POPULAR POWER, AGENCY AND COMMUNES IN VENEZUELA

by

Anderson M. Bean
A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Doctor of Philosophy
Sociology

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Date: _____________________________________ Spring Semester 2017
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA
Popular Power, Agency and Communes in Venezuela

A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy at George Mason University

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Spring Semester 2017
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Phoenix.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I could not have written this dissertation without the generous support of many individuals. First and foremost I would like to thank all the people who participated in this study, the communal council and communal organizers who were not only instrumental to the research of this project but were equally as important as inspirations for this project. Without their cooperation this project could not have been completed. I would also like to thank my loving parents whose unwavering support made writing this dissertation possible. I am also grateful for the many people who helped in a myriad of ways throughout the writing and research of this project, with those people in mind, I owe a special thanks to Mara Garcia Viloria, Yhon Pacheco, Melissa Gouge, Aury Escobar de Rodas, Phoenix Carter, Hector Hernandez Albornoz, Sahar Haghighat, and Andrea Pacheco. I want to thank my dissertation committee, Lester Kurtz, Peter Mandaville and George Ciccariello-Maher for taking time out of their busy schedule to read and reread this manuscript and offer critical suggestions and feedback. I owe the greatest thanks to my advisor, John Dale for his guidance, patience, valuable criticisms and suggestions and believing in me and this project, without him this project would never have been completed.
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Structural Adjustment Program ................................................................. SAP
United Socialist Party of Venezuela .......................................................... PSUV
Union Republicana Democratica ................................................................. URD
Union of South American Nations ............................................................ UNASUR
Venezuelan Communist Party ................................................................. PCV
World Trade Organization ................................................................. WTO
Venezuelan Communist Party ................................................................. PCV
Venezuelan Federation of Chambers of Commerce ..................................... Fedecámeras
Zapatista Army of National Liberation .................................................. EZLN
ABSTRACT

POPULAR POWER, AGENCY AND COMMUNES IN VENEZUELA

Anderson M. Bean, Ph.D.

George Mason University, 2017

Dissertation Director: Dr. Dr. John G. Dale

Since 2006, over 45,000 grassroots neighborhood-based communal councils and 1,400 communes have been constructed in Venezuela. These councils are permanent governing structures that bring together members of community organizations from poor neighborhoods around issues like access to clean water, electricity, healthcare, and education. Communes are larger bodies of popular power and collections of communal councils that operate to make more long term decisions and decisions that affect larger geographic areas. Drawing on qualitative interviews with council and commune organizers and participant observations at communal council and commune activities and assemblies, this dissertation analyzes popular and workers’ power, the ways in which networks of popular power exercise agency in their own development, and the potential these networks have for state and societal transformation that extends beyond Venezuela. Most importantly, this study explores the far reaching implications that the communal
movement in Venezuela has for building a society more responsive to the needs of ordinary people than to those of elites.
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction
I was told there was a direct bus from Caracas to Chabasquen. What was supposed to be a simple six hour bus trip, turned into a twelve hour journey up the Cordillera de Meridida mountain range which consisted of two buses rides, a van, a car, and finally standing up in the back of a truck, locking arms with other passengers to keep from falling into the dusty dirt road below us, all the while with our eyes closed to avoid the dust from entering our eyes. Chabasquen, a small village in Northwestern Venezuela high in the Cordillera de Merida mountain range is the host to the Gran Asamblea Comuna del Corredor Político Territorial Fabricio Ojeda (henceforth the Gran Asamblea), a gathering of twelve communes in the Venezuelan states of Portuguesa and Lara. Communes are grassroots organs of self-administration and popular power that bring together community organizations that have emerged in mostly poor neighborhoods around issues of water, electricity, health and more recently around the production of textiles and agricultural products. The Gran Asemblea in Chabasquen brings together twelve such communes from two different states in order to coordinate on projects that affect the territories of these communities.

As Chabasquen sits high in the Cordillera de Merida mountain range, a northeastern extension of the Andes Mountains, one of the first things I notice as we arrive at the assembly is that the temperature is noticeably cooler, at least 15 degrees, than the more tropical climate of Caracas. As soon as we jumped off the truck, with our brown shirts covered in dust, we were all welcomed by a jubilant crowd of over a few thousand communal organizers. The assembly was festive and familial. Children were running around with cotton candy, live music blaring from the speakers, and most
everyone had red shirts (the color worn by supporters of the late President Hugo Chavez).
Tables lined the walkway approaching the outdoor stage with products produced by the various communes in attendance. The tables were filled with fruits, vegetables, coffee, flour, sugar, salt, pineapples, bananas, corn, white purple and yellow maize, all produced in the communes. One table was collecting a variety of communal products to donate to people from a nearby town whose houses were destroyed by a recent flood.

We were quickly ushered on stage to seats just behind the podium and introduced to the crowd as international visitors (I was traveling with three Venezuelans and a woman from San Cristóbal de las Casas, México). The stage was surrounded with banners that read Comuna o Nada (The commune or nothing), Territorio Liberado y Comunalizado Ejerciendo la Soberana Popular (Communalized and Liberated Territory Exercising Popular Sovereignty), Ni un Paso Atras (not a single step backwards), as well as a banners from each of the twelve communes represented in the assembly.

From the stage there was poetry readings; spoken word; traditional folk music; renditions of popular folk songs by the late Ali Primera, probably the most recognized Venezuelan folk singer, poet and activist; and various types of dance performances. There were musicians of all ages including a young nine year old girl singing Joropo (Venezuela's national popular folk musical style and dance), children and adults, dancing the Salsa and the Merengue, and even at one point I was swept from my seat on stage by an older women to join her on the dance floor. Around lunchtime, free lunch plates piled with black beans, fried plantains, rice and shredded beef (a traditional Venezuelan meal) was passed around to all attendees.
Interspersed between the festivities were political discussions about various ways to consolidate popular power, increase production and better organize the distribution of products, was live entertainment from members of the communes. Many spoke of cooperation and better ways for the communes to coordinate. Speakers frequently referenced *El Golpe de Timón*, Hugo Chavez's 2012 speech announcing a leap forward in the Bolivarian Process to what is referred to as the "communal state". Some speakers spoke of the need to increase production of black beans, while others opined that the only way to take power and control of the state is to take control of production and through the self-management of production. Independence was another common theme from the stage, many making the argument that true independence comes when workers control the means of production, with most speakers concluding their speech with the oft-repeated phrase "Comuna o Nada" (the commune or nothing), another reference to *Golpe de Timón*.

If one were to read about Venezuela in the mainstream American press you may not hear about large gatherings of grassroots organs of self-administration, or participatory democratic structures like the communal councils and communes described above. Since the 1998 election of Hugo Chavez, much of the mainstream media has likened Venezuela to a dictatorship (O'Grady, 2012) where there are severe restrictions on freedom of expression and the press (Gupta, 2012). The New York Times referred to Chavez to a “monarch” who “rules with absolute authority and no checks and balances”, as well as an “authoritarian”, and an “autocrat” (Toro, 2012). The Times also wrote that Chavez has a “disdain for democracy”, that he was “assaulting Venezuela’s democratic
“institutions” and that despite having been democratically elected the government “certainly is not democratic” (Toro, 2012). The Wall Street Journal referred to Chavez as a “strongman”, “dictator”, “world-class demagogue”, and “authoritarian” (O’Grady, 2012).

Despite claims that Venezuela is a dictatorship led by strongmen, the December 2015 parliamentary election marked the 17th national election in Venezuela since the 1998 election of Chavez, more than the total number of national elections in the 40 years prior to Chavez. Venezuelan elections have been deemed free and fair by the European Union, the Organization of American States, and the Carter Center among others. Jimmy Carter, who won a Nobel prize for his election monitoring Carter Center said that of the 92 elections that they have monitored, the “Venezuelan election process is the best in the world” (Weisbrot 2012).

This is not to say that Venezuela does not have its fair share of problems, particularly in the last few years, as it has faced its largest existential crisis to date, with problems ranging from high inflation, violence, governance, and long queues for many staple goods like beans, milk, chicken, flour, diapers, and tampons (many of these issues will be discussed further in chapter 5). But there is much more to the story than what is being reported here in the United States. This dissertation tells the story of a movement that has not garnered much attention in the mainstream English-speaking press. It is a movement where; despite its many challenges, obstacles and sometimes outright messiness; regular workers and ordinary citizens are fighting for more direct control over the political decision making process though the construction of participatory democratic
structures, the creation of various forms of self-governance and by directly managing public policies and projects that affect their daily lives, and the contradictions of the Venezuelan government which on the one hand promotes and facilitates this movement while one the other hand has been at times a significant obstacle and source of resistance to it.

To begin this story we must begin with what is called the Bolivarian revolution (sometimes called the Bolivarian process or Bolivarian movement). This is the name given to the social and political process that officially began with the election of Chavez, but has roots in grassroots movements that preceded and now have succeeded Chavez. The Bolivarian Process is made up of three key components. The first is the re-writing of the constitution, which was approved in a popular referendum in December of 1999. The new constitution added two branches of government, changed the country’s name, introduced popular referenda and local planning councils, recognized Venezuela’s large indigenous population, recognized housework as an economic activity and in some ways strengthened presidential power. Many commentators argue that Venezuela has the world’s most progressive constitution in the sense that it provides for broad citizen participation and comprehensive human rights protections (Wilpert, 2007). Title III includes more than 100 articles directly addressing a wide range of civil and human rights. Human rights were a central component in the constitution and often went far beyond what most constitutions incorporate and often beyond liberal notions of human rights (Bean, 2016). Not only are civil and political rights included but also social and
economic rights such as the right to employment, education, healthcare and dignified housing. These rights are seen as fundamental and as an obligation of the state.

The second component is the redistribution of oil profits through various social programs, called "missions". Social missions are social programs implemented early in the Chavez administration that are primarily funded by oil profits. These missions span from education (Mission Robinson an adult literacy program), food (Mission Mercal, which provides access to basic foods at a discounted price), healthcare (Mission Barrio Adentro, which provides free healthcare services to under-served and impoverished communities), land reform (Mission Zamora, which redistributes land to the poor), indigenous rights (Mission Guaicapuro, which restores communal land rights to indigenous communities), to housing (La Gran Mision Vivienda Venezuela, a low-cost housing program). Partly because of the redistribution of oil wealth through social programs like these, poverty was reduced by 37.6 percent and extreme poverty dropped by 57.8 percent from the election of Chavez in 1999 until 2011 (Webber, 2013).

