is based on the fact that he is like them: from a poor background and *pardo* (of mixed Indigenous, African and European descent). The figures presented in Tables 2 and 3 below would seem to support this suggestion. Conversely, the rejection of Chávez by parts of the middle and most of the upper classes in Venezuela is precisely due to a rejection of these very qualities: being poor and dark-skinned. This rejection is furthermore based on a deeply-rooted historical rejection of the Black as being culturally and socially inferior to the White. Despite, as Wright (1990)<sup>12</sup> points out, the 'seamier sides of racism' being eradicated during the pre-Chávez period (1958-1993), the so-called *puntofijo*<sup>13</sup> era, this association of the Black with backwardness remains strong in Venezuela, especially in terms of media depictions of the poor. Dark skin, as we shall see, is still associated with poverty, and the darker the skin the more likely that that person will belong to the poorer sections of society. Thus race and class remain associated in Venezuela despite advancement in eradicating some elements of racism.

In order to prove this let us first examine the substantive point of this article, that class divisions in Venezuelan politics have an element of ethnic and race division within it, before going on to examine more closely the association of

race and class in Chávez's discourse and policy, as well as looking at classist and racist elements in opposition anti-Chávez discourse.

### *Race/class interaction*

Despite views to the contrary, racism still exists and operates in Venezuela and this racism has deep roots in the country's colonial past. Furthermore, in Venezuela as in much of the rest of Latin America, concepts of race and class fuse whereby generally speaking it is believed that the darker a person's skin, the poorer that person will be.

Before looking at the concepts of race and class in the context of Venezuelan history, we first of all need to look at the relationship between these two concepts in sociological theory to provide a theoretical background to this contextual discussion.

Miles and Brown (2003) see the concept of 'race' and 'races' as 'socially imagined rather than biological realities'. In a nutshell they see the phenomenon of race and racism as diverse but one that always centres on an ideology based on what they call a Self/Other dialectic. This ideology is two fold they argue. The act of racialisation of a given population, attributes the Other with negative attributes ('autoracialisation') while simultaneously and automatically giving the Self positive attributes. Hence, for example, European colonial discourse on Africans portrayed the African as 'less civilised, a barbarian, by virtue of supposedly looking more like a beast and behaving in ways that approximated to the behaviour of a beast'.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, the Self, the European was seen as

being the epitome of civilisation and human development. Conceptualisations such as these they argue seek 'to claim the authority of a natural (and therefore unalterable) difference [and]...is the prelude to exclusionary practices'.<sup>15</sup>

So what is the relationship, then between, the concept of race and that of class? The two are interlinked they argue because both perpetuate inequality. 'Racism is a denial of humanity (substituting, as it does, 'races' for 'the human race') and a means of legitimating inequality (particularly inequality explicit in class structures)'.<sup>16</sup> How they interact, however, will depend on the class position of those practicing racism, because '*Erlebnis* (lived experienced of the world) and its consequent problems vary with class position'.<sup>17</sup> Indeed the forms and expressions of racism have had 'varying interaction with economic and political relations in capitalist and non-capitalist social formations',<sup>18</sup> hence any discussion of racism must therefore be 'historically specific [as it is] knowable only as a result of historical analysis rather than abstract thinking'.<sup>19</sup> Consequently discussion on racism in Venezuela and its relationship to class must be looked at in an historical context to be properly understood, which is our task in the next few sections.

### *Colonial and early republican contexts*

During the colonial era, Venezuela had small indigenous populations relative to the richer colonies of Peru and Mexico, so consequently it had to import labour through slavery from Africa, at considerable cost, both human and economic. In the period from the Conquest up until 1797, when the African slave

trade ended, 100,000 Africans entered Venezuela.<sup>20</sup> These slaves were harshly treated both physically and socially and the black and the indigenous would remain stigmatized within Venezuelan society from thence on.

Venezuela nonetheless became one of the more racially mixed colonies of Spanish America, as a process of miscegenation began there from the earliest times of the colony. By the end of the colonial era 60 per cent of Venezuelans had African origins and of the 25 per cent classified as white probably some 90 per cent had some African ancestry.<sup>21</sup> This would have repercussions for the country's view of itself in later years, and of its inhabitants of themselves, as we shall see.

Gott (2006) sees this era in Latin America in terms of a 'white settler' society paradigm. Seeking to "eliminate the indigenous population', either physically or through policies of assimilation,<sup>22</sup> white settlers in Latin America set out to achieve this by 'simultaneously oppressing two different groups within their territory: they seized the *land* of the indigenous peoples, and they appropriated the *labour* of the black slaves that they had imported'.<sup>23</sup>

Republican Venezuela retained or assumed the characteristics of colonialism, resulting in the Latin American white settler elite having a Eurocentric approach to society and nation building, and a deep mistrust of native and African conceptions of community and society.<sup>24</sup> In consequence the white settler elites of Latin America had more in common with the elites of Europe and North America than their fellow Latin Americans, leading to an 'ingrained racist fear and hatred of the white settlers, alarmed by the continuing

presence of the expropriated underclass...'<sup>25</sup> Struggles between rich and poor in Latin America therefore not only were class based but also race based, a fact, Gott notes, that 'even politicians and historians of the Left' have ignored preferring to 'discuss class rather than race'.<sup>26</sup> Venezuela was no exception within this pattern, although it has had distinct overtones due to its individual historical trajectory as we shall see.

