

Us or Them? Social Representations and Imaginaries of the Other in Venezuela

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Polarisation, which seems to have established itself and spread worldwide as a mechanism for power and social control, has become more acute in Latin America, a region of long standing socioeconomic and political conflicts. In Venezuela, in the context of the “Bolivarian revolution”, although political confrontation has encouraged social participation processes, it has also led to an acute social polarization and to controversial representations held in the imaginary of the enemy-Other, which generate rivalries and struggles between opposing groups, in a climate of emotional exacerbation, mistrust and collective fear. In this context, marked by polarisation and intergroup violence, there is a progressive fracture of symbolic practices, which hinders consensus, generating antagonistic relationships in a permanent struggle for positions of real or symbolic power. From the experience of research developed during the 2002-2013 period at the Universidad Central of Venezuela, and the experience derived from programs of mediation and psychosocial attention developed with different political groups, some lines of problematisation arise that I will set forth here. The article deals with the triad: polarisation, representation and social imaginaries, focusing on the controversial representations that emerge in a context marked by sociopolitical conflict..

Keywords: Social polarisation, controversial representations, imaginaries of the Other, Bolivarian Revolution, Venezuela.

In the past two decades, socio-economic and politico-institutional conflicts that question formal democracy models have become more acute and more visible worldwide. In Latin America these conflicts are expressed with differing intensity and character, within the diversity of a region that shares important historical and cultural referents. Thus, there has been a deepening of the political crisis and its institutional forms in several Latin American countries, namely Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela.

Challenged by the tensions and contradictions of globalisation that aggravate the already widespread social inequalities, groups and movements of various countries in the region demand recognition, claim invisible or marginalised identities, demand old and new rights: social, economic, political, identity, community, ecological, sexual, and religious, among others. In this context, where different social sectors advocate a variety of positions on democracy models, sustainable development, competition for control of the state, ownership and management of natural resources, etc., acute processes of social polarisation are also generated, causing a fracture in the social fabric, different expressions of political violence, and a progressive deterioration of spaces for social coexistence.

In Venezuela, in the context of the *Bolivarian Revolution*¹, although the conflict has prompted social participation and strengthened group identity around common goals, it has also generated intense polarisation that has established itself as a mechanism of power and social control. The discourse of political actors in the government and the opposition, and of their followers, vindicates a series of revolutionary, religious and military representations and imaginaries that mobilise intergroup rivalries. Differential uses of discourse and actions limit constructive and peaceful conflict management, compromising the possibilities for deepening democracy in the country (Lozada, 2007).

In this context we could ask ourselves: What are the shared meanings in a society marked by polarisation? What representations of the political community are constructed in societies fragmented by polarisation and violence? What social subject is constructed outside

¹ The government proposal led by Hugo Chavez vindicates and re-signifies some tenets of Simon Bolivar's ideas. Thus the sociopolitical movement that follows this proposal is called the "Bolivarian revolution". At the ideological level, the "Bolivarian revolution" or "21st Century socialism" is recognised or questioned as: "participatory and protagonic democracy", "State capitalism and rentalist socialism" (López Maya, 2007), "bureaucratic socialism" (Biardeau, 2012), "populist scam" (Saint-Marc Upery, 2006).

the “us and them” representation? What is the role played by the imaginaries of the Other in the difficulty for consensus?

These are some of the questions that have guided the research conducted in the 2002-2012 period as part of the Project: Latin American Imaginaries (Arruda and de Alba, 2007) and the International Mediation Program in Venezuela (McCoy & Diez 2011). Without detailing the fluctuations of current conflicts, this article focuses on the *polemic representations* (Moscovici, 1988a) and imaginaries of the Other in a sociopolitical context where conflicts of interest and power struggles are occurring.

From a qualitative perspective, the empirical analysis is derived from data collected through different sources, in real and virtual spaces; namely, focus groups with different groups, opposition and government marches, graffiti, newspapers, political opinion websites, and social networks. Content analysis guided the analytic approach.

VENEZUELA: THE END OF THE ILLUSION?

Lt. Col. Hugo Chavez, who staged a coup in February 1992, acceded to the presidency through elections in December 1998. For the extensive national sectors that supported him (56% of votes), the illusion of change (Lozada, 2001) was centered on overcoming the country’s profound socioeconomic and political crisis.