The third and perhaps most transformative component of the Bolivarian process is the transfer of power from traditional nodes of power to the popular sectors through the creation of new forms of popular assemblies and experiments with worker's control, communal councils and communes. The latter two specifically are the focus of this dissertation and the topic to which we now turn.

The communal movement in Venezuela is made up of communal councils - which are neighborhood-based bodies of self-governance and self-administration - and communes which are made up of collections of communal councils. These two
networks of popular power function to circumvent representative democracy and
traditional sites of constituted power in order to create sites of participatory democracy
and to transfer direct political power and decision making to the people directly affected
by these decisions and to social sectors that have been traditionally excluded from sites of
power, particularly the poor and people of color.

This project examines both the ways in which workers and peasants, through
these networks of popular power exercise agency over their own development, and the
significant challenges, both internal and external, the movement faces as it operates
largely within a market economy and a capitalist state. My case study focuses primarily
on communes and communal councils in Venezuela. The council movement in
Venezuela is both one example of a network of popular power as well as a case of
counter-hegemonic globalization from below. My primary research question is: To what
extent do networks of popular power exercise agency over their own social, cultural and
economic development? As I explore this sociological research question I will also
answer a series of related questions regarding the significance of popular power to
Venezuela’s future and the relevance of these networks historically: 1) what are the
communes’ and councils’ relationship to the state, what are their origins, and do they
have the potential to transform the capitalist state. 2) Do workers only have agency at the
point of production or do councils that organize at the neighborhood level also have
revolutionary potential to transform society. And what power do communal councils
have beyond Venezuela?
In answering these questions I used three qualitative methods. First I conducted qualitative interviews with council and commune organizers, participants, and representatives, two Venezuelan authors of books on communes and representatives of the Ministry of Communes. Second, I conducted focus groups with council and communal organizers. Lastly I conducted participant observations at communal council and commune activities and assemblies.

This introduction will be organized as follows. The first section will discuss some of the key themes of the dissertation, agency, popular power, participatory democracy and democratic self-governance. In this section I briefly talk about the literature around these topics and where my research falls within this research. The second section is an overview of some of the key findings and conclusions that I draw from the data. The third section discusses the three research methods used in this study to collect data. The fourth section touches on ethical concerns and the steps that were taken to protect both the interview subjects and the data collected. The final section gives a brief overview of the organization of the dissertation and its five chapters.

**Agency, Change and Democratic Self-Governance**

Sociologists have long grappled with the question of how society changes. One important societal change is the democratization of society. Democratization can take a number of forms including transitions from authoritarian to representative democracies, increased participation in representative democracies, or in the form of councils as a bottom-up alternative to the representative model. This dissertation examines the intersection between democratization and social movements and the ways in which the
success or failure of an expansion of democracy from below is contingent on the activity and influence of social movements.

Over the past century workers and communities have fought to gain more control over their workplaces, communities, and the decisions that affect their lives. Workers have gained varying degrees of power by occupying factories, forming workers’ and communal councils and operating self-managed enterprises. Worker and communal councils have emerged at various geographic locations and historical moments as the genuine expression of workers’ interests. Different forms of workers’ control have sprung up in a myriad of places in the world and in many different historical contexts. Some of the most prominent examples include: Paris 1871, Russian 1917-18, Hungary 1956, France 1968, Chile 1972-73, Portugal 1974-75, Iran 1979, and Poland 1980-81 just to name a few (Barker 1987, Cohen 2011, Gluckstein 2011, Ness and Azzellini 2011). Ordinary people have also organized themselves around the slogan of popular power. Some historical examples include: The 1968 general strikes in France (Geir 2008), the Water Wars in Cochabamba, Bolivia (Olivera and Lewis 2008), the Portuguese Revolution (Hammond 1988), Chile under the Popular Unity Government in 1970-1973 (Winn 1989), the 2001 rebellion in Argentina (Sitrin 2006), and the 2006 teachers’ strike in the Mexican city of Oaxaca (Harman 2007), to name a few.

Movements to create councils and movements for popular power offer a critique and alternative to parliamentary, liberal notions of democracy and traditional nodes of power. While liberal democracy is based on the delegation to representatives who are only accountable to those they represent during the time of elections, social movements
stress a system of direct or participatory democracy. By opening new channels of access to the political system social movements contribute to the creation of public space that is separate from traditional political institutions and can also contribute to a transfer of power over states (della Porta 2013, Tilly 1993).

Another major theme in this project is agency, and in what ways are workers, peasants, and those in the informal sector able to exercise agency in the neoliberal era. In the Marxist literature, because of workers' unique position in the production of society’s wealth, workers' agency and the potential for workers’ power was theorized to reside at the point of production, in other words at the workplace. This literature suggests that the labor movement is especially positioned to increase democracy. Over the past few decades however, we have seen the labor movement experience great decline in unionization rates. This is not to say that the labor movement cannot experience resurgence, but in this decline other competing movements have emerged to pursue different projects and mobilize people around different interests. One important movement examined in this dissertation is the communal movement in Venezuela. The expansion of communes in Venezuela demonstrates an alternative form of workers power where citizens wield power, not at the point of production in the traditional Marxist literature, but at the community level. Though some of the communes have more recently taken over abandoned factories and other sites of production, for the most part they exercise their power not in their workplaces but in their neighborhoods. This project examines the ways in which ordinary Venezuelans, through the construction of communes are able to exercise a significant degree of agency, but also how this agency is
limited by certain structural constraints including the limited control the communes have over the economy as a whole.

**Key Findings**

The main argument presented in this dissertation is that the construction of networks of communes and communal councils in Venezuela has achieved three important things. First it has restructured how power is distributed and decisions are made for many Venezuelans. Second it presents an alternative form of development to the neoliberal model. And lastly it has enabled workers and peasants in the country to exercise a significant degree of agency in the face of neoliberal globalization. The communal movement has been able to achieve these three things primarily through four specific characteristics.

The first is participatory democracy. Participatory democracy in the communes enables citizens to be active participants in the process and decision making over the area in which they live or work. Members of the communes play a significant role in developing projects that benefit the entire community. Moreover, direct participatory democracy in the communes remedies some of the exclusionary aspects of representative democracy. This is apparent in the citizens' assemblies where historically excluded sectors of society, the poor, indigenous, and other marginalized groups are prominent.

Second is endogenous development, a socioeconomic model of development that is driven from within or from the inside the nation state or local communities, rather than development from without or from the outside. This model focuses on development
based on the country's developmental needs rather than by the demand of goods on the international market. Also distinct from the top-down centralized model of import substitution industrialization, popular in Latin America from the 1940s to 1980s, endogenous development enables communes to make decisions internally based on the needs of the community, enhancing community control over their own resources.

Third is the communal control over production which not only allows for community members themselves to decide what is produced, how it is produced and how it is distributed it also gives workers in these production sites the power to make decisions about their own working conditions, compensation, work hours and vacation time.

And lastly is the communal market which gives workers further control over their own development in that it enables communes to produce directly based on the needs of the community rather than the market dictating what should be produced, how it is distributed and more or less the prices of those goods and services produced. These four primary characteristics of the communal movement all function to deepen direct democratic community control over the resources and development of local communities. Furthermore the networks between communes and communal councils deepens self-determination and direct democratic control of even larger geographic and political spaces.

Though the successes that the communes have achieved so far are impressive it is important to also mention a series of various serious obstacles that they confront. The challenges are varied and come from both within and without the process. First is the
limitations that come with communal production and distribution in the midst of a capitalist economy, both domestically and in the global market economy. Second is the explicit challenges from the right wing opposition, whether that being hoarding, speculation or outright violence. And finally the verticalist structure of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) and the hostility to some of the more radical currents of Chavismo (the left-wing political ideology based on the ideas of Hugo Chavez) that has at various key moments impeded the transfer of power to workers and the popular sectors of society. Though the communal movement was legitimated and legalized through a series of communal laws passed and promoted by the Bolivarian government, a growing level of bureaucracy within the government is often one of the largest obstacles to the growth and success of the movement. Many in the government, both at the local and national level, resist conceding power to these grassroots expressions of popular power. Even Chavista officials who speak with radical rhetoric about socialism and popular power, often undermine the communal movement as they see it as an encroachment on their power and legitimacy. The survival and spread of the communes requires a confrontation with these three obstacles and the further building of popular power from below, and a deepening of the Bolivarian process as a whole.

**Methods/Data**

My field work in two separate trips spanned over two years, between 2015 and 2016. In 2015 I did field work in Venezuela for five months then again in 2016 for an additional six weeks. In total I was in Venezuela doing research for seven months.
My research was based on three qualitative methods of data collection, qualitative interviews, focus groups and participant observation. During my seven months in Venezuela I conducted twenty-four in-depth, formal and informal interviews and focus groups. The interviews included twenty communal council or commune organizers or what are called *voceros*, two representatives from the ministry of communes, and two academics who have written books on the communes. The interviews spanned from forty-five minutes to just over two hours, the majority around an hour and twenty minutes. Of the twenty-four interviews eighteen were one-on-one interviews and six were focus groups with anywhere from two to seven people. My interview subjects represented 20 different communes and communal councils from a combination of urban, rural and indigenous areas and in five different states and the federal district (Caracas, Carabobo, Lara, Miranda, Portuguesa, and Zulia). I also tried to achieve gender parity among interview respondents and of the twenty-four total interviews, ten ended up being with women.

The questionnaire used during the interviews will be attached in appendix 1. My interviews were semi-structured in that for the most part I started with the interview questions in appendix 1 but the conversation often went in many different directions and my follow-up questions varied depending on the respondent's answers. Questions also changed slightly depending on if the respondent was a *vocero(a)*, a representative from the ministry or an author. The benefit from doing semi-structured interviews was that it gave me, the researcher, the freedom to tailor the questions to the different people I was
talking to, to different contexts and situations and the freedom to ask follow-up questions based on the respondents responses.

