

The Uses of Conspiracy Theories for the Construction of a Political Religion in Venezuela

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Abstract—This article analyses conspiracy theories as part of the wider discourses of missionary politics. It presents a case study of Venezuela and describes how its leaders use conspiracy theories as political tools. Through quotes taken from Venezuelan president Chavez's public speeches and other sources, and through a short analysis of the ideological basis of his discourses, it shows how conspiracy theories are constructed and how they affect the local political praxis. The article also describes how conspiracy theories have been consistently used as an important part of the construction of a political religion for the New Man of the Bolivarian Revolution. It concludes that the use of conspiracy theories by political leaders produces a sense of loss of political agency.

Keywords—Conspiracy Theories, Venezuela, Institutions, Agency, Revolutions, Political Religion, New Man.

I. INTRODUCTION. LITERATURE AND DEFINITIONS OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

SEVERAL students have pointed out that conspiracy explanations of social reality have increased in popularity in recent years [1]. The bestseller status of literary fictions and films that deal with conspiracies are presented as confirmations of this fact. The Internet is often mentioned as a new and especially adequate vehicle for the transmission of these theories.

Much of the early sociological literature on the subject, such as, for example Georg Simmel, dealt not with conspiracy theories, but with conspiracies themselves [2]. The emphasis was in the sociological analysis of the secretive aspects and internal functioning of conspiracy cabals and secret groups. Later literature has acknowledged that there is little point in denying the fact that people conspire, that is, they participate in political actions in which they "breathe the same air" of a plot. In certain sense, as most authors reviewed in the following paragraphs admit, conspiracies are part of social life: they are everywhere.

Furthermore, in everyday life, every time we meet with a person because we want to reach a certain goal, and we think that the other person can either share that goal or help us achieve it, but we exclude a third person from our meeting because we consider this third person could jeopardize the plan,

we are conspiring. Everyday experiences are full of such events, and they do not necessarily entail negative connotations. The consequences of a conspiracy can be positive (arguably, all conspirators are convinced of the positive consequences of their actions); we can conspire to surprise a friend with a party, for purposes of beneficence and charity, or to advance a political position we consider correct.

We can also conspire to commit an unlawful act, and much legislation contemplates provisions against conspiracies to commit crimes. Serious crimes are usually described as acts of mental weakness, as the products of elaborate plots, or both. Much of the police story literary genre relies on the latter type of description; There is a crime, usually in a set location, and there is a detective who follows the signs left by the perpetrator, in the forms of clues, that lead him to unravel the plot and thus to the criminal. The criminal is a conspirator, although in many cases he may act alone and not conspire with anyone. Both cases, the relatively benign party organizers of the previous paragraph in one extreme, and the criminal on the other, represent micro and common forms of conspiracy: a limited plot for a limited end. Once the end is achieved, the conspiracy stops, although in the case of the criminal a further, greater plot may develop in order to cover up his crime.

However, social life may present us with far greater instances of conspiracies: Vast and powerful groups that try to impose their objectives through obscure and hidden mechanisms. They are portrayed in popular imagination and in literary fiction as meeting in shadowy places, away from the public light and, through procedures that are fundamentally undemocratic and secret, deciding upon the destiny of other people. Sometimes they represent unimportant and irrelevant groups that can only reach their objectives through an infinite chain of plots over plots. But more often they are groups with almost super natural powers over infinite human and material resources.

We are thus faced with the assumption that conspiracies are ever-present in social life, but that there are many levels of conspiracies that follow a continuum, from limited and relatively innocuous plots, to world domination conspiracies. In this article, the term "conspiracy theories" will be used to define knowledge constructions that tend to the latter end of the continuum. We may have conspiracy theories about certain dealings that may go on inside our academic departments or we may think that the Jews are plotting to dominate the world. Both forms of conspiracy theories have ideological and

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political consequences, but here the interest will be with the political use of the second type of these theories.

Karl Popper. *Conspiracy Theories and Social Sciences*

The most often cited analysis of this second, grand type, of conspiracy theories is Karl Popper's. His main argument will be briefly recounted here. In *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Popper describes

a theory which is widely held but which assumes what I consider the very opposite of the true aim of the social science; I call it the 'conspiracy theory of society'. It is the view that an explanation of a social phenomenon consists in the discovery of the men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon (sometimes it is a hidden interest which has first to be revealed), and who have planned and conspired to bring it about. [3]

For Popper, conspiracy theories are simply wrong interpretations of reality, often used in social sciences they are, however, contrary to scientific aims. Conspiracy theories are derivations of Historicism, putting causes of social phenomena beyond the human realm, and are the consequences of a secularization of the religious belief that gods play with social life. The result is people who are not the agents of their own history, but only the pawns, either of other people, or of abstract groups or structures.

Since this will is article on conspiracy theories used as political tools, we must mention the concern in later literature over the issue of using conspiracy theory, in Popper's sense, as a label that dangerously turns itself into a conspiracy to silence critical assessments of society. There seems to be a common notion in the literature that even as "overarching conspiracy theories are wrong [this] does not mean they are not on to something" [4], and that by using the term conspiracy theory as disqualifying argument we may be actually playing into the hands of "manufactures of consent" that preclude certain forms of criticism. Thus Mark Fenster argues for example, in the introduction to his book, that "[in] political discussions with friends and opponents, one can hurl no greater insult than to describe another's position as the product of a 'conspiracy theory.'" [4].

Here it is important to note that, in fact, many critiques of society, from the left and the right, rely heavily on the notion that hidden groups or abstract structures, beyond the actor's control, are behind most social issues. The purpose of these types of critiques is to "reveal" hidden truths through the study of discourse as expressions of meaning hidden between lines, and/or the institutional analysis of how structures of decision-making are penetrated by more or less hidden interest groups. These critiques can be academically sophisticated and, furthermore, they may be right in many of their assertions, or not, but the fact that they search for abstract explanations of social reality does not turn them into conspiracy theories in themselves, although they may be used, in politically simplified versions, as the basis for conspiracy theories.

An infinite spiral of mutual accusations of conspiracy theorizing is often presented, in the literature on the subject, as a result of certain political uses of conspiracy theories. Pigden

for example, has presented this problem as an inappropriate use of Occam's razor: for Pigden the simplest explanation is not always the best, as he implies is argued by Popper, particularly when we deal with social phenomena [5]. The common political use of conspiracy theory these authors are arguing against is typically seen when a political actor dismisses as a conspiracy theory, for example, the accusations of acting according to vested interests. The political actor may appeal to a simpler explanation of the facts versus a convoluted and complex conspiracy theory explanation of the same facts. This is quite different from the political actor claiming a conspiracy behind the accusations, and therefore appealing to a "more complicated" explanation of the facts. In both cases there is a notion of "degrees of complexity" of knowledge constructions as reflections of a "simple" or "complex" social phenomenon. These notions of complexity are the results of conceptions of how institutions work, especially with respect to the decision-making processes and the internal functioning of these institutions.