### *Miscegenation in modern Venezuela*

This rejection of the black and the indigenous continued into the twentieth century through the 'ideology of *mestizaje* (miscegenation), also known as the myth of democracy or racial equality, [which] served to mask racial discrimination and the socioeconomic situation of the Afro-Venezuelan and indigenous communities'.<sup>27</sup> In this ideology the white European was identified as 'the civilizing agent, making Africans and the indigenous and their descendants largely invisible'.<sup>28</sup> This ideology also 'denied the existence of social classes', and instead looked to a cultural homogenization, spread primarily through the educational system.<sup>29</sup> This policy of *mestizaje* and the denial of racism within Venezuela continued into the liberal democratic *puntofijo* regime, installed definitively in 1958.

The *puntofijo* regime was designed to avoid conflict and antagonism, encourage conciliation and negate the polarisation of Venezuelan society along class and, following the logic of our argument, racial lines. Access to the vote, to education and to health services and an expanding middle class temporarily

ameliorated the worst excesses of class/race divisions of Venezuela, forging even further the myth of a classless, non-racist, united Venezuela. Yet as time went by, the economic model began to be exhausted under the weight of a slump in oil prices and increased external borrowing.

From Black Friday in February 1983, when the government of Luis Herrera Campins dramatically devalued the *bolívar* in the face of a slump in oil prices and massive capital flight, the regime began to crumble. On the economic level, for example, Venezuelans saw their standard of living plummet. Between 1990 and 1997, according to the UN, per capita income fell from US\$5192 to US\$2858, and Venezuela's human development index from 0.8210 to 0.7046.<sup>30</sup>

With this economic crisis the vision of a united, non-racial and classless Venezuela lost its mythical power. Racist discourse began to re-emerge amongst the upper and middle classes. The link between class and race became more explicit as Afro-Venezuelan and indigenous people became the scapegoats for Venezuela's economic failure. Ishibashi (2003) shows how stereotypes of fecklessness and indolence of Afro-Venezuelans were perpetuated through the Venezuelan media. As Ishibashi puts it: 'The "white" is normally the symbol of the beautiful, the rich, the pure and the sophisticated, while the 'black' is the symbol of the ugly, the poor, the impure and the non-sophisticated'.<sup>31</sup> Black people in the Venezuelan media, in advertisements, TV soaps, cinema and in beauty pageants, are practically 'invisible'. When they are seen, they are often associated with partying on the beach, reinforcing the idea of the black as being 'feckless', or in a position of providing a service of physical labour.

Class plays a role in the depiction of blacks in the Venezuelan media, with products directed at the upper classes usually being advertised by white models, while those directed at the popular classes usually using darker skinned models. As one media photographer admits: 'the darker the [skin] colour, the more [models] are associated with the lowest social classes'.<sup>32</sup> Indeed not only is 'colour associated with [social] classes' but Afro-Venezuelans are also, as we have seen, associated with the 'ugly'.<sup>33</sup> This reinforces the association in the popular mind of the 'west' or the 'white' being associated with the 'superior and civilized' while the rest are 'inferior and savage'.

It is of no surprise then that in surveys done on ethnicity within Venezuela, those who identify as 'Afro-Venezuelan' are in a small minority, of much lesser significance to those who identify as white. For example in the World Values Survey (2007) in Venezuela, 4.2% of respondents identified themselves as Black-Other/Black, whereas 35.8% identified themselves as White/Caucasian White. Nevertheless, the survey also provides a number of intermediate options, such as 'Coloured-Dark' (16.6%) and 'Coloured-Light' (42.7%). Indigenous groups on the other hand represent only 0.5% of the population, but despite their small numbers have important symbolic value.<sup>34</sup>

Apart from the highly subjective nature of such categories (what is the actual physical difference between Black and 'Coloured-Dark?'), not to mention the high probability that those who identify themselves as 'Caucasian-White' have some element of Black or Indian blood (as noted by Ewell, 1984 above), the important point to note is that the majority of Venezuelans, approximately 64%,

identify themselves as non-white. It is important also to point out that in a social context where the Black is highly undervalued, if not despised, the probability of Venezuelans not identifying themselves with that ethnic category is most likely increased.

While at the time of writing it appears that no figures exist providing a breakdown of the racial make-up of each social class in Venezuela, it is instructive to compare social class breakdown with that of racial categories. As we can see in Figures 2 and 3, if we compare the total of social sectors A+B+C, at 40% with the total of those who identified themselves as White, at 35.8% we find a strong similarity in the percentages found pertaining to both those categories. Similarly if we compare the total of sectors D+E, the poorest social sectors, at 60%, with the total of those who identified as non-white (i.e. black, coloured dark, coloured light and indigenous) at 64.2%, again we find a high level of correlation between both sets of figures. This suggests, although by no means definitively, that there is a strong level of probability that those who identify as white are found in the higher social sectors while those who identify as black, mixed raced or indigenous are found in the D or E social categories. If we then go on further to look at the figures in Table 1 above, showing voting patterns in favour of President Chávez we find similar correlations between percentages in all three sets of figures. In other words, there is a high probability, judging by these figures, that a poorer Venezuelan, with darker skin, will vote for Chávez (see above).