The sampling technique I used to acquire interview subjects and sites for observation was through snowball sampling. Before arriving I had accrued about twenty contacts through three different sources. The first source of contacts was through the Venezuelan embassy in DC. There I was put into contact with several communal organizers and representatives from the ministry. The second source of contacts came from one of my dissertation committee members, George Ciccariello-Maher a political science professor at Drexel University who with his extensive research in Venezuela authored two books on Venezuela, one of which focuses on the communes. The third, and what turned out to be the most important source of contacts came from relationships that I had been building for up to a year before my trip to Venezuela with members from a local Trotskyist organization called Marea Socialista. Marea was a part of the Chavista party Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) from its inception in 2007 until, based on its critiques on the party in general and Maduro in particular, they left in early 2015. Through these three sources I had about twenty contacts before I arrived in Venezuela. Once in Venezuela those original twenty contacts all put me into contact with other communal organizers and activists who in turn put me in contact with yet others, and so on.

In addition to interviews and focus groups I also conducted participant observation. I visited twenty different communes and communal councils, and just like with the interviews they represented urban, rural and indigenous areas in five different
states and in the federal district. I went to communal assemblies, communal council assemblies, the *Gran Asamblea* mentioned above which was an assembly that brought together twelve different communes from two different states, and I was given tours of various communal projects including communal controlled factories (as in the case of El Sur Existe) as well as communal controlled stores and markets. In total I took about one hundred pages of field notes.

**Ethical Concerns**

Any research that involves human subjects must confront certain ethical concerns. This section will discuss issues related to consent, anonymity, and the protection of the data received. To address the issue of consent, I used a consent form indicating my interest in interviewing, asked their consent to be recorded, as well as containing contact information. Participants were given the option to complete the interview without being recorded if they wish as well as to terminate the interview and/or the recording at any point.

Regarding privacy and anonymity, I used pseudonyms when I transported the data back to the United States (I will address the latter issue further below). The codes for the pseudonyms and the consent forms were kept separate from the rest of the data. The names of participants were not on the recordings. Each interview was labeled by session instead of by interviewee name. For example, an interview with Nicolas would be labeled “Session 1”, and an interview with Simon would be labeled “Session 2” and so on. The data was emailed to a few trusted colleagues back in the United States before I went through customs and re-entered the country. I emailed a few different colleagues
the codes for the pseudonyms, and deleted both sets of emails from my sent box. Upon return to the United States I retrieved my data from the email recipients. In my analysis I used pseudonyms for those respondents who did not want their real names used and I used respondents' real names for those who gave me permission to do so.

**Organization of Study**

In chapter two, I engage with the literature in political sociology with an emphasis on democracy studies. Political sociologists have written about a variety of forms of democracy that have been pursued by social movements. Some of those include strong democracy (Barber 2003), discursive democracy (Dryzek 2000), communicative democracy (Young 1996), welfare democracy (Fitzpatrick 2002), associative democracy (Perczynski 2000) agonistic pluralism (Mouffe 2000), workers’ councils (Barker 1987, Cohen 2011, Gluckstein 2011, Ness and Azzellini 2011), communal councils (Azzellini 2009, Ellner 2009, Fuentes 2010), participatory democracy (Cairns and Sears 2012; della Porta 2012; Pateman 1970; Polletta 2002; Arnstein 1969) representative democracy (Arlbaster 2000; Dahl 1989, Weale 2007), and popular power (Hammond 1988, Winn 1989, Sitrin 2006, Harman 2007, Geir 2008, Olivera and Lewis 2008). This section focuses primarily on the major debates as they pertain to the latter five forms of democracy (representative, participatory, worker and communal councils and popular power). I explore the following questions in turn: What are the conditions in which councils emerge, why have councils been short-lived, what are their theoretical foundations and are all councils revolutionary or do some work within and support the capitalist representative model of democracy?
The second section in Chapter two examines the role social movements play in promoting and struggling for expansions of democracy, whether by increasing participation or in forming workers’ or communal councils. This section analyzes the role of social movements in democratization as well as the ways in which social movements can expand people’s power over the decisions that affect their lives either through their explicit program of democratization or as by-products of their action. Finally I discuss social movements as a form of democracy from below. This type of democracy is distinguished from Western and liberal notions of democracy called “democracy from above”.

Chapter three explores the dynamic between the Venezuelan state which has committed itself to a discourse on grassroots political participation and civil society which has responded to this call in ways that often exceed and challenge the expectations of the government. The Bolivarian process has raised Venezuelans' expectations of the state, and its very success depends on both the actions of grassroots activists and the Chavista government. While the government has opened up spaces for grassroots organization, what social-movement actors in Venezuela see as radical transformation still requires direct confrontation with those in political power. The Bolivarian process is not something that can be decreed from above, but must involve struggle, organization and ordinary people’s ability to act independently of the state.

Chapter three is divided into four parts. The first part gives a brief history of popular organization and the left in Venezuela from 1958 to the Caracazo. Part two analyzes the economic and social crises leading up to Hugo Chavez’s election in an
attempt to understand the broader context of resistance and social movements in which he came to power. Part three analyzes the relationship between civil society and the state by looking at the 2002 coup, the creation of the 1999 constitution, the radicalization of Chavez and the activity of popular movements. Part four focuses on participatory democracy as a form of popular power.

Chapter four gives a detailed look at communal councils and communes. In this chapter I talk about what the councils and communes are, how they function, how they are created, how decisions are made, how they coordinate with other communes, what type of projects they develop, and what role they play in the Bolivarian process. In order to answer these questions, I give three case studies of three different communes. The first is Comuna El Sur Existe, a mixed commune that consists of twelve urban and seven rural communal councils located in Carabobo Venezuela. The second is Comuna Jose Pio Tamayo, an urban commune in Barquisimeto. The third is Comuna El Maizal, a rural commune which consists of twenty two communal councils located in the state of Lara.

The final chapter, chapter five discusses the communes as networks of popular power and as a form of globalization from below. I make the argument that workers through these networks of popular power have some agency over their own development. I look specifically at four characteristics of the communes in which workers exercise, to various degrees, agency and self-determination, and how these four characteristics are distinctly different from neoliberal forms of development. The four characteristics are as follows: participatory democracy, endogenous development, communal control of production and communal markets. The next section discusses the communal
movement's connections with other transnational social movements and the importance of solidarity between movements. Chapter five concludes with a discussion of some of the limitations and challenges (both internal and external) that the communes face, and ultimately that the fate of the communes themselves is inextricably connected to the fate of the Bolivarian process in general.
CHAPTER TWO

Theorizing Participatory Democracy, Popular Power, and Counter-Hegemonic Globalization from Below
Each January, fifty thousand Brazilians in the harbor town of Porto Alegre gather in dozens of assemblies across the city to collectively decide how to allocate and distribute their $200 million budget. Decisions about housing, public transport, social housing, literacy, schooling, sewage etc. are made in assemblies constituted by the people of Porto Alegre. In more recent years this form of participatory budgeting spread to 100 cities in the country. Six hundred miles southeast of Porto Alegre, the workers of the Brukman textile factory in Balvanera Argentina are the both the stockholders and managers of the company. Brukman is one of at least 160 Argentine factories that are currently being owned and organized as a cooperative by their employees. In the northern part of the continent, Venezuelans have organized themselves in over 45,000 communal councils. These councils make binding decisions about matters that affect the daily lives of Venezuelans. Issues include water, health, education, and media. These examples of popular power offer a glimpse of alternatives to corporate-driven globalization.

Popular power can best be understood as the capacity of workers, the marginalized and oppressed to collectively control the political, social and economic conditions in which they live. It is important to distinguish popular power from other modes of governance as well as from the political tactic or style called populism. Here we will discuss the latter and the former will be discussed in the following section. Populism is the rhetoric, logic, or in the words of Ernest Laclau (2005), a collection of "empty signifiers" used primarily by political elites to empathize with and gain appeal to the "masses" of people across the political spectrum. There are disagreements on what
populism means and its relationship to democracy. Margaret Canovan (1981) for example writes about how populism is often used as a pejorative, one that is rejected by those who have been given the label. Mouffe and Laclau (1985) argue that though populism has been denigrated in the social sciences it should be rescued and in some instances embraced as it can be a legitimate left wing challenge to the status quo. Mouffe and Laclau (1985) argue that populism is not necessarily opposed to democracy, as rhetoric, and antagonism are inherent to democratic politics. But whether populism is of a right wing nationalist variety or a left leaning variety, whether it is a recipe for damaging democracy or one that is the essence of it, it is still the rhetoric, logic and empty signifiers used by political elites to appeal to the "masses", and it should be distinguished from popular power, the actual processes of workers, marginalized and oppressed groups actively exercising power over the conditions of their own lives. As Edgardo Lander (2007) writes "popular power has to do with people's capacity to take the reins". The building of popular power is the creation of relations of power contrary to the logic of capital. Central to the idea of popular power, and what most distinguishes it from populism, is the way in which popular power refers to people taking power themselves, whether in their workplaces, communities or in their neighborhoods. Popular power can thus be seen as an alternative site of power or counter-power to parliamentarism, state power or other traditional nodes of power. It is a form of direct democracy that can be exercised in various ways including in workers’ councils, communal councils, neighborhood associations, popular assemblies, and different forms
of workers’ control. Therefore popular power, unlike populism, by definition can only be
a bottom-up process. As Dario Azzelini writes:

"Neither can popular power, by its own logic, be awarded from above. Popular power
cannot be conceived of by the state, nor can it be conceived of without the state. The question of
sovereignty, or control of resources, puts on the table the question of the relation between state power and
popular power" (Azzellini 2016).

This conception of popular power excludes various forms of populism we see on the rise
today in the cases of Trump (in the US), Le Pen (in France), Geertz (in the Netherlands),
and Duterte (in the Philippines). With the latter examples, there is no transfer of power
from traditional sites of power to the traditionally excluded, working and marginalized
people do not have more collective control of the political, economic, and social
conditions under which they live. To use Lanner's (2007) words, the popular classes
"have not taken the reins". The "reins" in these cases of populism still remain in hands of
a political elites.