A close reading of Popper reveals that he understood conspiracy theories not as knowledge constructions that reflect notions of a complex social reality, but in fact that he argued that they reflect a simplistic conception of institutional functioning. Conspiracy theories are knowledge constructions that claim a simple cause and effect social reality guided by a complex plot, which is something very different from claiming that social reality is complex. Conspiracy theories pretend to reveal a simple reality made complex by conspirators, they long for an utopian political world in which nothing will be concealed; the perfect open political system in which everything is transparent, a world of perfect sincerity and perfect correspondence between good motives and their always positive consequences. In their most extreme cases, conspiracy theories long for an a-political utopia because political responsibility and sincerity is, for them, and oxymoron.

Furthermore, Popper clearly argued, as I mentioned above does most of the later literature, that he was not negating the existence of conspiracies in society. He did argue, however, that conspiracies very rarely achieve their stated ends. But, some critics could rightly retort that some conspiracies do achieve their ends, and the discussion could be collapsed into comparing successful and unsuccessful conspiracies, and consequently conspiracy theories that turn out to be true and those that do not, which was not Popper's intention. The important point is to stress that social action has unintended consequences and that conspiracy theorists have a hard time dealing with the notion of unintended consequences of actions.

In short, according to Popper, for the conspiracy theorist, if a consequence can be traced through a plot, to motives of the actors, then there is no room for the unexpected. Conversely, social reality becomes a mere symptom of an intentional plot that needs to be read. This simple explanation may work well for small limited conspiracies, but Popper would argue that it does not constitute a viable way for explaining broader social phenomena. In this line, Dieter Groh, for example, has argued that conspiracy theorists underestimate "the complexity and

dynamics of historical processes” and points that they “ascribe in a linear manner the results of actions to certain intentions.” [6]

The conspiracy theorist can describe the discovery of this code as a moment of illumination. It allows him to follow back the sequence of events, from the everyday facts that would otherwise remain random and unexplained, to the motives of the conspirator. As in classical police fiction, once the motives for the crime have been revealed, the crime is half solved. He, who had motives to commit a murder, is the murderer. It is only left for the detective to reconstruct the logical sequence of events that lead from the crime to the criminal. Explanations based on this type of logic do not pose a complex social and political reality; on the contrary they greatly simplify reality as the product of mono-causal linear intentionally driven events.

Therefore, given the complexity of social reality and the unintended consequences of social action, it was not Popper’s intention, and certainly is not the intention in this article, to counter conspiracy theories of how society works with a “theory of the innocence” of political actors. Again, it is important to state that a study of conspiracy theories should not hold that society is devoid of actors with diverse and often conflicting interest that act in order to advance those interests: There are governments that are more powerful than other governments, there are even companies and corporations that are more powerful than some governments. Are we to doubt that they meet in secret, and sometimes decide upon issues that affect others? There are historical examples of complex conspiracies that have been relatively successful, at least for a time. Who knows how many others were and are successful and have not been uncovered? But even if conspiracies exist and they are part of social life, there is still a difference between a conspiracy theory approach and a scientific approach to political reality.

The social scientist, according to Popper, holds that society, and therefore political action, is the outcome of a complex and multivariate web of relations and not the sole outcome of a purposeful mono-causal chain of events. Especially when dealing with political action the social scientist knows of unexpected consequences of such actions and is willing to include such consequences in his explanations. Therefore the social scientist accepts the existence of conspiracies as part of the actor’s political actions, but deals with conspiracies as only one of many variables determining the outcomes of that action. Furthermore, social scientists present, (or at least attempt to present) their theories as fallible, that is, their theories can be subject to replication and therefore proven wrong by other scientists, and the fact that they may be wrong is not taken as further proof of a totalistic attempt to hide the truth by the conspirators. Granted that this is only a very optimistic assessment of social sciences in general and of political sciences in particular, but at least it is something possibly most social scientists would recognize as their methodological utopian goal.

On the contrary, conspiracy theorists believe that every single event in social life can be explained as the product of an

obscure political machination by certain groups of actors. They do not deny the complexity of social life, but for them, that complexity is possible only inside the linear conspiracy plot that can, in effect, become extraordinarily complicated. As Umberto Eco has stated, conspiracy theorists fall victims of their own over-interpretative plots and create self-sustainable complexities that lead to new interpretation in an infinite irresolvable chain [7]. This “complexity” is what makes for the thriller character of most conspiracy fiction. But, as in fiction, this complexity is rather illusory and becomes a very simple sequence of interconnected events once the conspiracy code has been unveiled. The construction of this sequence, as an important part of a revolutionary ideology, that we would like to explore in the following sections in the context of a concrete case study.

II. THE POLITICAL USE OF CONSPIRACY THEORY

The types of discourses analyzed here are conspiracy theories and will be categorized as part of a wider official rhetoric on social change. This wider rhetoric has been characterized by José Pedro Zúquete as part of a “missionary” political style. Following Weber, and more recent literature on populism, Zúquete has argued that “[missionary] politics is a characteristic form of political religion that has at its center a charismatic leader who leads a chosen people gathered into a moral community struggling against all-powerful and conspiratorial enemies, and engaged in a mission towards redemption and salvation.” [8] Following Zúquete’s suggestion that a closer scrutiny should be paid to this religious aspect of the discourse of political actors, this article is concerned with the specific aspect of the discursive construction of this moral community “struggling against all-powerful and conspiratorial enemies”. Furthermore, it deals with some of the political and institutional consequences of this discursive construction. The case study I present here is based on the process of political transformation that is being currently undertaken in Venezuela by president Hugo Chávez and the followers of his “Bolivarian Revolution”. The purpose here will be to use this case an example of a particular aspect of “missionary” politics.

To oversimplify a complex and often contradictory discourse, the government of president Chávez has promised to redistribute the income from Venezuela’s oil wealth among the poor, and consequently end the poverty and inequality that has plagued Venezuelan history, and for which he blames capitalism in general. According to the current governmental discourse, the previous governments of what it calls the 4th Republic¹ (as opposed to the new revolutionary 5th Republic, led by Chávez), were controlled by corrupt cabals who responded to transnational, neo liberal and imperialist interests. They stole the oil revenues from the people and ran the national oil industry as their private enterprise, condemning the majority

¹ Popularly in Venezuela the term IVth Republic has come to refer, although not necessarily limited historically and depending on the historical numerology used, to the governments of the bi-party system that followed the fall of the dictatorship in 1958 and ended with the approval on the new Constitution in 1999.

of Venezuelans to the current poverty levels. The people, according to this official discourse, have awakened to this truth and have elected a revolutionary government that will redistribute these resources fairly among all. According to president Chávez, Venezuela was controlled, up to his coming to power, by foreign interests, often with the complacency and active collaboration of local elites who operated the political system through a complex and corrupt system of conciliation of interests that emerged with the "Pacto de Punto Fijo"². The challenge is now to reclaim these resources through a radical revolutionary transformation of society and all its institutions.