**Table 2 here**

### **Table 3 here**

These figures suggest furthermore, that, as Herrera Salas (2003) emphasises, racism is not just a social phenomenon in Venezuela but has a political economy rationale also. This is reinforced by the dependent situation of Venezuela's economy. In Venezuela structured employment, wealth, taxation and the distribution of social goods are subject to influence by the structural factors of race/class and the economic relations with the core capitalist countries. Economic dependence preserves underdevelopment, perpetuating the existing class/race bifurcation and the inequalities stemming from these basic societal cleavage, which in turn itself further perpetuates economic dependence.

Both these factors have resulted in a stratified society based on race, with non-white majorities having limited access to the scant formal employment opportunities available. The white or 'near-white' elite on the other hand acts as the mediator between local markets and capitalist centres, with local capitalists playing a reduced role in the local market, providing basic consumer goods (such as beer, wine, flour etc.) to it but few high value manufactured products.

These economic and cultural tendencies led the country to a deepening political polarisation which, as we shall see in the next section, became most apparent during the second presidency of Carlos Andrés Pérez (1989-93) as he attempted to introduce a neoliberal restructuring programme into Venezuela.

*The rise of neoliberalism and the death of a united Venezuela*

The introduction of neoliberal policies by Pérez sparked off the greatest public disorders seen in modern Venezuelan history, which came to be known as the *Caracazo* (27 - 28 February, 1989). Pérez brought in a number of International Monetary Fund (IMF) sponsored economic measures including the raising of fuel costs with a concomitant rise in public transport charges. This provoked residents of Caracas's overcrowded shantytowns, and those in many other Venezuelan cities, to come down from the *cerros* (hills) and proceed to loot shops and warehouses, initially for food, but as the disturbances developed for all sorts of consumer goods. Government reaction was initially tame but eventually President Pérez called a state of emergency and left it to the Army and Police to quell the disturbances. The result was the use of 'massive violence' and an official death toll of 277, an unofficial one running into the thousands.<sup>35</sup>

Establishment presentations of the *Caracazo* unearthed once again the barely latent classism and racism buried under the official myth of a classless and non-racial Venezuela. To those in power the *caracazo* represented the eruption of barbarism, of primitivism pitted against civilisation. The '*pueblo*' (people) were a source of barbarism, the government and the elite a force for reason and civilisation; '[t]he nation was split in two'.<sup>36</sup> After the *caracazo*, Venezuela would not be the same again as protest became the norm, increasing both in incidence, violence and variety and extending to almost all sectors of society.<sup>37</sup> It symbolised the eruption of the class factor once again into the national political arena and following the logic of our argument, also the question of race.

Despite President Pérez admitting the class nature of the disturbances and the economic measures which sparked them off,<sup>38</sup> he persisted in their implementation, leading initially to some macroeconomic success. By 1992, however, unemployment, informalisation of employment and poverty had all increased.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile as the Venezuelan population in general and the popular classes in particular paid the price of economic reform, the governmental and business elites were seen to enrich themselves even further through financial speculation and/or corruption. Dissatisfaction grew and in 1992 Pérez's government was rocked by two unsuccessful coups, the first led by Lt. Col. Hugo Chávez on February 4. While the coups failed, by 1993 Pérez was impeached and under house arrest for corruption, finally going into exile, where he still remains.

This cleared the way for the emergence of Chávez as a political force in the country and as we have seen in the first part of this paper this support came mostly from the poor of Venezuela. Yet as we have sought to prove, the vast majority of those poor are the darker skinned, black or *pardo* citizens of Venezuela. The next section will seek to answer the following question therefore: Why do the poorer, darker-skinned majorities of Venezuela vote for Chávez? Two reasons are offered for this: firstly, in his discourse Chávez has exalted the nobility of the ordinary Venezuelan in his discourse, and that ordinary Venezuelan is poor and of mixed-race extraction, *like himself*. Secondly, the Chávez government has directed policy towards improving the social and economic situation of the poor, *pardo* Venezuelan. This contrasts greatly with

opposition discourse and policy which has subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, racist and classist elements causing distrust amongst most poor Venezuelans.

### **Chávez's discourse on class and race.**

#### *The 'People': race and class in chavismo*

The movement launched by Chávez adopted as its ideology a system of thinking specifically Venezuelan and Latin American, *bolivarianismo*, rather than one based on imported ideologies. *Bolivarianismo* is based on the thinking and teachings of three major figures from Venezuelan history: Ezequiel Zamora, popular military leader in the Federal Wars; Símon Rodríguez, educator, friend and mentor to the final member of the trinity, the Liberator, Símon Bolívar. Each figure provides a specific element to the new ideology: Zamora the element of rebellion, popular protest and protagonism, summed up in the slogan attributed to him: 'Land and free men! Popular elections! Horror to the oligarchy!'; Rodríguez the requirement for autochthonous ideological originality when he warned that 'either we invent or we commit errors (...) America should not servilely imitate, but be original'; and Bolívar, the Liberator, the symbol of equilibrium between the dualism of rebellion and ideology, force and consent.<sup>40</sup>