Popular power, whether in the form of councils or otherwise, must be understood
as not only related to social movements and resistance from below but as inextricably
intertwined. In his letter from a Birmingham jail, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. famously
wrote that “freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by
the oppressed”. The same is true with power. Self-determination and popular power is
never granted to the powerless without pressure from below. One important form of
resistance of the oppressed is social movements. Charles Tilly (2004) defines social
movements as “a series of contentious performances, displays and campaigns, by which
ordinary people make collective claims on others” (Tilly 2013, pg. 3). For Sidney
Tarrow (1994) social movements are “sequences of contentious politics based on underlying social networks on resident collective action frames and on the capacity to maintain sustained challenges against powerful opponents” (Tarrow 1994, pg. 7). Contentious politics, as defined by Tilly (2008) are "interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else's interests" often by the use of disruptive techniques with the intention to make some specific change. Implied in both definitions is that social movement activity takes place outside of traditional channels of politics. Social movements are a vehicle for ordinary people’s participation in politics when traditional channels are closed. Though at times social movements do often engage with and influence traditional channels of politics.

But if movements are an expression of resistance why do we experience periods with little movement activity? Surely it is not due to a lack of grievances. Under what conditions do social movements emerge and flourish? What conditions are conducive for democratization? What is the relationship between democratization and social movements? What role do movements have in the development of different forms of popular power? With these questions in mind, this chapter analyzes three overarching and interrelated themes: participation and workers' control as an expression of workers' (or people's) power, the role of social movements in democratization, and social movements as a form of resistance to representative democracy.

Political sociologists have written about a variety of forms of democracy that have been pursued by social movements. Some of those include strong democracy (Barber 2003), discursive democracy (Dryzek 2000), communicative democracy (Young 1996),
welfare democracy (Fitzpatrick 2002), associative democracy (Perczynski 2000) agonistic pluralism (Mouffe 2000), workers’ councils (Barker 1987, Cohen 2011, Gluckstein 2011, Ness and Azzellini 2011), communal councils (Azzellini 2009, Ellner 2009, Fuentes 2010), participatory democracy (Cairns and Sears 2012; della Porta 2013; Pateman 1970; Polletta 2002; Arnstein 1969) representative democracy (Arlbaster 2000; Dahl 1989, Weale 2007), and popular power (Hammond 1988, Winn 1989, Sitrin 2006, Harman 2007, Geier 2008, Olivera and Lewis 2008). To best understand the emergence, success and failures of workers’ power, it is helpful to familiarize ourselves with the major debates as they pertain to the latter five forms of democracy (representative, participatory, worker and communal councils and popular power). In the first section of this chapter, I explore the following questions in turn: What are the conditions in which councils emerge, why have councils been short-lived, what are their theoretical foundations and are all councils revolutionary or do some work within and support the capitalist representative model of democracy?

In section two I then examine the role social movements play in promoting and struggling for expansions of democracy, whether by increasing participation or in forming workers’ or communal councils. I analyze the role of social movements in democratization as well as the ways in which social movements can expand people’s power over the decisions that affect their lives either through their explicit program of democratization or as by-products of their action. In the final section of this chapter, I discuss social movements as a form of democracy from below. This type of democracy
is distinguished from Western and liberal notions of democracy called “democracy from above.”

Representative vs Participatory Democracy

Representative Democracy

The term "democracy" is derived from the Greek demos (the people) and kratos (rule). The notion of democracy as the rule of the people rests on the idea that the general public should participate in the decision-making process that affect their daily lives. Democracy for most people in the world is synonymous with some form of representative system (Arlbaster 2000). The central idea in representative democracies is that people have power because they elect representatives, and those representatives are held accountable to voters for their decisions through elections. The rule of the people is exercised through the periodic activity of voting in elections, not the day-to-day activities of governance (Cairns and Sears 2012; Catt 1999). Theorists of representative democracy do argue that there is a role for citizen participation in a democracy, but the role is limited to the activities intended to influence the selection of representatives or the decisions they make. Participation is confined to activities within the framework of consent to be the governed.

Representative democracy is commonly accepted as the most conventional form of democracy, the version taught, for example in U.S. schools and government agencies. This view refers to democracy as a type of political system, and is used to classify nation-states and distinguish them from authoritarian states, military dictatorships, and monarchies. In contrast to the latter, liberal democracies have a free press, free and fair
elections, a multi-party system, equal rights, the rule of law, courts free of political control, and tolerates opposition (Cairns and Sears 2012, Lenski 1966).

Theorists of representative democracy argue that in large complex societies the election of a small number of representatives who are granted decision-making powers is the most efficient way to administer things (Dahl 1989, Weale 2007). They argue that other versions like participatory or direct democracy are impractical in such large and complex systems. Robert Dahl (1989) for example argues that participatory or direct democracy “has never existed in historical times. . .and try as hard as I may I can discover no way by which it could be made to exist in the foreseeable future” (Dahl 1989 pp 323, quoted in Cairns and Sears 2012 pp13).

By the end of the twentieth century the limitations of representative democracy started to become more apparent. Though the majority of nation states maintained a representative democratic system, various movements for alternative forms of democracy began to emerge. Participatory budgeting in Brazil (Lewit 2002), worker controlled factories in Argentina (Sitrin 2006), communal councils in Venezuela, and the Occupy movement all offered both critiques of representative democracy and perhaps more importantly offered alternatives. Some scholars have written about what is called the “democratic deficit” (Norris 2011; Zweifel), and others about the “death” of democracy (Keane 2009). The democratic deficit comes from waning trust in democratic institutions as they become less responsive and more disconnected to the citizens they are supposed to represent. This trend in the West can be seen in the decline in both voter turnout rates and in the number of people joining political parties (Cairns and Sears 2012, della Porta
Della Porta (2013) points out that in seventeen of the nineteen countries where we have data, the percent of the population who identify with a party is in decline. The number of citizens who claim attachment to parties has dropped in almost all European countries between 1972-1995 (della Porta 2013).

The shortcomings of representative democracy and the corresponding decline in its appeal to many working people across the globe can be attributed to a number of factors. The first is the extensive sum of money that is spent on campaigning and lobbying. Disproportionate funding from big business and other elite institutions ensure that the interests of elites supersede that of the electorate. The second and not unrelated factor is the concentration of economic power. As economic power becomes increasingly concentrated and powerful, its influence on representative politics increases. Powerful economic interests are increasingly able to make their desires felt in the legislative process. Laxer (2009) suggests that contemporary democracy is becoming more of a plutocracy, in the way that the power of wealth and money play an increasing role in determining political outcomes (quoted in Cairns and Sears 2012). This is accomplished in a variety of ways including the calculated use of corporate media, the aforementioned funding of powerful lobbies and various methods of manipulating the electorate. Representatives depend more on lobbies than their constituents during election cycles, resulting in lobbies having a greater influence on policy than everyday voters. The media often relies on images and personalities rather than the debate on important issues. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, in 93% of United States House of Representative races and 94% of Senate races (in the United States), the
candidate that spent the most money ended up winning. Most of the money that comes from political financing comes from corporate donations, political action committees, and wealthy individuals. The concept of one "person, one vote" is becoming harder to reconcile with representative democracy. Money, not people, tends to have more influence on the political process. The intention of the “rule of the people” was to guarantee that political decisions were inspired by and dictated by the interests of the people. When representatives make the decisions, there is no guarantee that political decisions will reflect the desires of the people. The effect is an increasing number of people alienated with electoral politics, a key institution to representative democracy.

Representative democracy has also been critiqued for being exclusionary (Cairns and Sears 2012; Foot 2005). Historically exclusion was achieved by limiting who is allowed to participate in democracy. Whether it is women, indigenous, aboriginal, black, or the property-less, restrictions have prevented many different people from the entire democratic process. Even today in the United States, people in prison and convicted felons are excluded from participation in elections. Voter ID laws also disproportionately disenfranchise people of color.

In Latin America, the crisis of representative democracy, and the new forms of institutionalized direct democracy that responded to that crisis, was perhaps more acute. Peruzzotti and Selee (2009) suggest that the "central problem that is affecting the political dynamics of representative democracy in the region [is] the emergence of a growing gap between citizens and the political system". Elected officials were becoming increasingly unresponsive to the public. As Maxwell A Cameron et al. (2012) wrote:
The elected governments often failed to provide physical or social security or economic well-being, and were plagued by levels of corruption, clientelism, and unaccountability that undermined legitimacy. Fundamental flaws persisted with regard to electoral procedures, adherence to constitutional provisions, and the separation, coordination, and balance of powers between the executive and competing branches of the government, as well as the availability of opportunities for citizen participation in public affairs (pp. 3).

Representative democracy in Latin America, perhaps most importantly, failed to properly confront the negative impacts of neoliberalism. The election of Carlos Andres Perez in Venezuela and the subsequent popular rebellion to his failure to break from neoliberalism is but one example. In the 1988 presidential campaign, Carlos Andres Perez ran on an anti-neoliberal platform. Just a few weeks after taking office, Perez implemented a harsh neoliberal IMF-imposed structural adjustment program (SAP). On the morning of 27th of February, just ten days after Perez announced the SAP, commuters who traveled to the city by bus noticed that the fares had doubled. Venezuelans immediately began protesting in Caracas and by mid-morning the protests had spread to all the country's major cities. This rebellion, later called the Caracazo, was one of the first popular revolts to neoliberalism in the region and an expression of the crisis of representative democracy's failures to properly confront neoliberalism and the collective yearning for something different. It was in this context that various new forms of direct or participatory democracy began to take shape in Latin America.

**Participatory Democracy**

The concept of participatory democracy holds that citizens should be active participants in the process of governing the country (or state, city, community, workplace
etc.). In this model citizens must play a significant role in developing government policy and prioritizing budgets and projects in a way that benefits the entire community. The main principle behind participatory democracy is the constant participation, consultation, and discussion by citizens in the political process. This conception of democracy is quite different than the representative model where the extent of participation among citizens is going to the voting booth once every two to four years. The constant participation of citizens in the political process serves to better ensure self-determination. Participatory democracy strives to create an active political culture, opportunities for the incorporation of broader sectors of the population into the political process, and a more healthy civil society in general.