The alternative model proposed by the revolutionary government basically implies the central planning of the economy through the re-nationalization of companies that were privatized by precedent administrations, the redistribution of oil revenues through social and economic programs called *Misiones* ("Missions", in the religious chiliastic language favored by president Chávez), and the cooperative take-over of the productive apparatus under the principle of "endogenous development".

Specifically, the Venezuelan government has presented its *Misiones* as an alternative to the formal institutionalized public welfare system without, first, attempting a reform of that system. Instead of reforming the health care system, for example, which is bureaucratically huge and inefficient, and according to the government controlled by neo liberal interest groups, the government has created an alternative "revolutionary" parallel system that it can closely control economically and ideologically and that bypasses the hurdles of bureaucratic and institutional controls. This can be understood as a way of avoiding confrontation with interest groups entrenched in the old institutions but, as has also been noticed by critics, can also become an uncontrolled source of waste of resources and corruption. The practice of "paralleling" is something the government does not only with public institutions, but also with every institution, public or private, it cannot directly control.

In the following paragraphs it will be shown how the problem of guiding Venezuela, from the corrupt control of the conspirators, to the utopia of "21st-century socialism" is, according to president Chávez, a profound institutional and moral one that can only be achieved by strengthening the revolutionary powers to intervene in all institutions of society. Critics point out, however, that the revolutionary control of all government institutions has left those institutions without checks and balances. All branches of government, from the judiciary and the electoral committee to the "Fiscalía", the "Contraloría" and the "Defensoría del Pueblo" (ombudsman) are now "Revolutionary" institutions. This means their members are, and can only be, "supporters of the process". It is evident that, even if they are morally proven people, their capacity to deal with corruption is severely limited. But,

according to the official discourse, the emergence of a revolutionary "new man", cleansed of the individualism of the corrupting neo liberal thinking, will make the bourgeois system of independent checks and balances unnecessary or, if anything, an obstacle to be overcome for the development of the revolutionary process with the necessary speed and strength. This conception of checks and balances as a bourgeois limitation to real revolutionary democracy is just one aspect of a "different" conception of democracy that President Chávez presents as "Participatory and Protagonic". As the President has declared referring to himself in the third person, "There is no dictator here, but a democrat that can't stand bourgeois democracy." [9] The idea behind this alternative conception of democracy is that the traditional liberal division of powers is an unnecessary bourgeois constraint to the revolutionary will of the leader, who in turn is but the embodied expression of the will of the people. This is also an argument used by the revolutionary government for justifying the centralization of all powers in the hands of the leader.

In this article it is argued that there is an increasingly strong conspiracy theory forms of discourse in the context of a the rhetoric of "missionary" politics, linked to the increasing personality cult surrounding president Chávez and the consequent process of concentration of all powers in his hands. Regarding this growing personality cult, pictures of the president are now everywhere, in public offices, on the streets, on t-shirts, watches, etc. But it is not only a matter of image. Chávez has counted for a long time on the unconditional devotion of many of his supporters. This devotion is reinforced by a conspiracy theory that shields the leader from any possible criticisms of his politics and from the postponement of the utopia he promises, and has profound consequences for the way Venezuelans practice politics in general. Through quotes taken from Chávez's public speeches and other sources, and through a short analysis of the ideological basis of these discourses, it will be shown here how conspiracy theories are constructed and how they affect the local political praxis.

III. THE CIA AND LATIN AMERICA

As the Venezuelan intellectual Carlos Rangel commented in the 1970s, since the Post War II era, everything that goes wrong in Latin America seems to be the work of the CIA [10]. If all the accusations were true, being on the pay roll of the CIA or other foreign interests, is what roughly half of the Latin Americans do to earn their living, thus denying the other half of the region their fair chance out of poverty and their right to explore other paths to development different from liberal capitalist democracy. According to Carlos Rangel almost every one in Latin America, left and right, has been accused at least once of being an agent of the CIA; from Gabriel García Marquez (for abandoning the Colombian Communist Party in favor of a more moderate version of Marxism) to university students protesting for better education conditions (In the Mexico of the 60s, for example). Even in the cases where there seems to be incontrovertible evidence of CIA's deep involvement in the region's affairs (as most notably in the cases of the coups

² The "Pacto de Punto Fijo" is the informal power sharing agreement between the main political parties after the fall of the last Venezuelan dictatorship in 1958

against president Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala in 1948, and the coup against president Salvador Allende of Chile in 1973), this involvement is sometimes taken to mean total control by the CIA of events as master minds of plots that includes, but only as pawns, local elites and operatives, as if the local history of those two countries counted for nothing in the development of the events, and they could only be explained by an external conspiracy. Rangel saw this as the most recent expression of an old European Rousseauian myth, later recycled and assumed by Latin Americans: the myth of the “good savage”. Living in pristine balance with nature and in pre-modern socialism with his neighbors, the “good savage” becomes corrupted by foreign intervention. In its recent rendition, the good savage has become the “good revolutionary” who strives to construct utopia in the continent, but is hampered by the powerful hand of the empire and its local operatives. Every time, so the version goes, Latin America has been close to reaching its promised land; it has been halted by a conspiracy of local elites in the hands of American imperialism.

The CIA, needless to say, really exists, and is a powerful and often intrusive, institution in many parts of the world, as the recent “secret rendition” case in Europe has amply reminded us. But Carlos Rangel saw something more serious than the simple assumption that the United States super power could use agents to enforce what it considers its interests, and the ethical dilemma posed by a democracy that is often willing to break international laws when dealing with others. He was concerned for what he saw as the use of this incontrovertible fact (the involvement of the United States in local issues), by certain political leaders in Latin America for local political purposes. He pointed out that in the 1970s, Latin American governments were using the CIA as a justification for political and economic blunders for which sometimes only internal incompetence and corruption were to blame. Worse, many governments, left and right, were finding supposed CIA agents among opposition groups, thus automatically disqualifying them as “loyal” political contenders, and turning them into traitors and enemies of the nation. Now, more than thirty years after Carlos Rangel published his polemical and influential book, Latin American political leaders seem to have discovered that the CIA had much more power than previously thought, as it is now behind a whole family of conspirators that include such general phenomena and discourses as neo-liberalisms, globalization, colonialism, and dependency. These are real phenomena, they exist and have important positive or tragic consequences for real people, especially but not exclusively, in the Third World, but the important thing here is how they are linked rhetorically to a wider conspiracy phenomenon as part of the construction of a political religion. Following is a description of how this has been done in the Venezuelan case.