Among the prominent historical and structural causes of the crisis were: the rentalist nature of the oil State, the deep inequity and social exclusion maintained for over four decades of democracy in the country, the loss of credibility of the institutions, the discredit of the traditional parties, worn out by bipartisanship, corruption and clientelism (Coronil, 2002, Ellner y Kellinger, 2003; Medina y López Maya, 2003; García-Guadilla, 2003).

The end of the illusion, the breaking of the window and the drawing of the curtain were some of the expressions used at the time by different social sectors to refer the breakdown of the social democratic consensus in Venezuela. Today, fourteen years after taking office and even after his death (March 2013), Chavez’s controversial figure still occupies the public agenda and the illusion for change is maintained. However, for one sector of the population this change is only possible if Chavez leaves the presidency, for another sector if he remains in power, and for a third sector, neither one thing nor the other. This

paradoxical illusion accounts for the impact of the process of social polarisation² that has intensified political conflict in recent years, during which political actors in government, opposition, different institutions and social sectors (educational, community, family, religious, police, military, media, academic, scientific, etc.) took sides for or against the government proposal, through street actions and discourses in state, private and alternative media, in real and virtual public spaces.

In addition to the redefinition of the political and ideological framework proposed by the *Bolivarian revolution*, other political, economic and social factors have helped aggravate the conflict between *chavismo* and *antichavismo*: the April 2002 coup, the lockout and oil strike in December 2002 and beginning of 2003, the recall referendum in August 2004, the presidential reelection in December 2006 and 2012, and the lack of transparency of the public information given by the government concerning the evolution of President Chavez's cancer, which ultimately led to his demise.

CONTROVERSIAL REPRESENTATIONS: US OR THEM?

In a study conducted in 1988 on the social representations of democracy in Venezuela (Lozada, 1999), the interviewed social action groups accused a *suspicious democracy*, marked by corruption, inequity and limited social participation. These *emancipated representations* (Moscovici, 1988a) questioned the meaning of equality, justice and equity in the *hegemonic representations* of democracy held in the country for over four decades³.

Although the traditional definition of democracy establishes a close relationship between the subjects of democracy, the spaces for participation and the forms of democratic exercise, the daily experience of the Venezuelan citizens interviewed in the study reflected a duality about the actors of democracy and the inclusion or marginalization of spaces of

² Here we distinguish social polarisation from political polarisation that refers to forces that revolve around two poles defined in ideological terms in party systems, which become visible in electoral junctures and public affairs' debates (Sartori, 1985). Social polarisation, while it entails processes of group categorisation and polarisation, in the context of social conflict, extends to social coexistence spaces, such as families, schools, churches, communities, which take on the same attitudes of exclusion, rigidity and confrontation present in the political struggle.

³ The turning point of the consensus that supported these representations is registered in the so called "Caracazo" of February 27th, 1989, when violent public demonstrations took place, mainly in the city of Caracas, in response to the application of "neoliberal recipes".

expression. Thus two identity referents emerged: *Us: people, the people* and *Them: the rulers and their corrupt and inefficient allies*.

This fundamental distinction between us and them, proposed by Summer in 1906, which defines membership or non membership to certain groups, emerges again, taking on other meanings in the *controversial representations* present in the current context of social conflict and polarisation in Venezuela. The obtained data reflect the antagonistic nature of the representations of two politically confronted groups, *chavistas* (pro-government) and *antichavistas* (opposition), as well as a third group, called *Ni-Ni* (neither with the government nor with the opposition). This last group was first reported in 2005 (Interenlaces polls) and represented 51% of the population, compared to 37% chavistas and 11% antichavistas. Other surveys (Datanalisis, March 2012) say that this group, representing between 45% and 55% of the population, rejects the misunderstanding of its position by the two polarised groups who build a typology that places them on a continuum of relative and circumstantial proximity or distance from the two poles of confrontation.

The dichotomous organisation and structuring of social reality put into play by these representations is evident in processes of “anchoring and objectification” that give it a functional value and serve as collective reading and action guidelines. Table 1 shows the social anchoring of the representations, while Table 2 shows instances of objectification, through the terms used to describe the out-group.