There are two prominent critiques of participatory democracy. The first is that direct democracy can only function efficiently on small scales and is untenable in larger communities (Steel and Peruzzotti 2009). The second is that governance should be left to experts (Schumpeter 1942). According to this critique, governance requires a certain level of skill and experience, and should not be entrusted to the everyday worker. The first argument is made both by theorists who reject participatory democracy outright (Schumpeter 1942) and by those who advocate participation only in small doses or as a complement to, rather than an alternative to representative democracy (Steel and Peruzzotti 2009). The notion that participatory democracy will fail if practiced in large communities is an old one. Writing in 1748 Montesquieu wrote:

As in a country of liberty, every man who is supposed a free agent ought to be his own governor, the legislative powers should reside in the whole body of the people. But since this is impossible in large states, and in small ones is subject to many inconveniences, it is fit the people should
transact by their representative what they cannot transact by themselves (Montesquieu 1748, book 11, Chapter 6).

For Montesquieu, representative democracy grew out of the infeasibility of participatory democracy in larger communities. Technical and organizational difficulties are the most cited reasons for why participatory democracy could not work in larger areas. It would be difficult for people in countries with large populations to unite in assemblies or meetings to make decisions.

Steel and Peruzzotti (2009) make the case that participatory democracy is only effective in small communities where face-to-face interaction is possible and only if to improve or enhance representative democracy. They argue that instead of replacing representative institutions, participation can only work to enhance representation. Steel and Peruzzotti (2009) argue that there are four ways in which this is the case. First, participatory mechanisms can replace clientelistic relations. Clientelistic situations where public goods are negotiated in uneven private interactions can be mitigated by adopting more participatory forms of intermediation. Second, participation can bring more voices into the political arena, and increase incentives for low-income communities to participate in the decision making process. Third, participatory institutions can encourage more deliberative processes of decision-making. Through deliberation, Steel and Peruzzotti (2009) argue, citizens become the “true subjects of public decision making” (Steel and Peruzzotti 2009, pp 6). Fourth, the sum of the first three produces a more equitable distribution of resources. Steel and Peruzzotti (2009) are quick to point out that these benefits of participation are to “enhance accountability and outcomes of existing democratic regimes”, not to replace them (Steel and Peruzzotti 2009, pg. 6). Not
all forms of participatory democracy are seen as alternatives to the representative model but as ways to improve and enhance it.

The second major critique of participatory or direct democracy is that the common person is not fit to govern. The notion that governance should be left to “experts” dates back for centuries. Plato and Aristotle for example were hostile to the idea of “non-experts” governing their own affairs. The complex task of governing requires specialized knowledge and should be left to political experts. Just as you want a mechanic to fix your car, a pilot to fly a plane and a doctor to perform surgery, the argument goes that governing also requires specialized knowledge, skills, training and temperament. Paul Ginsborg (2008), characterizing the work of the great political theorist John Stuart Mill, wrote that Mill "felt passionately that the working classes, men and women, were not yet ready or sufficiently educated for democracy" (Ginsborg 2008).

When the Founding Fathers wrote the U.S. constitution, they also had this idea in mind. The purpose of the constitution was to prevent non-experts from meddling in policy matters (Arlander 2002). Alexander Hamilton wrote that if you were to have participatory democracy on a mass scale, “you must expect error, confusion and instability” (quoted in Cairns and Sears 2012). John Adams warned that “men in general in every society, who are wholly destitute of property are also too little acquainted with public affairs to form a right judgment, and too dependent upon other men to have a will of their own” (Quoted in Le Blanc 2010). As a way to secure both the wealth and power in the hands of a small minority, the participation of the majority was excluded from the political process.
Theorists of participatory democracy argue that not only are working people capable of governing their own affairs but that they are in fact better equipped to do so than representatives (Ackerman 2003; Barber 2003; Pateman 1970). Rather than the notion that only an elite set of experts have the skill-set and expertise to rule, to put it the words of the Marxist theorist and historian C.L.R. James, “every cook can govern” (James 1956). Proponents of this view make two arguments to support this idea. The first is that local actors are in a better position to make policy decisions that directly affect them because they have better knowledge of their own local needs. Moreover, when citizens are directly involved in the decision-making process, they become more invested in the projects and decisions in which they have determined (Ackerman 2003, Montambeault 2012).

Second, the specialized knowledge, skills and training that one needs to govern are attained through the process of governing itself. Participatory democracy is praised by theorists as “schools of democracy” that function as an institutional space for citizenship learning and empowerment and a space for citizens to be better democrats (Montambeault 2012). Participatory democracy thus not only gives excluded sectors channels to voice their concerns but also educates them on how to best use that voice. The more citizens participate in the decision making process, the more they are informed, educated and empowered to administer their own affairs (Pateman 1970, della Porta 2013). Participation creates a cyclical process where participation trains and provides experience for citizens to be more informed, knowledgeable and skilled democrats, thus reproducing and improving the efficiency of participation which opens more spaces for
more participation. Politics and participatory governance becomes its own university. It is by participating that people learn to participate (della Porta 2013).

The role of participation has been of considerable importance to sociologists. Jurgen Habermas (1991) for example, argues that democratic settings and increased participation are likely to produce individuals with democratic dispositions and the capacities necessary for democracy. By resolving political issues by means of democratic and participatory discourse, participants develop autonomy, the social capacities of judgment, and are better able to make critical decisions of their interests and needs. For Habermas, autonomy implies agency (the ability for one to have control over their own life), and “the ability to create, to bring new ideas, things and relations into being” (Warren 1993).

Montambeault (2012) argues that participatory decision making processes function as schools of democracy. The first argument is the ways in which participants become better citizens at an individual level. On an individual level participants learn the democratic skills necessary to govern. These might include learning how to organize and mobilize, communicate more effectively, listen to other perspectives, to formulate demands etc. Participatory decision making is more successful when participants have experience, and participation itself contributes to the education and learning process necessary.

Secondly, participation contributes to citizens becoming better positioned to pursue the interests and the common good of the community. By developing democratic attitudes towards the governance process, participants develop shared understandings of
the political sphere, the world and the common good (Montambeault 2012, Pateman 1970.) Shared understandings lead participants to engage in public thinking and envisioning a common future. Individual beliefs, values and preferences, in this conception are not static and unchanging but rather created and transformed through the participatory process. Through participation the issues and political preferences held by the individual are embedded in the interests of the community to which they belong.

Testing this theory, Francoise Montambeault (2012) analyzed the Brazilian participatory budgeting model (PB) as a school for democracy. She found that in all the cities in her study, PB created formal spaces for the voices of the excluded. Citizens were included in every step of the local democratic process. This included the decision making process, policy implementation and monitoring. PB also contributed to making citizens “better democrats” but to varying successes. In two of the three cities studied, participants developed new understandings of politics and citizenship and learned how to better pursue the interests and the common good of their community. In the third city, Recife, PB still opened spaces for traditionally excluded, but politicized interests prevailed over the common good (Montambeault 2012).

Increasing the direct involvement of the traditionally excluded in the decision-making process also serves to introduce new, important issues that might otherwise not be considered. While representative democracy serves the interest of those who fund lobbyists or have the resources to make major contributions to political campaigns, participatory democracy should give more power to the powerless as they themselves are directly involved in the construction of values and issues. Participation opens up spaces
for the traditionally excluded to debate, discuss and formulate issues that are important to them and that directly affect their lives (della Porta 2013).

The expansion of democracy, be it participatory or otherwise, was never a gift from above, but was achieved through relentless, protracted and sometimes violent social struggles. Participatory democracy or democracy from below (Cairns and Sears 2012) has emerged from resistance and social movements in the form of collective action. It is from these actions that different forms of democracy have developed. It is not simply the power of ideas created by great thinkers, but rather the self-activity of living humans as an ongoing process that safeguards or improves democracy (Cairns and Sears 2012).

Although early experiments in participatory democracy can be found in the West, classical Greece being one example (Cornelius Castoriadis, The Imaginary Institution of Society, MIT Press, 1975), in our contemporary age the global South is taking a lead in its promotion and practice in participatory democracy. While Western notions of representative democracy are losing favor in many parts of the global south, citizens are reconfiguring democracy under their own terms. Since 1989 participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil has allowed residents to directly participate in the allocation of city funds. Budgeting decisions are made by dozens of assemblies made up of poor and middle class men and women across the city. Currently more than fifty thousand residents participate in the budgeting process in a city of one and a half million people (Lewit 2002).

Responding to the economic crisis of 2001, workers in Argentina created hundreds of neighborhood assemblies. Argentines also began to take control of factories.
The number of occupied and worker-controlled factories subsequently grew into the hundreds (Sitrin 2006). Building off factory occupations that took place during the Dirty War of the 1970s, workers cooperatively run the factories, decisions are made democratically by worker assemblies rather than professional managers, and profits are distributed equitably to all workers (Ranis 2006).

Historically, social movements (particularly the labor movement) have put forward alternative conceptions of democracy from the liberal representative model. With an emphasis on positive and collective rights over individual and negative rights, participation over delegation to politicians, social movements have been at the forefront of experimenting with different democratic models (della Porta 2013). Movements from the Occupy Movement to the Indignados in Spain to participatory budgeting in Brazil, demonstrate that participation remains central to movements today.

Participation, and more specifically participatory democracy is but one component in a broader constellation of ways in which workers and everyday citizens exercise their own self determination and collectively control the social conditions under which they live. The Venezuelan Communes exhibit characteristics of popular power and democratic self-governance, two topics that will be discussed in more detail below.

**Theorizing Popular Power**

The slogan of popular power has been raised in many historical cases including: The 1968 general strikes in France (Geir 2008), the Water Wars in Cochabamba, Bolivia (Olivera and Lewis 2008), the Portuguese Revolution (Hammond 1988), Chile under the Popular Unity Government in 1970-1973 (Winn 1989), the 2001 rebellion in Argentina
(Sitrin 2006), and the 2006 teachers’ strike in the Mexican city of Oaxaca (Harman 2007), to name a few. The following section will attempt to theorize the notion of “popular power”.