IV. THE LEADER UNDER CONSTANT THREAT

Perhaps the conspiracy theory most prominent in the official discourse in Venezuela is that of the constant assassination attempts against president Chávez. To follow this specific line, among many others of conspiracy theorizing in the

governmental discourse, is particularly important because Chávez has closely identified his persona with the political process he leads. He has repeatedly expressed the fear that, without him, the path to the utopia of the “21st-century socialism” will be irredeemably lost for Venezuela. Furthermore, this identification of the leader with the realization of his political project is an important part of the official discourse on the need to do away with the constitutional limits on reelection for the president. According to Chávez, his assassination would have almost apocalyptic consequences. Also, the plots to kill the president are often presented, in the official discourse, as parts of more extensive plots against Venezuela in the sense that the death of Chávez would be, for example, the first step in a planned invasion of the country by foreign forces.

The central piece of the theory discussed here is that Chávez is in danger of becoming a target of assassination, basically by the CIA, but also involving local and regional operatives; such as elements of the oligarchy bought by imperial interests, opposition parties, Colombian Paramilitaries, and the Colombian intelligence services. The following short chronology of denunciations made by the Venezuelan government is intended only as an example of how these types of discourses are constructed and only includes denunciations made during February-August of 2005. It is based on a chronology made by Norma Jiménez Montealegre and published the national Venezuelan daily *El Universal* in January 1, 2006, and on the transcripts of Chavez’s TV program, *Aló Presidente*.³

February 20. President Hugo Chávez announces in his TV show *Aló Presidente* that the president of the United States, George W. Bush, has reactivated old CIA plans to murder heads of State that are uncomfortable to Washington (These old plans are not specified, but in the context of president Chavez’s discourse, they usually refer either to the death of president Salvador Allende or to the assassination attempts against Fidel Castro). Chávez therefore makes president Bush responsible for anything that might happen to him. The announcement is dismissed by the American Department of State spokesperson Richard Boucher as “ridiculous and false”.

February 23. The Minister for Communication and Information, Andrés Izarra, declares that he has reliable information that people, who in the past have been involved in

³ In his weekly *Aló Presidente* television show Chávez presents many of his new programs and projects, publicly gives instructions to his subalterns, sometimes makes important announcements of economic policies, names and demotes public functionaries, takes calls from “random” viewers, invites special guests who he personally interviews, attacks imperialism and neo liberalism, lectures on socialist ethics and the creation of the “new man” of the Revolution. He also sings, usually Venezuelan folkloric music but also occasional *bolero*, *son*, *salsa*, *ranchera*, and protest songs from the *Nueva Trova Cubana* and from the late Venezuelan protest singer Alí Primera. Most important, the show is usually a lengthy presidential lecture on how to counter the conspiracies that threaten the revolutionary project. Verbatim transcriptions of *Aló Presidente* (89 shows from the number 205 of April 4, 2004 to number 299 of February 15, 2008), can be downloaded from the Venezuelan Government web site at <http://www.alopresidente.gob.ve/transcripciones/>

anti-democratic activities in Venezuela, are now also involved in the plot to murder the president. He further says that the evidence of this plot is secret and cannot be revealed, but that this does not mean that the proofs of its existence do not exist, and the government will make them public in the “appropriate time” (who these people were, or details of the plot have never since surfaced or been made public).

February 24. After the president’s denunciation of a new plot to murder him, reporters pressure the official Venezuelan government spokespersons, vice president José Vicente Rangel, to give details and to make public the documents proving the conspiracy that the Communication and Information Minister has said the Government possesses. Rangel answers that to ask for concrete evidence constitutes a “sophism”, as public opinion has only to look for it in the media campaign the United States is waging against Venezuela. He also declares that those looking for evidence should look at the long history of US involvement in Latin America, how they (the CIA) have used local media in the past to prepare the “final action”, for example, and then extrapolate to the current Venezuelan situation. Further proof of the plot now being denounced is considered, therefore, unnecessary.

March 2. The documents on the presidential assassination plot denounced in February are not made public; instead Chávez denounces a “new provocation” by the United States. The arrival of a US aircraft carrier in Curacao is interpreted by the president as an indicator of a wider plot by the US to invade Venezuela. He warns the US not to attempt the planned invasion or else face open war. Chávez insists that this act of aggression is further proof that the US will stop at nothing, even assassination, to remove him from office.

March 5. In a visit to Havana, Cuba, General Raúl Isaías Baduel, Venezuelan commandant of 42-paratrooper brigade of Maracay, assures the public that the US has given up on all other possibilities for the removal of Chávez, which proves that the only possibility left is the assassination of the president and therefore this, in itself, demonstrates that there is a plot under way to such effect.

March 10. American Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice denies the accusations made by Venezuelan officials that the US is preparing a plot to assassinate the Venezuelan President.

April 12. The ambassador of Venezuela in Cuba, Adam Chávez, declares that the US has plans to murder his brother, president Chávez. The proof for this plan are the hegemonic intentions of the US and the fact that they “planned, organized, and supported” the 2002 coup against president Chávez. For Adam Chávez, the fact that the United States government so vehemently denies the existence of the conspiracy shows that it really must be behind the plot.

June 2. President Chávez insists that he has concrete information of a plot to assassinate him. He further warns the local media that by criticizing his Bolivarian Revolution they are, in fact, part of the strategy of this plot.

June 3. Vice president José Vicente Rangel details the denunciation of the plot made by president Chávez. He reveals that the CIA is “moving its threads” and further involves in the plot Cuban exiles living in Miami, Colombian paramilitaries, and Colombian sicarios (hired guns).

June 14. The president announces that the traditional military parade of June 24, commemorating the independence war battle of Carabobo, has been suspended for security reasons: Namely, the discovery of a plot to murder the president during the parade. It is not specified if Chávez is referring to a new plot, or to a part of the previously denounced conspiracy to kill him.

June 16. Vice president José Vicente Rangel insists on the existence of the assassination plot. This time he accuses the opposition (in general) of being part of the conspiracy.

June 20. Minister of Interior and Justice, Jesse Chacon, reveals that he has tapes and films linking Colombian paramilitaries to a plot to murder the president. The films, however, are not shown, as they are part of a state secret investigation (these films have been never since been made public).

June 21. During a visit to Paraguay, Chávez, points to a large conspiracy of enormous proportions, that stretches from Miami to Colombia, to kill him.

July 3. President Chávez denounces the existence of a concrete plan, code name “Balboa”, by the United States to invade Venezuela. He says the plan includes details such as the number of daily bombings, planes and even the type of munitions that would be used during the invasion. The central aspect of the plan is the assassination of the President. The plan is never shown, as it constitutes part of the secret investigation by the Venezuelan government. The United States ambassador in Venezuela, William Brownfield, denies the existence of such plan.