Central and crucial to this ideology is the concept of '*el pueblo*', the people. For Laclau (2005), the people are not so much a coalition of identities, as portrayed by many analysts of populism, but rather invest their diverse identities into one privileged identity. For Laclau, this identity is the

underprivileged, the *plebs*, who function as representative of the whole people, the *populus*. In other words the *totality* is expressed through a *singularity* and the extreme form of a singularity is an *individuality*. The group then, the totality of the *populus*, becomes symbolically unified around an individuality, in this case the leader. The 'leader' therefore 'is inherent in the formation of a people'<sup>41</sup>, indeed comes to signify the people themselves, or rather what the people strive for.

This process can be seen in the relationship between Chávez and the 'people' in Venezuela. Chávez reifies the people in his discourse. For him, 'popular protagonism [is] the fuel of history' and only when this protagonism exists is a people truly *el pueblo*.<sup>42</sup> Leadership must be provided in order to galvanise the collective into action, but the leader is but a conduit. The people are an 'unleashed force, equal to the rivers' being channelled by leaders such as Chávez because either 'we provide a course for that force, or that force will pass over us'.<sup>43</sup> Chávez is 'not a cause, but a consequence',<sup>44</sup> 'an instrument of the collective'.<sup>45</sup>

Race and class are central sources of identification for Chávez with the concept of *el pueblo*. Chávez repeatedly emphasizes his background as a *pardo* and as a common man. Kozloff (2005) quotes Chávez as saying: 'My Indian roots are from my father's side [...] He [my father] is mixed Indian and black, which makes me very proud.' He also boasted, according to Kozloff, that his grandmother was a Pumé Indian. Kozloff goes on to report that apart from being *pardo*, 'Chávez was [also] born in extremely humbling conditions in the llano, [Orinoco plains area of Central Venezuela]: "I was a farm kid from the plains of

South Venezuela,” he remarked to Ted Koppel ‘on ABC’s *Nightline*. “I grew up in a palm tree house with an earthen floor,” he added’.<sup>46</sup> Chávez frequently refers to cultural symbols associated with grassroots Venezuelan communities: the *arepa*, a corn bread that is part of the staple diet for ordinary Venezuelans, baseball, the national sport, and occasionally breaks out into a typical Venezuelan song in the middle of a speech, which is often laden with colloquialisms.

On another occasion, Chávez points out the links between racism in the United States and the underlying racism in discourse against Chávez himself:

“Racism is very characteristic of imperialism. Racism is very characteristic of capitalism....Hate against me has a lot to do with racism. Because of my big mouth, because of my curly hair. And I’m so proud to have this mouth and this hair, because it is African.”

In the end, Chávez insists it is socialism ‘a new ethic’ which is needed “to beat those ominous phenomenon such as racism”.<sup>47</sup>

Through discourse celebrating the common man and his ethnic background, Chávez is underlining his similarities with the majority of Venezuelans. As we have seen most Venezuelans are black or mixed race, with some indigeneous (64 per cent) and most are in the lower socio-economic brackets (62% in stratum D and E). It is no accident therefore that in the last presidential elections in 2006, similar percentages of the population voted for Chávez (62% out of a turnout of 75%).

### *Opposition discourse on class and race*

The Chávez discourse celebrating race and class, contrasts greatly with that emanating from opposition elements. Some of this discourse presents deeply subtle forms of racism and classism, whereas others are much more radical. In it the image is projected of a *pueblo* being easily manipulated and incapable of thinking rationally. Pedro Carmona Estanga, for example, leader of peak business organisation, FEDECAMARAS and erstwhile president for 48 hours during the coup against Chávez in April, 2002, wrote in an article published shortly before the 1998 Presidential elections that 'people don't understand the *Constituyente* but simply emotionally follow the candidate that is promoting it'. Francia gives further examples of this, where the vote for Chávez is considered an 'emotional' vote, while votes against him are considered 'rational'.<sup>48</sup> Similarly Julio Borges, leader of US funded political party *Primero Justicia* (Justice First), qualifies those who vote for Chávez as 'inhabitants' not 'citizens', implying that they acted without thinking.<sup>49</sup> On field work to Venezuela in 2002, I found that some people rejected Chávez because, according to them, Venezuela needed '*gente preparada*', educated, trained people, this despite the fact that Chávez has a BSc in military science and studied for a Masters in Political Science.

Less subtle forms of racism and classism are also found in opposition discourse on Chávez supporters. In March, 2004, during a high-level international summit in Caracas, opposition television station Globovisión parodied President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe as a monkey, prompting six

African countries to object.<sup>50</sup> Herrera Salas points to a visceral racism and classism directed towards the president and his supporters by opposition members and media, where the President is routinely referred to as ‘Indian, monkey and thick-lipped’ or simply as a ‘monkey’.<sup>51</sup> Supporters of Chávez are regularly referred to as ‘hordes’ and the pro-government Bolivarian Circles as ‘terror circles’. Duno (2004) examines how media portrayals of Chávez supporters suggest this image of the mob as one “swayed by its leader, or moved by base emotions, failing to exercise its will in a rational fashion”. Worse, the image is of ‘those people’ [who] go on marches because they are paid to or because it gives them a chance to get drunk”.<sup>52</sup> These portrayals of Chávez supporters have underlying them a profound racial and classist bias.