Thomas Muhr (2010) defines popular power as “an expansion of the territorial distribution of power (in addition to municipal, federal state and national power) in the construction of a direct democratic governance structure”. In another definition, Cairns and Sears (2012) define popular power as “the ability of vast numbers of people to control collectively the political, economic, and social conditions under which they live.” The legal definition of popular power in Venezuela's Law of Popular Power, states that:

"Popular power is the full exercise of sovereignty by the people in the political, economic, social, cultural, environmental, international, and any other sphere of the progression and development of society through their diverse forms of organization that build the communal state" (Ley Organica del Poder Popular; 2010).

Popular power can thus be seen as an alternative site of power or counter-power to parliamentarism, state power or other traditional nodes of power. In other words popular power is a form of direct or workers’ democracy. Workers’ councils, communal councils, neighborhood associations, popular assemblies, and different forms of workers’ control are all examples of ways citizens can exercise popular power.

Popular power is often framed as ‘democracy from below’ in contrast to traditional forms of power or ‘democracy from above’. Cairns and Sears (2012) use the term democracy from below to “refer to more expansive processes of self-government that are based on the establishment of popular power in all areas of life”. Hal Draper (1974) suggests that while democracy from above stops at governmental forms,
democracy from below works to transform human relations in all areas of society and towards the democratization of social-economic life in general. Fundamental to the idea of popular power is direct decision making by those who are affected by those decisions. But more than a style of government or form of decision making, it is about participants controlling all aspects of their lives (Cairns and Sears 2012).

Sociologist John L. Hammond (1988) contrasts popular power to centralism. The centralist model “is viewed as a command structure in which people’s participation consists largely in supporting decisions made in their name by a central authority” (Hammond 1988, pp.19). The popular power model on the other hand argues that the state must be transformed by the activities of citizens. According to Hammond (1988) true popular power comes through processes of struggle in which workers “come to control the means of production directly and collectively” (Hammond 1988, pp. 20). For Hammond (1988), like Draper (1974), popular power rejects representative governing structures and is predicated upon direct participation by all in both political and economic decisions. Popular power is something that is created by collective organization of popular struggles making demands against the ruling class and the state.

Movements for popular power offer a critique and alternative to parliamentary, liberal notions of democracy and traditional nodes of power. While liberal democracy is based on the delegation to representatives who are only accountable to those they represent during the time of elections, social movements stress a system of direct or participatory democracy. By opening new channels of access to the political system social movements contribute to the creation of public space that is separate from
traditional political institutions and can also contribute to a transfer of power over states (della Porta 2013, Tilly 1993). Two prominent forms of popular power, workers’ councils and communal councils, will be discussed in further detail below.

**Councils and Democratic Self-Governance**

Over the past century workers and communities have fought to gain more control over their workplaces, communities, and the decisions that affect their lives. Workers have gained varying degrees of power by occupying factories, operating self-managed enterprises and forming workers’ and communal councils. Worker and communal councils have emerged at various geographic locations and historical moments as the genuine expression of workers’ interests. Workers have organized themselves in councils in many cases without prior knowledge of councils that have preceded them. In this way councils can be seen as a natural tendency for rank-and-file workers (Ness and Azzellini 2011). The following section will examine the history and theory of councils from the Paris Commune of 1848 to the present.

**Worker Councils**

A workers’ council can be defined broadly as a form of political and economic organization in which a workplace is controlled collectively by the workers of that workplace. Councils represent the collective expression of the working class whereby workplaces are collectively controlled by the workers rather than the bosses. The workers themselves through assemblies and the election of temporary and recallable delegates make all the necessary decisions in that work place. Delegates come from and
are elected by the workers themselves, they generally make the same wages as the other workers and are meant to rotate frequently. Delegates are elected to pursue a mandate that was given to them by the workers, and if the mandate is betrayed the delegate is recalled. There are no managers in the council; all decisions are made through the delegate system. Councils are also marked by their independence from official and institutional structures. Different forms of workers' control have sprung up in a myriad of places in the world and in many different historical contexts. Some of the most prominent examples include: Paris 1871, Russian 1917-18, Hungary 1956, France 1968, Chile 1972-73, Portugal 1974-75, Iran 1979, and Poland 1980-81 just to name a few (Barker 1987, Cohen 2011, Gluckstein 2011, Ness and Azzellini 2011).

Councils have sprung up in a variety of different geographic locations, types of states, in both more and less developed countries as well as in both urban and rural sectors. In each of these examples, workers’ councils form very similar democratic structures, regardless of whether the workers had much prior knowledge of previous council structures. Workplace-based, direct democratic structures repeatedly appear in unpredictable moments of working class struggle. Councils are generated in the midst of worker uprisings regardless of the experience or awareness of the workers involved. One conclusion drawn from this is that the council structure is an organic expression of workers in a context that requires such organization (Cohen 2011, Wallis 2011).

**How and When do Workers’ Councils Emerge?**

The literature suggests that there are two necessary conditions for the emergence of workers’ councils. The first condition is that councils emerge in times of major crisis,
and the second is a high level of independent organization among workers (Gluckstein 2011). Much of the research on workers’ councils has found that they usually emerge in times of capital crisis, whether economic, political or both (Barker 1987; Ness and Azzellini 2011, Wallis 2011). Although councils have appeared at various junctures, they tend to go further and deeper in revolutionary periods.

Regarding the second condition for workers’ councils, the existence of a strong independent organization among workers, there is much debate about what types of organization are necessary, how they organize and the level of spontaneity in their emergence. Comparing the successful establishment of Soviets in Russia and the failure the German councils, Barker (2002) argues that the key to success in Russia was the existence of an effective revolutionary organization rooted in the working class. At the time of the revolution the Bolsheviks had a few thousand members with a strong tradition in the laboring class. Barker (2002) contends that the Bolsheviks were ready when the objective factors presented the opportunity for councils to take power. In the case of the German councils, Barker argues (2002) the Spartakists were born only in the moment of the 1918 revolution and were not as well established, nor did they have the coherent revolutionary strategies that the Bolsheviks did. Wallis (2011) argues that the role of a revolutionary party is to give priority to workers' control at each stage of development, provide self-protection, and to ensure the movement’s cohesion.

The conditions for the development of councils (social and economic upheaval, crisis, war, and the destruction of state structures) were present in both the post WWI and post WWII periods but they only appeared to a significant extent in the post WWI period.
Gluckstein (2011) locates the dearth of councils in the weakness of independent working class organizations in the WWII period. The repression of independent working-class activity by Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany was one factor, but also the communist parties who once promoted councils in the WWI period, now opposed them. Communist parties post WWII were oriented primarily to support Moscow and were discouraged to actively encourage the formation of workers’ councils.

One example of this dynamic is the 1956 revolutionary workers' movement in Hungary. Workers in Hungary armed themselves and formed independent democratic councils that challenged extant traditional state institutions. In the end, the workers’ movement was crushed by Stalin’s successors and dismissed as “counter-revolutionary” and under the influence of Western financing. The suppression of the democratic councils was supported by communist parties internationally (Kosuth 2007).

On the question of organization there is an important debate on the extent to which workers’ council structures emerge “spontaneously” without conscious preparation, or as a result of conscious organization. The debate is often framed as the spontaneity vs. organization debate. In times of crisis and heightened class conflict workers form identical committee-based, delegate led directly democratic structures. These structures are created by the requirements of the situation and are generated to meet the immediate organizational needs of workers. Because the generation of councils can be seen as a natural expression out of the concrete needs of workers, some theorists argue that their organization is spontaneous (Cohen 2011). Councils, according to Cohen (2011) are not premeditated or the result of conscious preparation. She argues that
because all accounts of workers councils are almost identical in structure, they emerge because real material conditions require that type of organization, among workers rather than being “plucked from thin air”. The specific council structure arises and is shaped by the capitalist labor process and capitalist production (Cohen 2011).

Hallas (1971) on the other hand, although acknowledging spontaneity, emphasizes the importance of conscious organization. He argues that from the position of organizations any action or event carried out by workers not part of a formal organization appears to be spontaneous, but from the point of view of the workers their actions are conscious and deliberate. Hallas argues that:

Spontaneity and organization are not alternatives; they are different aspects of the process by which increasing numbers of workers can become conscious of the reality of their situation and of their power to change it. The growth of that process depends on a dialogue, on organized militants who listen as well as argue, who understand the limitations of a party as well as its strengths and who are able to find connections between the actual consciousness of their fellows and the politics necessary to realize the aspirations buried in that consciousness.

For Hallas (1971) workers do act spontaneously but organization provides the cohesion and coordination necessary for a workers’ movement to sustain itself and be successful in the end.

**Why have Councils Been Short-lived?**

Though the appearance of the workers’ councils on the world stage was of great importance, their existence was brief. The question of why historic examples of workers’ councils have been short-lived is an important one in the literature. Are the internal dynamics of councils and the nature of workers power in general more inefficient
and rife with internal institutional problems than traditional workplace organization? Or do the problems with councils come from outside the council itself, from either the state, or party officials or having to operate within the capitalist marketplace? Ness and Azzellini (2011) contend that the challenges of worker control come more from without rather than from within. Places of worker controlled production operating in the dominant capitalist culture must interact with sectors of capitalist society and on a capitalist playing field. Many workplaces are occupied after capitalist entrepreneurs abandon their firm because of obsolete production methods or because of eroded distribution markets. The recently occupied workplace thus faces additional hurdles by taking over enterprises with obsolete technology or that are non-profitable because of market failures. It is in this context that worker-run industries must compete in the capitalist marketplace against domestic and foreign enterprises (Ness and Azzellini 2011). Additionally worker-run industries, despite their democratic nature, must produce for the market, undermining the democratic elements of the worker council itself. Decisions that in theory are made by the council are often influenced by the capitalist marketplace in which it operates. For example the market dictates what is to be produced and the prices for commodities, influencing decisions in the council.