August 22. Televangelist Pat Robertson declares that the United States has the power to “take out” Chávez and should use that power. American State Department spoke person, Sean McCormack, qualifies Robertson’s declaration as inappropriate and says they were made by a private individual, not the US government. Venezuelan officials, however, read Pat Robertson’s declarations as part of a concerted plan by the CIA to murder the president. Concretely, they denounce Robertson’s declaration as a covert CIA order issued to local “sleeping” agents to assassinate president Chávez.

This chronology could go on with almost weekly additions up to the date this article is being written, and the declarations of minor officials and of representatives of the National Assembly have been omitted, as they usually only elaborate on what higher functionaries denounce. If, in fact, there is a CIA plan to murder Chávez, a plan that also involves Miami Cuban exiles, Colombian paramilitaries, Colombian intelligence services, Venezuelan media, and the Venezuelan opposition (in general), this is not discussed in this article. What is important here is how this type of discourse is constructed and used, and what the political consequences of such use are. Certain characteristics of how this construction takes place can be

(accessed April 30, 2008). The English translations are mine. The page numbers given here correspond to the original Spanish language transcriptions.

extracted from the previous example:

1. The first denunciation of a conspiracy is made by the leader, in very general terms, but always claiming to possess concrete documents and details of the specific plot. In this case, the denunciations of the plots are generally made by president Chávez himself in his weekly television show *Aló Presidente*, but also in other public appearances. In fact, a detailed content analysis of the Presidential discourses should show the prevalence of this theme on almost every edition of *Aló Presidente*.

2. Other government officials echo the denunciation of the conspiracy, also claiming to possess concrete evidence of its existence. Thus they make the local media repeat several times the denunciation already made once by the president, as the local media generally reports on declarations of high officials. The saturation of the media with declarations about the plot allows it to acquire the quality of a “news” event.

3. The concrete evidences and documents claimed to be possessed by the authorities are never made public, usually because they constitute secret and crucial elements of pending investigations. Instead of the case based on this evidence being presented to the Courts, fresh denunciations of new plots are made. These denunciations pile up as “evidence”, and officials can then look back at them and use them as mounting proof of concrete new plots. It becomes hard to follow from the chronology when a new plot is being denounced or when we are only in the presence of a variation of a conspiracy denounced before.

4. The public opinion is called by the government to use its “common sense” knowledge in two ways: First, previous, incontrovertible, conspiracies are recalled and claimed as evidence of the current conspiracies. Examples of this use of previous historical cases by government officials, are the CIA involvement in the “suicide” of Chile’s president Salvador Allende, and the assassination attempts by the CIA against Fidel Castro. These are used as “evidence” of the fact that the CIA is out to murder Chávez. Faced with these historical (and often real) examples, asking for further evidence for the case at hand becomes, according to Vice President Rangel, a sophism;

5. Second, “common sense” is invoked by appealing to a general knowledge in the context of which a plot to murder President Chávez is, at least, believable. Thus, if public opinion is convinced that the United States is an imperial power that strives for hegemonic power, and will stop at nothing to achieve this power, then it must accept the fact that the assassination of a President, “uncomfortable” to this hegemonic pretension is, at least, a believable option. “If they did it with Kennedy, why not with Chávez?” Chávez himself declares in the following quote, thus echoing conspiracy theorists suspicions that the CIA was behind the assassinations of Marti Luther King and president John F. Kennedy. In the *Aló Presidente* of October 17, 2004, after explaining that the revolutionary excesses of the Allende government in Chile were due to the fact that the extreme left of the movement was infiltrated by the CIA, he goes on to comment on the possibility of a magnicide in Venezuela and an assassination attempt

against Evo Morales in Bolivia:

This is why we are radicals, but then, these analysts of the US South Command say that we are radical populists, now Chávez is number one, a threat. And then from there, comes the plans for his assassination, because he is a threat: it is worth killing him, because he is a threat, he has to disappear. Then they also include others in that list, I am not going to name anyone, but they include other presidents and other social leaders that could eventually occupy high places in their countries, such as the indigenous leader Evo Morales, well... they also include him in the list, he is also a threat so he is marked, they mark us one by one. Well, let me tell you that we are in fact radicals, and we are with the people, we are real, popular, revolutionary democrats. And this is something that goes well beyond us as individuals, they have never understood this in the North, they have never understood what is going on in Latin America, and those who have, more or less, understood and have come to occupy high places or have been an obstacle in their way, they have eliminated them, like they did with Martin Luther King or even with Kennedy, and despite all that Kennedy managed to do... [11]

6. The enemy is amalgamated into a multifaceted but united conspirator. Sometimes one enemy is mentioned, at other times, a different one. Sometimes they are summarized and hyphenated in the Miamiexiles, CIAagents, localopposition, localmedia, etc. form. There is no difference between, for example, Pat Robertson, The New York Times, The US State Department and the CIA, as they all correspond to the same enemy and are following the same orders from a centralized command. Thus, a declaration by Pat Robertson is taken as a message from the CIA to local opposition groups to carry out an attempt on the life of the Venezuelan president. One would presume the CIA has more efficient channels for carrying out orders for an assassination plot, but the important thing for the construction of this particular conspiracy theory is to establish public links in a plot. Tenuous relations are presented as close hierarchical relations that convey concrete and exact orders from the empire’s head quarters, to local operatives.

7. A strong binary opposition of “us versus them” mentality reinforces the notion of a “moral community” that, as Zúquete has pointed out, is “besieged, threatened and surrounded by conspiratorial forces.” [8]

8. The conspiracies that are being denounced, in this concrete case the plot to kill the president and (almost tangentially) invade the country, are of such extent, but at the same time so precise in their penetration, that they give the impression of a level of institutional control by the conspirators well beyond what could be considered the influence of powerful groups outside and inside the country. Combined with the previous point, this gives an impression of an institutional structure, within the country, which is either totally in the hands of the conspiracy or liberated by the revolution, with no middle

ground and no such thing as “neutral” institutions. The aim of the revolution is to re-gain control of those institutions that before the revolution were, and even during the transformation process are, in the hands of the conspirators, and give them back to the people, so they may serve them in their struggle to reach the utopia.

V. CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND THE REVOLUTION

As Carlos Romero has pointed out in a recent article on the context of Venezuela’s foreign relations, as the internal “oligarch” enemies have lost power, the enemy of the Revolution has been displaced. The Venezuelan oligarchy has become, in the eyes of the government, but the local hand of the international conspiracy, and therefore it is only logical that the revolution should focus more on that greater, more powerful enemy [12]. This displacement of the enemy to a larger form of peril is part of a political discourse construction consistent with the displacement of the utopia to a more distant future that any political revolution entails. As the utopia seems to recede to the future, new and broader conspiracies are discovered and blamed for this delay with the consequent creation of a “besieged fortress” mentality, inside of which every form of dissidence is considered treason.