Duno shows us through recounting several examples of media racism against Chávez supporters, that it is indeed the construction of a “national political imaginary...articulated on the basis of racist thought”.<sup>53</sup> In the end, the main thrust of these disqualifying media presentations of Chávez supporters, Duno asserts, are “a strategy to remove political legitimacy from marginalised social subjects”<sup>54</sup> who are in effect political actors who have challenged power.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, as Wilpert (2007) asserts, this is a strategy on the part of the old established elite, removed from power by Chávez, to attempt to regain that power. The old elite uses “its control of the country’s mass media to turn the middle class against Chávez, creating a campaign that took advantage of the latent racism and classism in Venezuelan culture”.<sup>56</sup>

Some opposition analysts, while recognising this racism and classism within the opposition ranks, blame Chávez for this situation. For Patricia Marquez for example, of the elite *Instituto de Estudios Superiores de Administración* (IESA) it is Chávez who has ‘stirred up the beehive of social harmony’.<sup>57</sup> Yet, Herrera Salas counters, it ‘is evident...that [Chávez’s] political discourse and the symbolic and cultural practices of the Bolivarian Revolution have emphasised so-called national values, significantly reducing the occurrence of ethnic shame and endoracism in the popular sectors’.<sup>58</sup> This *chavista* discourse has been translated into numerous policy initiatives which have further recognised the existence of the class and race fractures in Venezuelan society, as we shall see in the next section.

#### *Bolivarian race and class policy*

In general indigenous and Afro-Venezuelans as well as the majority *pardo* population can take advantage of the various missions set up by the Chávez government to ensure greater access for the popular classes in a variety of social areas. Indigenous groups also have their own, specific *misiones*. Mujica and Rincón group these into the following areas: 1) Education; 2) Health; 3) Food and Salaries; 4) Employment; 5) Land; 6) Indigenous and 7) Identity.<sup>59</sup> Under Education there are a number of missions: Mission Robinson I covering basic literacy and II covering the completion of primary education. Mission Ribas covers secondary education and Sucre third level, both of these providing monthly scholarships of \$100 for each student.

Under Health there is the most important Mission 'Into the Neighbourhood' (*Barrio Adentro*) which establishes health clinics in shanty towns covered by Cuban medical personnel. There are also the Miracle Mission (*Mision Milagro*) providing eye operations for children in Cuban hospitals and Sports Mission (*Mision Deporte*) promoting sport in marginalised areas. Under food and salaries there is Mercal Mission, which provides low cost food stuffs through a state run store network as well as the Maximum Protection Programme providing half price basic food stuffs and *comedores populares* or Soup Kitchens providing low cost meals.

In employment, Mission Turn Heads (*Mision Vuelvan Caras*) builds on the work of the educational missions by helping their graduates find work and Piar Mission which helps mining communities. On Land, Mission Zamora, associated with the Land Law, works on land distribution to poor families as well as providing credit, technical assistance, training and infrastructure. Mission Guaicapuro promotes the intergral development of indigenous communities ensuring that their Constitutional rights are delivered. Finally, the Housing Mission seeks to guarantee the right to housing and the Identity Mission to ensure that everyone obtains legal identity documents.

In general, it is estimated that of the \$40.5 billion dollar 2006 budget, 41 per cent was dedicated to social programmes and that social spending has increased three fold since Chávez came to office in 1998.<sup>60</sup> Much of that social spending went on the various *misiones* explained above.

The Chávez government has also attempted to tackle disadvantage based on race, for the indigenous at least. Indigenous people are guaranteed through Article 121 of the Bolivarian Constitution, the right to maintain their cultural identity, the state's promotion of that right, and the right to education for in a culturally appropriate manner. There are reserved seats in the National Assembly for Indigenous people and some indigenous have occupied high-level posts such as Noelí Pocaterra, who became vice-president of the National Assembly. The Organic Law for Indigenous Peoples and Communities (LOPCI in its Spanish acronym), passed in 2006, set up the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples (INPI) run by the indigenous and charged with establishing the procedures for the demarcation of Indigenous Lands and Habitats. Other laws passed include the creation of a Vice Ministry for Indigenous Affairs, new health care initiatives and the extension of the *Mision Guaicapuro* in education.

There is, however, no corresponding recognition of Afro-Venezuelans in the Constitution and as a result no pro-Afro Venezuelan legislation, despite representations from Afro-Venezuelan groups. In a package of proposed amendments to the Constitution formulated in August 2007, however, such recognition was finally proposed. This package was rejected by the Venezuelan people in a referendum in December of that year, largely due to controversial proposals to extend Presidential powers.

Nonetheless, we can see from this brief summary that Chávez himself has prioritized class and race issues in discourse and many policy initiatives have tackled classism directly, with race issues being subsumed within these more

general programmes, except in the case of the indigenous. The question remains, however, to what extent this represents a genuine change in the structure of Venezuelan society. We turn to this question in the next section.

