

Formal and Substantive Rationality in Venezuela's 21st Century Socialism

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In his sociology of domination, Max Weber portrays bureaucracy as the purest type of legal authority, functioning as the executive arm of the modern state and having "formal rationality" as its central characteristic. Formal rationality separates ends and means and determines the optimal path for meeting specific ends. In Weber's view, the setting of goals itself is "irrational," that is, dependent on the tastes and desires of society, determined in a separate sphere of politics. The executive functions are reserved for bureaucracy (Szelenyi 1982, p.303)

Weber's portrait created one of the classic problems of liberalism insofar as the scope of democratic steering is not clear. Those wielding influence through "formal rationality" tend to expand their influence leaving little space for substantive decision-making about how to live. The possibility of a technocratic future produced Weber's seminal reflections referred to as the "iron cage" (a term he himself, however, never used). Weber himself suggested perhaps charismatic leadership was necessary and is sometimes considered an early apologist for fascism for his statements to this regard. Other scholars in his circle of influence likewise rejected the dominance of formal rationality, leading them to right (Schmitt) or left (Lukacs) illiberal theories (McCormick 1997).

Karl Marx did not develop a full theory of rationality. However, he did discuss "the subordination of use value to exchange value, as the subordination of human need to profit interests, as the problem of production for profit rather than for the satisfaction of human needs" (Szelenyi 1982, p.303). He also had a theory of alienation suggesting that under capitalism human beings forget that they are the creators of all social practices and institutions and come to see them as objects of unknown origin, impervious to human action. For Marx, the move to socialism amounted to not just a change in economic systems, but a broader rejection of reified formal rationality in favor of dynamic substantive rationality. "The ideal society [Marx and Engels] proposed would reunite a world split into separate, alienated spheres of existence. It would be a society in which telos again dominated techne, a society ruled by substantive rationality" (Szelenyi 1982, p.305).

Marx's is an illiberal vision as the idea that substantive rationality can guide a collectivity depends on a unity of opinion that does not need to be aggregated through the institutions of a bourgeois state or protected by the specification of bourgeois rights. The basis of this possibility comes from Marx's realist metaphysics (Glaeser 2011). The possibility of true, unencumbered knowledge provides the possibility for the critique of capitalism and construction of consensus within socialism.

The critique of formal rationality and preeminence of substantive rationality gets to the core of Hugo Chávez's "democratic revolution" in Venezuela. In 1997-98 his campaign had neoliberal technocracy as its main rhetorical foil. The early years of his government sought to bring autonomous institutions such as the state oil company, which he argued was a "state-within-a-state." He also tried to get the Venezuelan Labor Federation (CTV), autonomous public universities, and even religious institutions in

synch, if not under the control of the central government. After his 2006 reelection, Chávez codified this prioritization of substantive over formal rationality in Venezuela's 21st Century socialism. In this paper I work through the First Socialist Plan 2007-2013 (FSP, República Bolivariana de Venezuela 2007) written by the Chávez government after his re-election in 2006, as well as some salient features of Chavista projects of governance, highlighting the predominance of illiberal, substantive rationality.

The predominance of substantive over formal rationality in 21st Century socialism sheds light on some of the most characteristic elements of Venezuela's 21st Century socialism.

- The emphasis on the concrete needs of Venezuelans rather than the logic of state or state-building, accounts for much of Chavismo's popularity and mobilizing potential as it presented Venezuelans with a government that followed an understandable moral economy. In his weekly televised show "Hello President" Chávez took phone calls and responded to the needs of concrete individuals. The slogan used in public service messages was "Venezuela Belongs to Everyone Now." The FSP has as one of its five "directives" for creating socialism "Supreme Social Happiness" and sees itself constructing an "ethical state" (República Bolivariana de Venezuela 2007)
- The emphasis on substantive rationality helps understand the attractiveness of Chavismo to "intellectuals" with new ideas, that had been largely excluded by the previous technocracy. This is the class Szelenyi (1982 p.308) calls "the intelligentsia." These professionals were involved in not just in carrying-out, but defining priorities. "The redistributor of state socialism claims to operate within the framework of 'substantive rationality...He claims a monopoly of rational choice among goals. He claims a monopoly of technical knowledge." Numerous new projects, from cooperative housing design to moving the government to open-source software, brought activist professionals into new positions of power where they provided significant innovation.
- Socialism's emphasis on substantive rationality often carries a paradox. On the one hand, in rejecting formal rationality it also rejects bureaucracy, the paragon of formal rationality. Yet the idea of substantive rational control in the form of directed economies and civil societies increases the need for institutional control (Szelenyi 1982, p.303n17). The result in Venezuela was the emergence of bloated but weak institutions. Instead of working or improving existing institutions of social policy, the Chávez government created "missions" that worked parallel to ministries, to provide access to education, health and housing. Instead of running social spending through the standard government budget, Chávez had the state oil company provide direct funding that had no legislative oversight. The results of these and many other examples were generally early successes that overtime collapsed into inefficiency and corruption as people in and around these initiatives learned how to game the system.
- The Chávez government's approach to crime and violence was to see it as a direct consequence of poverty and inequality. In speaking of "moral co-responsibility" the FSP says "the child that today cannot eat, that cannot be a child, that cannot play, is likely to be the child who tomorrow murders our own child" (República Bolivariana de Venezuela 2007 p.6). Their approach, then was to largely abandon the police forces and focus instead on social policies and try to alleviate poverty and inequality leading to "supreme social happiness." While they were indeed able to reduce poverty and inequality, violence soared as the influx of guns and social change led to ever more lethal micro-social conflict in the midst of decaying police forces, judicial institutions and corrections. Attempts at police reform were themselves dragged down in part because

some sectors in the socialist government thought that strengthening police forces was “right wing” (Smilde, Zubillaga and Hanson, forthcoming).

- The focus on substantive rationality rests on a realist metaphysics that undercuts respect for pluralism. While the 1999 Constitution firmly included representative institutions, the “First Socialist Plan” suggests that the will of the people “does not admit representation” but should be expressed directly. It effectively presents a tolerance of pluralism “within reason.” It’s disrespect for pluralism and affirmation of hegemony lead to massive social and political conflict. While Chávez’s efforts to control Venezuela’s autonomous universities largely failed, he created a whole system of parallel “Bolivarian universities” with no institutional autonomy and which were frequently mobilized in favor of the revolution. The First Socialist Plan suggested that research should be synchronized with the demands of production. The 2009 Education Law increased state control of primary and secondary education, and instituted a “Bolivarian curriculum.” This created some of the largest mobilizations against the government in years.
- One of the most distinguishing traits of Chavismo over the years leading to much derision were its inability to incorporate and build upon failures and setbacks. Its realist epistemology does not provided ready grounds for self-critique or institutional provisions for feedback loops. The only two possibilities to explain problems are: the failures of individuals or conspiracies from without. While conspiracy theories would reach ludicrous levels with the Maduro administration, during the Chávez administration it generally amounted to publicly berating, demoting or firing officials on live television.

It is easy to exaggerate the importance of a construct such as formal versus substantive rationality. There are many other factors at play, especially given the fact that this was a “transition to socialism” from a capitalist, liberal democracy. I conceive of formal versus substantive rationality not as a deep logic running through all actions, but as a cultural logic mobilized in public discourses that at key moments could have a distinctive impact on efforts at governance.

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