This is not to deny the existence of foreign interest in Venezuela. There seems to be little doubt, for example, that the US government was involved in the coup attempt of April 2002 (although there was enough internal discontent to fuel the coup), and that the United States government would rather have President Chávez out of power, and has been very public about this. And there can be no doubt that, as the opposition claims, there are many Cuban officials in Venezuela and that Fidel Castro exercises an important (and public) influence on President Chávez. But, again, what is important for the argument made here is not the discussion of whether these conspiracy theories are true or not, but the way they are used as political tools and the institutional consequences of this use. Most serious of these consequences for any democratic system seems to be a loss of political agency. This means that both common people and the political elites lose the sense that politics is something that they are actually doing. For the whole of society politics becomes something that is acted in a remote, out of reach, place.

In our case, if the conspiracy theories of the government and the opposition are combined, Venezuelans are not acting or participating politically, they are but the pawns of bigger transnational interests. In short: a picture emerges of a country half of which is controlled by Washington and half by Havana. Most importantly, president Chávez permanently reinforces this myth in his discourse. For example, during the electoral campaign of December 2006, Chávez refused to debate with the opposition candidate Manuel Rosales, or even acknowledge him by name, on the grounds that he was only an imperialist agent. He repeatedly declared that that electoral battle was not between an incumbent and an opposition candidate with different perspectives on national issues, but between Chávez and Imperialism, Globalization, Neo Liberalism etc,

represented by the United States Government. Thus constructing a political discourse in which the real political struggle was not between two local legitimate, however different, political projects for the country, or between two different candidates, but between two powerful and removed men: Chávez and Bush. What was presented as being at stake was something of universal significance: not simple economic or social ideas for the solution of Venezuela’s problems, but grand ideological projects that happened to be fighting their latest battle in Venezuela. Faced with the choice, Venezuelans are asked to stand by their leader in the face of aggression from the outside, or become part of a conspiracy against him. All internal dissidence is but a local expression of that external aggression. Furthermore, conspiracy theories have sometimes the character of self-fulfilling prophecies. When democratic channels of participation are closed because they may be used by conspirators plotting to overthrow the regime, it is of course very likely that opponents to the system will chose to conspire against it instead of participate in it, thus fulfilling the fears of the conspiracy theorist.

VI. THE TOTAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE POLITICAL MODEL IS NECESSARY TO STOP THE CONSPIRACY

If before the “Bolivarian Revolution” led by Chávez, in the previous “IV Republic”, the conspiracy was in total control, and all institutions were contaminated by its presence, then nothing but a total transformation of those institutions will do. As the president has stated:

The revolutionary project, [is] the integral transformation of Venezuela, and that integral transformation has various battlefronts, various components as you might call them; various elements. The political... the political transformation. Democracy is to be filled with the content of the people, with popular content, that is, we are making democracy real, [we are] transforming the political model. [13]

The old, bourgeois, formal, externally controlled form of democracy will be overcome by a new people’s revolutionary democracy that will break with the conspiratorial control of the past and allow the moral community to finally reach the utopia of “21st-century Socialism”.

However, unlike other twentieth century social utopian experiments, the “Bolivarian Revolution” has come to power in Venezuela not by a violent revolutionary act, but by democratic elections. The revolution has not come to supplant a reactionary dictatorship with a new order, but as an elected government within an established political order. This entails important limitations on the transformation process and on the “revolutionary” character of this process in the traditional sense. However much the government attempts to criminalize the previous governments as part of an international plot to loot Venezuelan natural and human resources, as an elected government, it is still part of, and must acknowledge, the democratic institutional order it has inherited. In other words, as an elected government it is obliged to respond to the institutional constraints of an established democracy. A new proposed democratic model full of “popular content”, which

supposedly overcomes the limitations of bourgeois democracy, still needs to contend with those limitations. Division of powers, independent checks and balances, independent media, etc., all limit the transformative powers of the revolution both in content and in speed. These formal controls of democracy can be denounced as myths or as parts of the conspiracy, but the fact is that until the institutional transformation is complete, those controls exist. A revolution that has come to power, not through a revolutionary struggle from outside the system, but by using the system, cannot deal with those institutional controls summarily, as no doubt the most radical and impatient elements of the revolutionary process would prefer.

Wrestling for control of all institutions against the conspiracy is not an easy task in this context, because they cannot be simply disbanded the day after the revolution has gained power. Institutions have, in a slow transformation process as the one described here, more tools for resistance than in a violent revolutionary context. They can appeal to each other and to international solidarity for defense of the institutional status quo. They, of course, risk becoming targets of the conspiracy theory discourse by doing this. But they may also use the established institutional mechanisms for their defense. These mechanisms can be inefficient and may have fallen already under the control of the revolution, but their use buys time for the institutions and makes the transformation process, from the perspective of the revolutionaries, painfully slow, which in its turn is blamed on the conspiracy that precludes the march forward to the “21st-century Socialism”. As the revolutionary transformation process is limited by legality, the leader is faced with the contradiction of a total revolution that needs to be done under the rule of law. But as this legality retards the arrival of the utopia, the leader appeals to conspiracy theories to justify this time lag and at the same time to break the institutional resistance.

The legal framework that “limits” the transformations can be changed, thus giving the leader more powers (as with the special powers of the “Ley Habilitante”) to “speed up” the revolution.⁴ Also, to circumvent these types of obstacles an attempt is made to parallel the whole institutional structure of society with centrally state controlled new institutions. As the new institutions are being created, and as the “new man” who will run these institutions is being educated, the old institutions are linked to a conspiracy, thus amalgamated with the enemy and placed outside the law, and therefore beyond the protection of the established institutional mechanisms in place. At the same time the legal framework is being changed, so as to render those mechanisms ultimately ineffectual. The revolution weighs and judges this timing process and finally, when all things fall into place (the parallel institution is up and running and the legal framework has been changed) it can act freely and close the old, corrupt and conspiratorial institutions. Concrete examples of this process of paralleling institutions in the

Venezuelan case are the labor unions (with the creation of the pro-government UNETE as parallel to the CTV, linked to the traditional parties), universities (with the creation of a new system of “Universidades Bolivarianas” to parallel the established public university system, which the revolution has failed to penetrate), the health care system (with the implementation of “Misión Barrio Adentro”), among others.

The revolutionary government is far from exact and efficient when it comes to judging the right time for intervention, however, and as the Venezuelan case shows, the old institutions may put up unexpectedly strong resistance. The more they resist, however, the more it becomes clear for the revolutionaries that those institutions are, without a doubt, receiving the support of foreign conspiratorial elements bent on destroying the revolution and precluding society from reaching utopia. A “new man”, immune to the power of conspiracy, is necessary for staffing the new parallel institutional system. But a second problem follows from this institutional paralleling process, one that fortunately can also be blamed on the conspiracy. This problem was called by “Che” Guevara, as quoted by President Chávez, the “Peril of Bureaucratism”. These two aspects will be discussed in the following paragraphs as ideological underpinnings of the struggle against the conspiratorial enemies and will be described in the following paragraphs.