Table 1: Forms of social anchoring of representations

	<i>“Chavistas”</i>	<i>“Anti-chavistas”</i>
Political System	Revolution	Democracy
Economic Model	Socialism - communism	Capitalism
Social classes	Poor class	High and middle classes
Social subjects	The people	Civil society
Citizenship	Revolutionary	Democratic

Table 2: Instances of objectification of representations

Terms used by “antichavista” groups to describe “chavista” groups (*)	Terms used by “chavista” groups to describe “antichavista” groups (*)	Terms used by “chavistas and antichavistas” to describe “Ni –Ni” groups (*)
Hordes	Rotten party leaders	Apolitical
Tierruos (Destitute)	Bourgeois scum	Abstentionists
Lumpen	Squalid	Accommodative
Mobs	Countryless	Uninterested
Rabble	So estupid	Irresponsible
Cha-donkeys	Enemies of the people	Incapable
Fascists	Fascists	Useless
Hellish Circles	Talibans	Indifferent
Devil	Opusgay	Jerks
Communist morons	Yankee-lovers	Stupid

(*) These expressions have been used throughout the conflict, especially at times of increase in polarization.

In the cognitive, attitudinal, figurative and relational elements present in the representations of *chavistas* and *antichavistas*, common elements that accentuate intergroup differentiation and discrimination can be seen, in terms of:

Identity: in-group and out-group defined by adhesion or opposition to the leader Hugo Chavez.

Perception: use of stereotypes to qualify the out-group.

Affect: heightened emotionality and intra and out-group intolerance.

Inter-group interaction:

- Inter-group antagonism base on the friend-foe polarity.
- Overvaluation of the in-group as electoral majority and underestimation of the out-group as a minority.
- Control of in-group dissidence.
- Absence of shared meanings.
- Lack of spaces for dialogue and debate.

- Climate of suspicion and mistrust.
- Direct or symbolic inter-group violence in the media and in real or virtual public spaces.

In the representations of the groups, a lexical and thematic evocation emerges that refers to ideological positions that are typical of each group, for example, capitalism, socialism. However, both groups are made up of parties, militants and supporters that belong to an ideological spectrum ranging from the extreme right to the extreme left. This complexity is revealed both in the diversity of ways the ideologies are appropriated, as in the relationships that the subjects have with the groups they belong to, relationships that do not always correspond to ideological adherence or to social class, as the representations are structured and organised around following or opposing President Hugo Chavez⁴, and are located in different socioeconomic sectors⁵.

THE ENEMY OTHER

These complex dynamics of denial of the Other, expressed in the results obtained in the Venezuelan political context, have been reported worldwide in other conflict and war contexts (Martin-Baro, 1983, Bar-Tal, 1990). An idealised perception of one's own group: *us*, stands out in contrast with a demonised one of the opposite group: *them*, perceived as an enemy.

The dualistic structuring of the representational field in terms of us-them, is stated in terms of the symbolic and utilitarian value that this affiliation represents for each group, situated in dynamics that offer social recognition, electoral representativeness or political and economic power at an individual or group level.

However, recognising these “utilitarian mechanisms of adhesion” (Rey, 1989), present in a context of institutional delegitimation and the deterioration of the sociopolitical system in

⁴ The processes of identification and emotional involvement present in the cult of the charismatic and messianic leader, which were strongly expressed in the funeral of President Hugo Chavez, are not discussed in this article. This “father cult” according to Moscovici (1988b, 480), represents a link in the transformation of a political doctrine into a conception of the world, with the strength of a belief.

⁵ Although, on one hand, the representations of the groups correspond to the *leader-people* identity fusion, that exists between the people majorities and Chavez (Silva, 1999) and the identification of the upper and middle sectors with the *civil society* category that guided the practices of social actors in national and transnational contexts in the last decades (Matos, 2000), the election results show the presence of poor and middleclass sectors in both groups.

Venezuela, does not exclude the *ideological texture* of the social agents (Ibañez, 1989). This ‘texture’ can open up interesting analysis perspectives by including the sector called *Ni-Ni*, as well as the *Chavista* and *Antichavista* groups. This sector can play a decisive role, not only as witnesses facing party activists and adherents of each group, but from its allocation to a specific status. These subjects, who are not submitted to the influence of a party organisation, nor to institutional pressures, games and alliances (political, economic, media), provide analysis perspectives both of the plural, conflictive and dynamic nature of ideological adhesions, and to the psychosocial mechanisms that induce antagonistic representations at certain historical, socio-cultural and political junctures.

These representations, marked by emotional dichotomisation, while calling forth adhesion, trust and identification with their own group, simultaneously incite contempt, distrust and hate for the opposite group, considered an enemy (Lozada, 2007). This polarised, affective and irrational thinking, present in mass phenomena (Rouquette, 1994), lets us evaluate the impact of polarisation processes on social thinking, and problematise the psychosocial mechanisms that, in terms of social identity, are brought into play in the *us-them* representation.