In addition to operating within a market system, worker-run industries also face attacks from the state or other outside forces. Wallis (2011) argues that in the thirteen cases of workers-control in his study, each of them was destroyed by the threat, or use of force. In the case of Russia, the soviets were destroyed in counter-revolution led by the white army in the civil war, in Spain worker’s control was suppressed when Nazi and
Italian Fascist forces intervened in their civil war on the side of Franco, and in Chile the government returned seized factories to their previous owners in exchange for military guarantees to protect elections.

In the case of Russia, Harman (1967) locates the failures of the soviets in the decimation of the working class and the decline in industrial and agricultural production that resulted from the civil war. Fourteen capitalist countries sent forces to Russian to fight alongside the White Army to crush the soviet system. The Red Army ended up winning the war but not without significant losses. By 1920 industrial output was just 18 percent of the pre-war figure and labor productivity was just one third of what it was before the war. The working class was reduced to 43 percent of its former numbers (Harman 1967). The workers who once ran the factories were the most likely to fight on the frontline in the war and the most likely to suffer the most casualties. The decimation of production and the decimation of the working class led to decline in genuine workers’ power. The class that made up the soviets ceased to exist in any meaningful sense after the war, hindering any chance of sustaining genuine workers' democracy (Harman 1967).

**Theoretical Foundations**

The theoretical foundation for worker’s control is rooted in Marxism or more specifically in late 19th and early 20th century socialist theory. Marx argued that workers are the most revolutionary and democratic force in society. As Marxist theorist Hal Draper (1955) points out, it is not that workers are more clever, more humanitarian, or that they are better human beings because they are workers but that:
The special "advantage" of the working class springs from inherent drives of its class position in society, its ineradicable interests as a group, its conditions of life; and its "advantage" comes into play only insofar as this class organizes itself (as it is inevitably driven to do) and transforms the thinking of its individual components in the course of class experiences.

The workings of capitalist production have created a new laboring class both through the development of industry, which increases the working class in number, and through the socialization of production, which concentrates workers in workplaces. Capitalist production led to increasingly large and concentrated production units. Other oppressed groups that existed before the modern working class (for example peasants or farmers) were atomized, separated and relied on individual effort to survive. In contrast, to meet the needs of capitalism, workers were thrown together in crowds and were organized in assembly lines, work teams and shifts in a way that they never had been before. Capitalism not only organized workers in workplaces, teaching workers the principles of working together and solidarity but also subjected workers to similar stresses on the job. Their collective grievances, their inherent organization as a class, and their overwhelming majority in numbers gives the working class a different kind of economic power. Workers exercise this power primarily through their ability to withhold their labor and shut off the source of wealth in society (Marx 1848; Draper 1955).

If the working class is a revolutionary class, then the worker council represents the collective expression of workers' interests. Marx, writing about the Paris Commune, acknowledged the revolutionary potential of worker’s councils. About the commune he wrote “It was essentially a working class government, the product of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under
which to work out the economical emancipation of labor” (Marx 1978, pp. 634). Lenin’s analysis of the 1905 Petrograd Soviet also suggests that councils can be the basis for a new, worker-run society (Cohen 2011). Cohen (2011) argues that the councils that emerged in Russia in 1917 also embodied the features of a potential workers’ state. She contends that these bodies also had the potential to lead the conquest of power; eventually leading to what Engels called the “withering away” of the state (Cohen 2011).

Are all Councils Revolutionary?

Some forms of workers’ councils directly challenge capitalist hegemony while others operate within the capitalist logic of profit. Examples like the soviets in Russia and the councils during the Paris commune offer a glimpse of an alternative to capitalism. These councils emerge not out any state or party but out of the grassroots conditions of working life (Gluckstein 2011). Because the workers’ councils mentioned above actively challenge capitalist logic of production and profitability they must be distinguished from councils and other forms of participation that work within and support the capitalist representative model. The national policy councils and national policy conferences in Brazil, although important in expanding participation to the traditionally excluded, neither are a challenge to capitalist hegemony and nor can be seen as organs for a fundamentally different type of society. The national policy councils are permanent bodies that work within the structure of the executive branch, and the representatives are composed of half from the government and half from civil society (Pogrebinschi 2012). Pogrebinshci (2012) argues that these bodies are genuinely participatory but “strengthen formal political representation and potentially reinforce the functions and activities of
traditional political institutions, such as the legislature and political parties” (Pogrebinschi 2012, pg. 70).

Consultative councils in Mexico are another example. The consultative councils in Mexico play an ancillary role to established institutions. They consult in the formulation of policies, evaluate policies, and make recommendations for specific issues to government agencies (de la Jara and Vera 2012).

Self-management councils in Tito’s Yugoslavia, despite existing in a very different type of state as the Brazilian and Mexican examples above also played a supportive role to ruling class institutions. These councils were largely instruments of the ruling bureaucracy rather than genuine organs of democratic control from below. Yugoslav councils were quite unique in their acceptance and promotion of official state ideology, which was a market oriented approach to modernization. For the first few decades of self-management the trade unions were an essential ally of the pro-market faction of Yugoslav leadership (Music 2011). Councils demanded deregulation and lower taxes. Workers’ councils acted more as “collective entrepreneurs . . . than organs of workers’ control over management” (Music 2011, pg. 177). Additionally unlike the Russian Soviets, workers did not have full control over the surplus value produced in their workplaces. In the end the councils’ reliance on the marketplace on determining remuneration resulted in workplace insecurity and declining standard of living. Music (2011) argues that “the self-management councils, as the principal structures, could not serve as democratic organs for exercising dissent, since their primary purpose was to play
a managerial function in the operation of firms, not to serve as political organs of the working class” (Music 2011, pg. 189).

The difference between councils that challenge capitalism and those that work within it is that in the former the councils control the means of production and collectively make binding decisions in their workplaces while in the latter the councils serve a more advisory and non-binding role supporting or supplementing traditional political institutions.

This section discussed popular power and various forms of democratic self-governance, but it is important to note that neither democratic self-governance or popular power is granted to the powerless without pressure from below. One important form of resistance of the oppressed is social movements. Popular power, whether in the form of councils or otherwise, must be understood as not only related to social movements and resistance from below but also as being inextricably intertwined. We now turn to the subject of social movements in general and movements for democracy in particular.

**Movements for Democracy**

Much of the literature on democracy and social movements focuses on three components, the internal democratic practices within movements themselves (Epstein 1991; Polletta 2002; della Porta and Rucht 2013) the ways in which regimes of different degrees of democracy create different opportunities and challenges for the development of social movements (McAdam 1982; Tilly 1978; Tarrow 1994), and social movements’ role in democratization and in movements whose explicit demand is increasing

This following section will focus on the latter.

**Social Movements and Democratization**

Democratization studies in the social sciences often focus either on socioeconomic preconditions or on the behavior of elites. Their emphasis on elites leaves little room for social movements and protest in democratic processes. Huntington (1965) went so far as to argue that mobilization of the working class was more of a risk to democracy than an asset. O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986), like Huntington argue that too much pressure from below and too much popular mobilization is a threat to democracy. Movements should therefore moderate themselves and avoid radical redistributive demands, and allow political party leaders to mediate conflicts, set the stakes, and in short set the terms for transitions to democracy (della Porta 2013).

More recently scholars (della Porta 2013; Evans 2008; Tilly 2013; Ulfelder 2005) have taken up the question of social movements and their role in democratization. The global justice movement pushed scholars to merge social movement and democratization studies. A number of studies began to afford social movements a more prominent role in democratic transitions (della Porta 2013; Tilly 2013; Ulfelder 2005). Della Porta (2013) argues that protests and strikes (two movement tactics) spread the perception among authoritarian regimes that they must liberalize society in order to avoid the taking of power by revolutionary or democratic actors. During transition periods, large coalitions of movements (be it labor, women’s, urban) often push for the expansion of democratic rights (Assies 2003; Azzellini and Ness 2011; Barker 1987; Cameron et al. 2012; della
As Tilly (2013) points out, movements are more likely to mobilize around particular grievances and interests than around explicit demands for democratization. And some movements pursue anti-democratic programs, in the cases of movements that exclude immigrants or racial or religious minorities. A few scholars have pointed out how movements from below, even if their program is not explicitly the expansion of democracy, play a significant role in democratization (della Porta 2013; Tilly 2013). Tilly (2013) contends that movements, through their voluntary associations, petition drives, public meetings etc. promote a series of effects. They develop problem-solving ties among activists, incorporate existing organizations into new forms of political activity, and develop procedures by which governmental agents respond differentially to performances and identity claims. Tilly (2013) argues that “these additional effects established social movements as regular participants in public politics” (Tilly 2013, pg. 124). In other words movements, whether promoting democracy in general or not, democratize society by including traditionally excluded sectors of society into the workings of public politics. The dynamics of social movements, according to Tilly (2013), activated three democracy-promoting processes:

Processes that democratized public politics directly by broadening and equalizing collective political participation, processes that insulated public politics from existing social inequalities, and processes that reduced insulation of trust networks from major political actors (Tilly 2013, pg. 142).
When these processes are activated, democracy is expanded. But, in cases where governments ignored, co-opted, destroyed, repressed, dispersed or deflected social movement coalitions and their trust networks, democracy deteriorated. In the end, Tilly (2013) argues that social movements promote democracy when they give people more power over the decisions that affect their lives. This can occur either as explicit programs of democratization or as by-products of their action (Tilly 2013, pg. 143). Social movements expand the number of and equalize the weight of participants in public politics, as well construct coalitions that cross important categorical boundaries. One example Tilly (2013) gives is the coalition between Egyptians of diverse ideological orientations (leftists, liberals, nationalists, Islamists) working together alongside established interest groups (e.g. worker groups) and minority communities (e.g. Copts) in their efforts to overthrow Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian dictator.