### **Class and Race in Venezuela: A break with the past or the song remains the same?**

Despite the advances outlined above there are a number of problems in their design and delivery, as well as due to the historical context, which have limited the impact of change for the popular classes, in their majority *pardo*, Afro-Venezuelan and indigenous peoples of Venezuela.

Of all the initiatives aimed at eliminating disadvantage along class lines the Missions have been most successful. The combined effect of the Missions and other social programmes have resulted in a drop in poverty from 44 per cent of households in 1998 to 31 per cent in 2006. This, as Weisbrot et al. (2006) point out only covers cash income – the combined effects of the above mentioned missions, most of which are not cash based, may have further reduced poverty in Venezuela. For example, the Venezuelan government has provided free health care to an estimated 54 per cent of the population and well as subsidized food for 40 per cent.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, the management of these missions provides much popular participation, through a variety of novel mechanisms such as local health committees (*comités de salud*) or local communal councils (*consejos comunales*) to develop and manage local affairs at neighbourhood level.

The independent Venezuelan human rights organisation, PROVEA in their annual evaluation of human rights for 2004-2005, hails the advances towards social justice and equality during Chávez's years in power. These improvements have been particularly felt, they note, amongst the poorest sections of society, with an important increase in income for socio-economic stratum E, the group, as we have seen which provides the bedrock of popular support for the Chávez government. PROVEA sees these tendencies as a democratizing force, increasing equality and social justice.<sup>62</sup>

In the following year's report (2005-2006) they recommend, however, improvements in five key areas in order to ensure lasting structural changes in favour of all, but particularly the traditionally excluded.<sup>63</sup> These are:

1. Integrating Missions into the existing institutionalality and putting them under more rigorous cost and evaluation controls.
2. Creating a real division of powers between institutions, reducing the protagonism of the presidency, and reversing the tendency towards the militarization of Venezuelan society.
3. Fostering an appropriate climate to handle conflict and reach consensus through the creation of more space for dialogue.
4. Providing a National Plan for Human Rights with ample popular participation.
5. Ensuring the participation of the population in public affairs, guaranteeing citizenship and the autonomy of social organizations.

'Who governs in the next six years' PROVEA concludes, 'have the challenge to construct a democracy with social justice, solid and efficient institutions, less poor people, with citizens more conscious of their rights, and with a significant decline in human rights abuses and impunity, as well as creating adequate conditions for the exercising and enjoyment of all human rights without discrimination'.<sup>64</sup>

While the Chávez government has advanced notably towards a number of these goals since coming to power in 1999, and whilst discursively in particular it has clearly voiced its wish to aim towards many of them, in practice it still has quite some way to go. The most recent 2006-2007 PROVEA survey notes that Venezuela is in a state of transition between the old *puntofijo* republic and a new form of state aiming towards a 'socialism of the XXI century'. Within Venezuelan society there is a battle, within and without the government, between those whose actions are characterised by authoritarianism and those aiming towards a full participative democracy.<sup>65</sup> It remains to be seen if in the remaining five years of Chávez's second full mandate whether he will aim towards the latter with the necessary vigour to ensure popular participation for all, especially those traditionally excluded on the basis of class and race, and thus truly reverse the historical patterns which helped create the space for him to emerge as a leader in the first place.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, our survey shows that the bulk of Chávez's support emerges from the poorer, darker skinned sectors of Venezuelan society. This has two implications: firstly that there a polarization around class in Venezuela, with a powerful racial subtext which points to the emergence of a class-based political system for the present at least. Secondly, in terms of the study of Venezuelan politics and Chávez's support in particular, that there is a complex interrelation between class and race in this area. However this has only been a tentative exploration to highlight this fact and if anything the issue needs more detailed research to draw out its full implications.

**Table 1: Class/Race polarisation in Venezuela – Poll Data 2000-2006**

YEAR/SOCIAL CLASS	A	B	C	D	E	% IN ELECTION
% social class in overall pop	5%		35%	39%	21%	100%
<b>2000</b>	66.7% (Opp)		N/A	N/A	50.5% (Ch)	59.76% (Ch) 37.52% (Opp)
<b>2004</b>	80% (SÍ)* 15% (No)*		61% (SÍ) 34%(No)	51% (SÍ) 43%(No)	38% (SÍ) 59%(No)	40.63% (S í) 59.9% (No)
<b>2006</b>	76% (Opp) 17% (Ch)		47% (Opp) 48% (Ch)	32% (Opp) 64% (Ch)	26% (Opp) 68% (Ch)	38.39% (Opp) 62% (Ch)

Table own elaboration. Sources: Subero, C. 2000; Greenberg, Quinlan and Rosner, 2004; Evans Mc Donagh/Consultores 30.11, 2006; Consejo Nacional Electoral, 2007.

\* Sí refers to the option in favour of removing Chávez, No to the option against.

Key:

Opp=Main Opposition Candidates: Francisco Arias Cardenas (2000), Manuel Rosales (2006).

Ch=Hugo Chávez Frías, President of Venezuela.