Representative activity lets us classify people and objects, compare them, explain behaviours, and objectify them as part of our social environment. However, Doise (1985) and Jodelet (1991) point out that this categorisation process can also produce distortions that justify, legitimise or rationalise some social realities according to the interests and norms established by individuals or groups that are located in certain social or institutional positions or relationships. As Zavalloni (1990, 423) points out, the emotional and evaluative meaning that results from belonging to certain groups and the “natural” in-group favouritism, are not enough to explain the “hatred” and “dehumanisation” that places the in-group’s superiority above the out-group’s inferiority.

As seen in the results obtained in our study and as reported by Bar-Tal (1990), in processes of *delegitimation* the categorisation of the out-group puts it at the negative extremes, on the limits of acceptable norms and values, or in categories that deny the humanity of these groups, generating feelings of fear and contempt in the adversaries and the rest of the population. To explain the tendency to consider the political opponent as an *enemy* (Smith, 1969) using class or race stereotypes that devalue or deny their human condition, requires placing the categorization processes described by Tajfel (1986) in a socio-historical

context, and recognizing the cultural dimension of social thought pointed out by Moscovici in discussing the use of the notion of stereotype from its reduction to “a kind of irrational background of the species”. (1993b:84) states that in representations that are widely shared by the people that compose them, it is easy “to delimit the area of categories defined by rules as something culturally visible; that is, the categories that focus the group’s attention, representing ‘others’, ‘you’ in relation to ‘us’”. But, the author asks himself what happens when other categories of people are placed in the culturally “invisible” area of the representation?:

“These categories are not seen as “others” or “you” relative to “us”, but rather as “them”. And the entire political effort consists of deleting their “self”, with the sole purpose of hiding their link to humanity. However, to maintain a connection with these social groups, it is necessary to animalise or objectify them.” (Moscovici, 1993b:84).

In Latin America this *limited reflexivity*, applied by most cultures to a small number of social groups (Moscovici, 1993b, 86)⁶, dates back to the conquest and evangelisation period, and has been reinforced by the continent’s political and economic elites, that reproduce this pattern of exclusion and inequity. The imaginaries of the *Other* constitute a double movement that differentiates and devalues. “The coloniser, the evangeliser, and later, the politician or planner adopt the rite as a means of “comprehension-cooptation” of the Other” (Calderon, Hopenhayn and Ottone, 1996, p. 66).

These imaginaries of the Other reveal the questioning of identity of a mestizo population⁷ and the search for inclusion of large sectors of the population that have been economically, socially, culturally and politically underprivileged for decades. In addition to this exclusion, that has been a source of conflict and divisions at various historical moments⁸,

⁶ However, this limitation is not uniform. Friar Bartolome de las Casas, on the subject of Indians’ souls in the sixteenth century “denounces this reflexivity defect, and calls for the need to understand that, while the Europeans have a representation of the Indians, the Indians also have one of the Europeans” (Moscovici, 1993b, 85-86).

⁷ According to Este (1994) three great waves in Venezuelan history resulted in the dispersion and disintegration of its communities and affected the formation of social identity: the Spanish conquest, the war of independence and the industrial-oil emergence.

⁸ Quintero (2000) reports four historical moments of social fragmentation: 1830, year of the establishment of the Republic, 1864, when the Federation was sanctioned, 1899, the beginning of centralization and 1945, the establishment of the party system.

there are new forms of exclusion of different social sectors in the current sociopolitical context. The severe social polarisation, where each sector struggles to defend and maintain its position, accounts for the collapse of the *hegemonic representations* (Moscovici, 1988a) of democracy in Venezuela, based on the imaginaries of justice, equality and equity, and the utopia of welfare, development and modernity, an established world of social meanings (Castoriadis, 1975). The fracture of the social fabric that accompanied the modernisation process, the breakdown of the democratic political model, the vicissitudes of recent political history, question the communicational, conversational and dialogic nature of representations of democracy in the country, and highlight the need to analyse the impact of polarisation processes and breakdown of consensus in societies fractured by conflict.

Galam and Moscovici (1995) highlight the conforming, interaction and participation processes that determine consensus in collective formations characterised by the exchange between equal and autonomous individuals, in participation processes that lead to *real* polarisation. Making consensus more extreme, in the sense of the deepening of differences at the intra-group level, strengthens group identity and commitment. As shown in the results, the co-presence of ideological and socioeconomic positions within each group, rather than weaken, strengthens intergroup differentiation, especially in electoral junctures, when the struggle between majorities and minorities intensifies. The ideological heterogeneity of each sector, rather than being an obstacle to minority cohesion, reinforces extremisms or radicalisation of positions (Orfali, 1989) and favors polarisation, causing tension and different expressions of violence that hinder the search for peaceful and democratic solutions to conflicts.