VII. THE LEADER IS ALONE AGAINST THE CONSPIRACY. THE “NEW MAN” DELAYED

Central in the official discourse, and as a solution to the problem of Bureaucratism is, according to President Chávez, the Guevara inspired version of the “new man,”⁵ an embodiment of the new values of socialism.

For Guevara [14], the new man of Socialism was to emerge as a result of the end of alienated labor. In the new socialist society that was being constructed in Cuba since 1959, men would have a new relation to labor that would liberate their

⁵ The “new man” is a very extended notion in most Nineteen and Twentieth century’s attempts to construct social utopias. So much that it is difficult to establish complete intellectual lineage of a remotely millenarist inspired idea that in modern times runs through intellectuals and activists such as Nietzsche, Marx, Mussolini, Fanon, Ché, and Chávez, to name just a few. Perhaps, for the Twentieth century case, it is best to categorize the new man in two ideal typical forms: the fascist new man and the socialist new man. Although both share many characteristics, as both point to a future, anthropologically improved version of mankind. In the fascist version, as for example in Mussolini’s conception, the leader is the prime example of the new man; he is in fact the only embodiment of the new man in a society that is in the process of being transformed into the fascist utopia. As a leader guided by an ethics of convictions he is not bound to the moral restraints of bourgeois order. He is beyond that order because he transcends it, as he is already the representative of the utopia in this world. The new man of the fascist order will also be free of the capitalist, individualist, competitive, corrupting, etc., values of the bourgeois world order, and he will be one with the leader. The improvement of man in order to achieve the new version was not only educational and ideological but also, as in the case of National Socialism, based on eugenics ideas of a racist conception of the world. This conception of the new man has many ideal typical points of convergence with the socialist version, and also several differences. The conception of the new man that has influenced the Venezuelan process is, of course, the socialist version and, in particular, the endlessly quoted by President Chávez, Guevara’s version, which will be sketched in the following paragraphs.

⁴ A further and more serious obstacle to this project has been the rejection by voters in the referendum of December 2007 of the presidential proposal to institutionalize the “21st-century Socialism”.

creative potentials, mainly through what Guevara called “voluntary work”, which had an “indirect” educational power on the masses. Old values such as individualism and competition were to be supplanted by a close dialectical unity between the individual, the masses, and their leaders (the vanguard of the party). The new man, however, took time to develop in the socialist society, meanwhile it could be prefigured in the educational experience of guerrilla combat and the formative effect it had on those who had taken part in the revolutionary struggle. The revolutionary new man, Guevara often repeated, is plethoric of love for humanity. A love that sometimes makes him seem cruel when judged by limited bourgeois values (as when he is forced to send traitors to face shooting squads), but that constitutes the central characteristic of the new man, and that will eventually justify him in history. The new man could especially be exemplified, according to Guevara, in the figure of Fidel Castro as maximum leader of the revolution, a point of contact with the leader as example of the new man of fascism. After his death in Bolivia, Guevara himself was progressively canonized as the martyred example of the new man: the romantic fighter guided by an incorruptible ethic of convictions of the revolution as precognized by Max Weber. [15]

In any case, according to Guevara, the masses had not gone through the guerrilla revolutionary experience, by definition an experience of the few, and had missed its formative potential. Therefore society had to be transformed into a “giant school” for the education of the masses and the creation of the new man. New values were to be injected through the example of the leader and through a push for non-alienated “voluntary” work. This re-education process was to be very long because the new socialist society had been born under the burden of the “original sin” of capitalism and its corrupting values. Guevara warned that it might be necessary to wait for a new generation of men that would be born innocent of this original sin. But for this it was necessary the complete the institutional transformation of society. The creation of the revolutionary institutions, adequate for the new man, was also an ongoing process of invention. Guevara admitted that this had been particularly difficult for the Cuban revolution because of the need to escape from institutional bourgeois clichés, such as legislative cameras, electoral processes, division of powers, bourgeois human rights, etc. But at the beginning of the revolutionary rule nothing was yet complete, and all of society had to be transformed to serve as the institutional framework for the new man. This, of course, implied the total freedom for the revolutionary leaders to transform institutions without the trappings of formal, limited, bourgeois democracy. It also implied the total institutional control of society by the revolutionary government. Guevara was concerned, however, that this creative process of invention of institutions might be imperiled by bureaucratism, a related theme also central to Chavez’s discourse and important for the problem of institutional transformation.

VIII. THE PERILS OF BUREAUCRATISM

Bureaucratism was the perversion of the revolutionary process by the administrative need. It was an unintended consequence of the revolutionary process due, according to Guevara, not to an increasing level of control of society by a central State, but to what could be called a time conundrum caused by the persistence of the “original sin” of capitalist alienation and the encroachment of the old values in the new revolutionary society. Only a new man, as described above, would be immune to the peril of bureaucratism. For Guevara all problems he regarded as persisting in the new society, such as corruption, lack of creativity, the bureaucratization of decision-making process, lack of solidarity, individualism, etc. were basically moral problems rooted in the original sin of capitalism. Since the clean, innocent, revolutionary new man would take time to emerge, the new institutions would have to be molded with “imperfect clay”. The institutional framework that was emerging for the new man was being temporarily staffed by the old man, thus producing all sorts of moral and administrative problems. Only close control by the proto-new man (the vanguard of the party, mainly those who had taken part in the guerrilla struggle, but more specifically, the revolutionary leader) could ensure the successful transition to communism.

President Chávez is of this same opinion and often cites Guevara as his most important inspiration on these problems. The following long quote, taken from *Aló Presidente*, is revealing because it not only presents what Chávez sees as the problems of bureaucratism, in Guevara’s terms, but also gives a small glimpse of how the national budget is handled during the revolutionary transformation:

Well, the Plan Café is advancing, we are working with the small producers. By the way, I still have not put my signature on the resources for the Plan Café. Do you see now? Bureaucratism, Che Guevara seems to be everywhere, “trails of fire”, bureaucratism. I am the first to criticize my own government. I have read a column by a man who calls himself Marciano [Marciano is the pen name of the vice president at the time: Jose Vicente Rangel] who says that I am the boss of the opposition, because the critiques I make of my own government are not even made by the opposition, therefore I am the boss of the opposition. Well I’m not sure who writes that column, but I thought that it was very important. Not that I believe that I am the boss of the opposition, God spare me, but I do believe that we do not need to wait for the whip of the counter-revolution, as Trotsky said, that the revolution needs the whip of the counter-revolution. No, lets not wait for the whip of counter-revolution, let us use our own whip and scar our own faces, let us do it ourselves. What I mean is that it is not possible, I cannot accept it, ministers, Mr. vice president. How long ago did I announce the Plan Café.