**Table 2: Social class sectors population breakdown: Venezuela**

<b>SOCIAL CLASS</b>	<b>A+B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>% social class in overall pop</b>	5%	35%	39%	21%	100%
<b>Total A+B+C and D+E</b>	40%		60%		100%

Table own elaboration. Source: Greenberg, Quinlan and Rosner, 2004 p.24. Note: (A,B, C+).

Social strata vary from poll to poll but generally those in A,B and upper C are regarded as in high income brackets; C- in the middle income bracket and D and E in the low income bracket, the poorest income strata.

**Table 3: Racial category breakdown: Venezuela**

<b>RACIAL CATEGORY</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Coloured Light</b>	<b>Coloured Dark</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Indigenous</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>% race in overall pop</b>	35.8%	42.7%	16.6%	4.2%	0.5%	100%
<b>Totals White/Non-white</b>	35.8%	64.2%				100%

Table own elaboration. Source: World Values Survey, Venezuela, 1996 & 2000. Categories were self-selected by respondents from presented options.

<sup>1</sup> R Miles and M Brown, *Racism* Second Edition, London and New York, Routledge, 2003, p.105.

<sup>2</sup> See B Cannon, 2004. 'April 2002: The Myth of a United Venezuela', in *Bulletin of Latin American Research* **23**(3): 285–302.

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<sup>3</sup> R Gott, 2007. 'Latin America as a White Settler Society' in *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 26, (2), pp. 269-290, p.273; G Wilpert, 2007. *Changing Venezuela by Taking Power*, London/New York: Verso, p.20

<sup>4</sup> D Canache, 2004. 'Urban Poor and Political Order', in: J L. Mc Coy and D J. Myers (eds.), 2004. *The Unraveling of Representative Democracy in Venezuela*, Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, pp.33-50, pp.44-46

<sup>5</sup> K Roberts, 'Social polarisation and the populist resurgence', in S Ellner and D Hellinger, (eds), *Venezuelan Politics in the Chávez Era: Class, Polarization and Conflict*. Boulder and London, Lynne Rienner, 2003, pp.55–73, p.66.

<sup>6</sup> op cit., p46

<sup>7</sup> C Subero. 'Clases sociales tienen distinto candidato', in *El Universal* Sección Nacional y Política, 6 April 2000 [Online]. Available from:

<http://www.eluniversal.com/2000/04/06/06102AA.shtml>. [Accessed 20/06/ 2003].

<sup>8</sup> Datanalisis, 2001, *Escenarios* Julio, 2001 Año IV, número 3, p.21 Cuadro No 4.

<sup>9</sup> Greenberg, Quinlan and Rosner, 'Venezuela, Resultados Estudio de Opinión Pública Nacional: Junio 23, 2004' <Available at

<[www.rnv.gov.ve/noticias/uploads/encuesta-greenberg-junio-2004.ppt](http://www.rnv.gov.ve/noticias/uploads/encuesta-greenberg-junio-2004.ppt)>. [Accessed 15 January, 2008].

<sup>10</sup> Evans/McDonough Co. Inc./Consultores 30.11, 2007. 'Clima Política Votantes Venezolanos: Presentación de resultados'. Available at:

[http://www.rethinkvenezuela.com/downloads/PRESENTACION\\_ENCUESTA\\_NACIONAL\\_NOVIEMBRE\\_2007.pdf](http://www.rethinkvenezuela.com/downloads/PRESENTACION_ENCUESTA_NACIONAL_NOVIEMBRE_2007.pdf). [Accessed 15 January, 2008].

<sup>11</sup> Roberts, op cit., p.55

<sup>12</sup> W R Wright, 1990. *Café con Leche: Race, Class and National Image in Venezuela*. Austin: University of Texas Press

<sup>13</sup> *Quinta Punto Fijo* was the name of the house where the political agreement between the main parties, AD, COPEI and URD was drawn up after the 1958 coup against dictator Pérez Jimenez.

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<sup>14</sup> Miles and Brown, 2003, p.37

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp.89-90

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.11

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.105

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.117

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.118

<sup>20</sup> J M Herrera Salas, 'Ethnicity and evolution: The political economy of racism in Venezuela' *Latin American Perspectives*.No.32, 2005, pp.72-91, p.74.

<sup>21</sup> J Ewell, 1984. *Venezuela: A Century of Change*. Stanford: Stanford University Press , p.14.

<sup>22</sup> P Wolfe *Settler Colonialisms and the Transformation of Anthropology* London, Cassell,1999, p163 cited in R Gott, 'Latin America as a White Settler Society' in *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 26, (2), 2007, pp. 269-290, p272

<sup>23</sup> Gott, 2007. Ibid., p273

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Herrera Salas, op cit., p.76

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.77

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> OCEI (Oficina Central de Estadística e Informática)/PNUD (Programa Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo), *Informe sobre Desarrollo Humano en Venezuela, 2000: Caminos para superar la pobreza*. Caracas, CDB Publicaciones, 2001, p.92

<sup>31</sup> J Ishibashi.'Hacia una apertura del debate sobre el racismo en Venezuela: exclusión y inclusión estereotipada de personas negras en los medios de comunicación'. In D Mato (coord): *Políticas de identidades y diferencias sociales en tiempos de globalización* Caracas, FACES-UCV, 2003, pp.33-61:p.34

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p48

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p49

<sup>34</sup> The World Values Survey: Online Data Analysis, Venezuela – 1996, 2000, Sociodemographics – Ethnic Description. <Available at: <http://www.jdsurvey.net/bdasepjds/wvsevs/home.jsp?OWNER=WVS>>. [Accessed 15 January, 2008].