The *polarization of consensus* (Galam and Moscovici, 1995) implied in the debate and argumentations between opposing views, inherited from the Habermasian proposal of an autonomous and coercion-free public sphere, meets its limits in societies undermined by social inequity and the crisis of democratic representativeness, whose end of consensus and of the *illusion of harmony* (Naim and Piñango, 1984) are a crucial symptom of the state of society.

DISCUSSION: REPRESENTATIONS AND SOCIAL IMAGINARIES IN TIMES OF TRANSITION

To assume, from a psychosocial perspective, the cultural challenge of democracy, which has become a belief system, a symbolic, consensual institution with no viable alternative (Moscovici, 1993a), requires both an understanding of the structural causes of its crises and transitions, and the analysis of a certain number of historical, cultural, economic and political facts involved in the re-construction of its imaginaries and representations.

The conflictive Venezuelan empirical field appears as a privileged terrain to re-question the consensual nature of democracy and the role played by the symbolic and subjective dimension that is involved in the construction and transformation of social representations in contexts of acute socioeconomic and political exclusion. The deterioration of the democratic model for half a century and the emergence of a *popular-democratic* questioning discourse, in a scenario of profound dislocation and fragmentation of the political imaginary in a society marked by inequity and impunity, led to a progressive fracture in the symbolic practices in Venezuela, generating controversial representations in the *struggle for recognition* of different social sectors (Honneth, 2000). The imaginaries and meanings that sustain these representations in a given discursive-ideological complex function as a horizon of social struggles and confrontations (Laclau, 1987). This horizon, a source of conflict, innovation and change, highlights the potential of minority influence (Moscovici, 1979, Mugny and Perez, 1986), carries new meanings capable of transforming, triggering and enabling new courses of social and political action in emergent social imaginaries.

The imaginary institution of society, a central element of the social subjectivity concept in Castoriadis, allows us to place ourselves in the social-historical field to “question the objects thus far endowed, in terms of a reflexive process” (Castoriadis, 2004, 123) that questions the contemporary world’s fundamental concerns. The emergence of this *reflecting subjectivity*, where the historical dimension occupies a privileged position, gives us the opportunity to ask ourselves: “Does society need to establish an Other to establish itself (to invent him, if necessary)?” (Castoriadis, 2004, 217). In a dynamics of socially constructed polarisation, where the self does not recognise itself in the Other, it is urgent to encourage the psychosocial process of construction of alterity (Arruda, 1998), where images of the Other become social representations (Jodelet, 2007), forms of resistance to the hegemonic models that deny it (Jovchelovitch, 1998).

Democracy needs the recognition and diversity of the Other in the construction of the

common. It is about constructing symbolic and real conditions to re-signify, in Venezuela, democracy as an inclusive project and a shared meaning; forms of influence and mediation that belong to the “between” of social life and enrich the intersubjective communication of social thought. The imaginary of an Other, to be reconstructed by claiming a *relational ontology* that questions the presuppositions that assume *like-oneself* from an atomistic ontology that privileges what is common from given individual or group entities (Colomb, 2011). In order to deepen democratic processes, it is about supporting an imaginary capable of thinking about the possible, thanks to the ability to imagine the unpredictable. This creative ability of the radical imaginary, as a source of creation (Castoriadis, 1975), should lead to the construction of new social imaginaries, inclusive imaginaries, that signify and give meaning to growing demands for participation, for different forms of citizenship, amid the emergence or recognition of new social subjects and a radical imaginary of the Other as an inclusive imaginary that exerts a consensual function that acts as a mechanism to prevent further confrontation or fractures of the social fabric, already affected by conflict that encourages the appearance of new forms of participation and new social subjects. The celebration and deepening of democracy implies celebrating the Otherness that acknowledges diversity, as the Other’s need to be dignified, to perceive boundaries and possibilities in the daily construction of coexistence.

Finally, social transits in periods of change and innovation require time to understand in societies marked by polarisation and violence, the historical challenge of politics understood as everyday experience within a diverse political community reflected in the rising of different voices that express solidarity and respect toward the Other as well as time to recreate and re-signify the imaginary *us* in a collective subject, with the sense and direction of a common future.

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