Assistant: Fifteen days ago, Mr. President.

President Chávez: Then this is unacceptable,

unacceptable, two weeks. The money is there, waiting, and by this time this issue should have been discussed in the Council of Ministers. Because it turns out that these things have to follow a bureaucratic path, because they need controls, it is not acceptable that Chávez and his ministers use the resources as they see fit to use those resources, no, no, then it turns out that we need controls. Then, for example, this money needs to be part of an additional credit line, because it has not been assigned to any official budget, right? So it is not there, and suppose we are deciding now to use that money, but this has to be done with a note, that's the name for it, a note, and this is a piece of paper. It can even be hand written, the important thing is that it has to be clear, but I could even hand write it right now; if you give me a piece of paper, I can sign it right now and it becomes an order...

Look, when I announced the Plan Pollo [agricultural program], Alexis, you have no idea how much I suffered. I suffered a lot to get this Plan Pollo activated. I had to personally meet the producers, the whole process lasted for something like a year and it was a tough fight, but in the end, we activated the Plan. I want to tell you, sometimes I have nightmares that I am fighting against a beast I can't even tell the size of. You are a psychiatrist [Alexis] and they say that dreams reflect what we live in our everyday lives. Of course! That beast is the biggest enemy, and it is not in Washington and it is not in that house, the one they called Unity House [Opposition coalition head quarters at the time]. This enemy is here, inside us. Our biggest enemy is inefficiency. Che Guevara used to call it bureaucratism. And let us remember what Che Guevara used to say. He recommended three things, or better said, he saw three causes. Because as a doctor, he would always first do a diagnosis: What is this sickness of bureaucratism? [Chávez drops the theme of bureaucratism and goes on to explain the three motors of the Revolution according to Che]. [16]

Chávez expresses his exasperation and impatience at the bureaucratic controls that limit the speed of the revolutionary transformation of institutions. He is concerned that the new revolutionary institutions are vulnerable to the perils of bureaucratism and may become inefficient. For him there is no link between lack of formal bureaucratic controls and the institutional disorder of the bureaucracy and consequent inefficiency, indeed those controls are but cumbersome formalities that can be circumvented through simple mechanisms (hand written orders on simple pieces of paper). Corruption, bureaucratism, inefficiency are moral problems that will be solved with the emergence of the new revolutionary man that will not need formal controls, only revolutionary ethics. Chávez's recommendation on the subject is an educational campaign, which will target mainly public functionaries, on the areas of bureaucratism, the values of the new man of socialism, and Guevara's ideas on the subject. He

commends Communication Minister William Izarra for having published 50,000 copies of one of Guevara's book (which book is not specified), but he suggests a new pocket edition to give out to every public administration functionary.

It is also important to note from the previous quote that Chávez does not forget to mention his enemies in Washington and their local agents (the opposition). On this occasion, however, they are spared the direct blame for the failure to activate the Plan Pollo and still, the leader is shielded from criticism as he is the victim of internal bureaucratic inefficiencies. However, it is precisely with the lack of public functionaries that understand the perils of bureaucratism that the revolutionary government feels it has an important limitation. The government is faced with the serious problem that the Venezuelan revolution lacks the proto-new man, since it did not come to power through a revolutionary struggle but through bourgeois democratic electoral politics mechanisms. The militants of the revolution did not go through the necessary initiatory process of a "real" revolution as described by Guevara. The "original sin" of alienated labor of capitalisms, and all its moral corrupting implications, are therefore thought of as particularly strong in the Venezuelan process, making the institutional transformation of society, and the emergence of the new man, difficult. Add to this the power of a permanent conspiracy against the process through the media and through education and the revolutionary task becomes truly daunting. Centralization and control become even more necessary, but since the leader is the only recognized proto-new man, the control cannot be delegated on a vanguard party or a group of revolutionaries but highly concentrated on the leader himself.

The image finally created through this discourse is that of a leader alone in a process where original sin and conspiracy are permanently threatening him. He gives orders and instructions weekly through *Aló Presidente*, all Venezuelans are witness to this, but those orders are corrupted by bureaucratism and by conspirators within his own government. During the television program, and other public appearances, Chávez reveals conspiracies against his person and against the process he leads, but those conspiracies continue, despite his permanent warning. He offers long ideological explanations, rich with quotes from Guevara and other revolutionary classics, on the need to create a new man impervious to conspiracies, but that new man fails to emerge and, instead, old men still staff the new revolutionary institutions, condemning them to bureaucratism and inefficiency. Chávez builds a discourse that leads to the conclusion that he is left with no option but to assume more and more powers to protect himself, and the accomplishments of his revolution, from these perils.

IX. CONCLUSION

The process of institutional transformation in Venezuela is complicated and uncertain. This article has attempted to show how conspiracy theories have been consistently used as an important part of the discourse to justify these transformations. Furthermore it has presented the ways in which conspiracy theories are used, not only as justifying discourse, but also as

political tools to facilitate the substitution of new institutions for old. Focusing on conspiracy theories does not give a complete picture of missionary political discourse on the transformation process of institutions, but it does give an idea of how this discourse is produced and used as a political tool for transformation.

Opinions on the possible results of this process seem to be polarized between those who believe that the current Venezuelan political process will result in a new, more popular and participatory form of democracy, and those who believe that it will result in a sort of re-enactment of the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century. In any case, as should be clear from the case presented here, the more general political consequences of a constant use of conspiracy theories in political discourse is the loss of a sense of political agency by the actors. Only mentioned, and not explored here in detail, is the fact that the opposition responds to official discourse with conspiracy theories of its own: Fidel Castro and the Cuban secret service are behind every action of the government, and the thousands of Cuban doctors imported by Chávez to staff the health care program Mision Barrio Adentro are in reality agents of that Cuban secret service. According to the opposition, the government rigs all elections by complicated electronic maneuvers that blind national and international independent observers. But even more serious, as channels of political participation for traditional actors are closed by state centralization and control, the opposition does, in effect, resort to conspiratorial methods to try and gain power.⁶ This creates a cycle of self fulfilling prophecies that narrows political discourse, both by opposition and government, to a conspiracy discourse of institutions supposedly controlled by external powers beyond the individuals or groups that actually make those institutions function. If the actors subscribe to this explanation given by the leader, they are put into a form of political blackmail: the only option they have in order to regain a sense of political agency is to completely put themselves, and all institutions, in the hands of an all powerful leader, and follow him as foot soldiers to the final battle against the conspirators. The paradoxical result of this attempt to regain agency for the people, could be to lose it in the hands of an ever more absolute and powerful leader.

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⁶ The results of the December 2007 referendum on constitutional reform, lost by Chávez, could change this conclusion. The fact that the opposition decided to participate in the process, and that Chávez conceded defeat, despite the widespread opposition conspiracy theory that the government would steal the process, could open the system to political participation in the future.