<sup>35</sup> F Coronil and J Skurski, 'Dismembering and remembering the nation: the semantics of political violence in Venezuela', in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 33 (2), 1991, pp.288–337, p.326.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* p328

<sup>37</sup> M López-Maya, 'Venezuela after the Caracazo: Forms of protest in a deinstitutionalized context', in *Bulletin of Latin American Studies* 21(2), 2000, pp.199–219.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.* pp.50-51

<sup>39</sup> For example, in 1992 unemployment stood at 7.1 per cent as opposed to 6.9 per cent in 1988. Of total employment in 1991, 59.5 per cent was in the formal sector while 40.5 per cent in the informal, as opposed to 61.9 and 39.7 per cent respectively in 1988. Between 1988 and 1991 poverty increased from 46 to 68 per cent and extreme poverty from 14 to 34 per cent. See Lander, E., 1996. The impact of neoliberal adjustment in Venezuela, 1989–1993, in *Latin American Perspectives* 23(3): pp.50–73.

<sup>40</sup> MBR-200/Pirela Romero, Lt.Col. A. MBR-200: *El Arbol de las Tres Raíces*. Valencia, Venezuela 1994.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* p100

<sup>42</sup> H Chávez Frías, 1994. *A Dos Años del 4 de febrero*. Yare, no publisher, p.3

<sup>43</sup> Chávez Frías, 2000, p.17

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*:18

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*:23

<sup>46</sup> N Kozloff, 'A Real Radical Democracy: Hugo Chávez and the Politics of Race', October, 2005. <Available at: [www.venezuelanalysis.com/articles.php?artno=1577](http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/articles.php?artno=1577)>.

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with President Chávez, Democracy Now! 'President Chávez offers cheap oil to the Poor of the United States'. Available from:

[http://www.democracynow.org/2005/9/20/venezuelas\\_president\\_chavez\\_offers\\_cheap\\_oil](http://www.democracynow.org/2005/9/20/venezuelas_president_chavez_offers_cheap_oil)

[accessed 15 January, 2008].

<sup>48</sup> N Francia, 2000. *Antichavismo y Estupidez Ilustrada*. Caracas, Rayuela Taller de Ediciones, pp.109-111

<sup>49</sup> E Gomez, 'Sólo la presión social puede liberar conciencias', *El Universal* 13 February 2002 (p. 4).

<sup>50</sup> Herrera Salas, op cit., p.85

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. pp.82-87

<sup>52</sup> L Duno Gottberg, 2004. 'Mob outrages: reflections on the media construction of the masses in Venezuela (April 2000-January 2003), in *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, Vol 13:No.1, pps.115-135, p.120.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p.124.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.115

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p.131

<sup>56</sup> Wilpert, 2007, p.20

<sup>57</sup> P Marquez, 2005. 'Vacas flacas y odios gordos: la polarización en Venezuela' in P Marquez y R Piñango (eds), 2005. *Realidades y Nuevos Caminos en esta Venezuela*. Caracas, Ediciones del Instituto de Estudios Superiores de Administración, quoted in Herrera Salas, 2005, op cit., p.86.

<sup>58</sup> Herrera Salas, 2005, op cit.

<sup>59</sup> N Mujica Chirinos and S Rincón González,. 2006. 'Caracterización de la política social y la política económica del actual gobierno venezolano: 1999-2004', in *Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales*, (Vol 12, No.1) pp. 31-57. Available at:

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<sup>60</sup> M Weisbrot, L Sandoval and D Rosnick, 2006, *Poverty Rates In Venezuela: Getting the Numbers Right* <Available at:

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[http://www.cepr.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=61&Itemid=8](http://www.cepr.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=61&Itemid=8) . [Accessed 15 January, 2008].

<sup>61</sup> T Gibbs, 'Business as Unusual: what the Chávez era tells us about democracy under globalization', *Third World Quarterly* Vol. 27, No. 2, 2006, pp.265-279: p.272; Weisbrot et. al., 2006, p.10

<sup>62</sup> Programa Venezolano de Educación-Acción en Derechos Humanos (PROVEA), *Informe Anual 2004-2005*, p.18. <Available at: [www.derechos.org](http://www.derechos.org)>, [Accessed 15 January, 2008].

<sup>63</sup> Programa Venezolano de Educación-Acción en Derechos Humanos (PROVEA), *Informe Anual 2005-2006*, pps. 30-33 <Available at: [www.derechos.org](http://www.derechos.org)>, [Accessed 15 January, 2008].

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.,p33

<sup>65</sup> Programa Venezolano de Educación-Acción en Derechos Humanos (PROVEA), *Informe Anual 2006-2007*, p.19. <Available at: [www.derechos.org](http://www.derechos.org)>, [Accessed 15 January, 2008].