Social movements also enhance democracy through what De Sousa Santos (2005) calls “cosmopolitan legality”. Cosmopolitan legality is defined as “law-making and law challenging projects that link the local and the global in ways that unsettle global inequality and exclusion” (Ansley 2005, pg. 158). Cosmopolitan legality projects were carried out in various ways and in diverse institutional settings, including the Alien Tort Claims Act (ATCA) used by the Free Burma movement (Dale, 2011), The Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network in their struggle against NAFTA (Ansley, 2005), the driver’s license campaign for undocumented workers, and the Narmada Valley’s struggle against dam projects (Rajagopal, 2005).
In the case of the Free Burma movement, an ATCA suit was brought by peasants who claimed to have been used as slave laborers and subjected to human rights abuses while working on a Unocal pipeline. They used a U.S. law to argue for the first time that a transnational corporation was compliant in human rights abuses committed outside the United States. Rather than transnational networks seeking to adapt to the power of elites, those in Burma sought to challenge this power by pushing for different rules. These movements create spaces for popular participation, new pressures toward governments, new forms of popular debate, and new spaces to hold states and corporations accountable (Dale, 2011).

Keck and Sikkink's (1989) work looks at one particular strategy that some movements for democracy have adopted. Their model, called the 'boomerang effect', shows how state-centered movements can create political leverage through alliances with transnational advocacy networks. The boomerang effect is a strategy employed by local actors when domestic avenues of influence are closed off (normally in a repressive state). Local advocacy groups would then mobilize international allies to pressure their states to put pressure on the target state. Various movements promoting democracy, especially in conjunction with human rights (see Peter Evans 2000) have successfully adopted such organizational strategies.

**Social Movements as Democracy from Below**

The democracy of social movements is often different than Western and liberal notions of representative democracy. As I mentioned in the above section social movements do more than simply struggle for their own specific demands; they also
influence the way the whole political system functions. A movement for immigration rights for example, does more than push for immigration reform, it also pushes for the inclusion of voices outside of the traditional establishment, the decentralization of political power and by their interactions with public administration they present new institutions and approaches that influence the political process (Tilly 2013). These new approaches or institutional actors make up what some scholars call “democracy from below” (della Porta 2013; Draper 1974; Cairns and Sears) or a “populist approach to democracy” (Tilly 1993; Grattan 2016). They are to be distinct from Western and liberal notions of representative democracy called “democracy from above” (della Porta 2013, Draper 1974; Cairns and Sears 2012), or the “elitist” approach to democracy (Tilly 1993).

Cairns and Sears (2012) use the term democracy from below to “refer to more expansive processes of self-government that are based on the establishment of popular power in all areas of life”. Draper (1974) suggests that while democracy from above stops at governmental forms, democracy from below works to transform human relations in all areas of society and moves towards the democratization of social-economic life in general. Fundamental to the idea of democracy from below is direct decision making by those who are affected by those decisions. But more than a style of government or form of decision making it is about participants controlling all aspects of their lives (Cairns and Sears 2012).

From the democracy from below perspective, movements offer a critique and alternative to parliamentary, liberal democracy. While liberal democracy is based on the delegation to representatives who are only accountable to those they represent during the
time of elections, social movements stress a system of direct or participatory democracy discussed at the beginning of this paper. By opening new channels of access to the political system social movements contribute to the creation of public space that is separate from traditional political institutions and can also contribute to a transfer of power over states (della Porta 2013, Tilly 1993). Tilly (1993) argues that under the right conditions the creation of public space and the transfer of power promote democratization. These conditions will be discussed in the next section, but it is first important to note that not all social movements promote democracy. In fact some are either anti-democratic (fascist, racist, anti-immigrant etc.) or have the unintended effect of provoking a backlash in democratic rights (della Porta 2013, Tilly 2013). But when social movements act as agents of democracy from below they help democratization both in authoritarian regimes and by increasing participation and direct democracy in representative regimes.

**Popular Power and Counterhegemonic Globalization from Below**

The concept of globalization from below derives from the study of social change, a key theme of sociology. One important impetus for social change (and one important topic for sociologists) is social movements. Sociologists have been interested in the ways humans band together in an organized fashion to encourage (or discourage) social change. Social movements connect people who share similar political goals. In this case, globalization from below has the goal of “making the global system safe for decent societies”. Douglas Kellner (2002) defines globalization from below as:
The ways in which marginalized individuals and social movements resist globalization and/or use its institutions and instruments to further democratization and social justice (pg. 293)

Kellner’s definition is very useful in the way that he conceptualizes globalization from below as two different (yet overlapping) phenomena. On the one hand it is a reaction, a movement that exists solely to resist the inequities of corporate globalization, but on the other it looks at the ways people at the grassroots level have taken advantage of the openings and possibilities created by globalization to build an alternative globalization based on democracy and social justice. Not only have activists taken advantage of openings and possibilities but they have also played a role in creating them.

Some examples of globalization from below that sociologists have studied include: transnational social movements (Peter Evans 2012), deglobalization (Bello 2005), the World Social Forum (de Sousa Santos 2005), the Zapatista movement (John Holloway 1998, 2002), the Free Burma Movement (Dale 2011), the Global Justice Movement (La Botz 2000), the Bolivian Water Wars (Assies 2003), among others. These authors are interested in the ways in which counter-hegemonic social movements have played a role in shaping our global world and challenging hegemonic neoliberal globalization from above.

Evans (2008) defines counter-hegemonic globalization as “a globally organized effort to replace the neoliberal global regime with one that maximizes democratic political control and makes the equitable development of human capabilities and environment stewardship its priorities” (Evans 2008). Evans (2008) begins with the assumption that neoliberal globalization is unsustainable. Neoliberalism has come to be
an uncontested by dominant elites, but outside of elite circles dominant economic institutions and government officials, widespread disillusionment of the failures of neoliberalism prevail. Disillusionment stems from neoliberalism’s failure to protect individuals and groups from the market, whether it be crises, inequality or decreasing access to health and education. Moreover, neoliberal governance has failed to even protect the assets of capitalists themselves.

What is important for Evans (2008) however is that while neoliberalism has failed to protect people from the vicissitudes of the market, it has created the conditions for and opened up the space for counterhegemonic social movements that challenge globalization from above. Evans (2008) argues that neoliberalism has in many ways expanded the possibilities for social movements to organize at the global level. Advances in technological tools as well as the social and organizational resources that have expanded under neoliberal globalization have given social movements the tools that enable them to organize in ways that were unthinkable 100 years ago.

In the case of Venezuela the emergence and proliferation of communes and communal councils are not just an expression of resistance to neoliberal, corporate-led globalization but also the creation of a new form of development and democratic self-governance. Communal councils have already incorporated traditionally excluded sectors of society into political decision making processes, but the question remains, do these networks of popular power have the potential to fundamentally transform the capitalist state in this era of globalization?
The study of globalization from below is generally interested in transnational networks and movements. The communes and communal councils in Venezuela should be understood as response and a reaction to neoliberal globalization. Community organizations in Venezuela and the precursors to communal councils emerged from the caracazo which was a response to IMF imposed neoliberal globalization. Many civil society organizations and social movements in Venezuela organized transnationally in various campaigns including the rejection of the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA). The communal councils and communes also have a transnational component. One example is the collaboration between various indigenous communal councils in Venezuela and the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico. These connections will be further elaborated in chapter five.

Sociologists have long grappled with the question of how society changes. One important societal change is the democratization of society. Democratization can take a number of forms including transitions from authoritarian to representative democracies, increased participation in representative democracies, or in the form of councils as a bottom-up alternative to the representative model. This chapter examined the intersection between democratization and social movements and the ways in which the success or failure of an expansion of democracy from below is contingent on the activity and influence of social movements.

In the Marxist literature, because of workers’ unique position in the production of society’s wealth, the potential for workers’ power was theorized to reside at the point of production, in other words at the workplace. This literature suggests that the labor
movement is especially positioned to increase democracy. Over the past few decades however, we have seen the labor movement experience great decline in unionization rates. This is not to say that the labor movement cannot experience resurgence, but in this decline other competing movements have emerged to pursue different projects and mobilize people around different interests. One important movement examined in this dissertation is the communal council movement in Venezuela. The expansion of communal councils in Venezuela demonstrates an alternative form of workers power where citizens wield power, not at the point of production in the traditional Marxist literature, but at the community level. Though some of the communes have more recently taken over abandoned factories and other sites of production for the most part they exercise their power not in their workplaces but in their neighborhoods.

Marx and Engels (1848) wrote in the Communist Manifesto that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle”. Though not all social movements promote democracy, and in some cases are anti-democratic in nature, social movements as a form of resistance and an expression of the oppressed are important catalysts in history. While social movements and class struggle, as Marx and Engels (1848) wrote, are the motors of history and play a significant role in the democratization of society, democratization also creates the conditions that are conducive for the mobilization of social movements. It is through this dialectic between movements and various forms of participation and popular power that we can begin to understand the democratization of society.
CHAPTER THREE

Popular Power, Participatory Democracy and the Communes from *Punto Fijismo* to the Present.
Underneath a busy highway in Caracas Venezuela, thirty to forty community members, sitting on tattered couches and an array of plastic and wooden chairs, collectively decide what type of projects and services they would like to implement in their neighborhoods. Accompanied by live music, pets, children of all ages, and the constant noise of passing traffic, members of the communal council engage in lively debates and vote on public policy and projects that directly affect their daily lives. There is a communal almost extended family feel to the gathering. On this particular day in La Cascada the assembly is discussing possibilities to build a stage with bathrooms and dressing rooms, a sports court, a daycare center and a soup kitchen to serve community members. Whatever decisions made by the council are binding. If the council decides to build a daycare center and a sports court, the mayor and local officials are bound to abide by the council’s decision.

On the other side of Caracas in the parish of Antimano is the Clavellinas Communal Council, a council that was formed in 2006 with 350 families, is working to receive grants for home, sidewalk and alleyway repairs. La Cascada, and Clavellinas are just two of over 45,000 registered Communal Councils in Venezuela. Funding for these communal councils come mostly from municipal, state and city governments and goes directly to the community (Fox and Leindecker, 2008; Azzellini, 2013). La Cascada and Clavellinas give us a glimpse of the self-government mechanisms that are cropping up all over Venezuela where marginalized communities who previously had no say, now participate in decision making that is collective rather than individual, direct rather than representative and active rather than passive.
Since the 1998 election of Hugo Chavez Frias, Venezuela has undergone significant changes. For one, networks of popular power through popular organizations like the communal councils, land committees and communes are far more prevalent today than any time before the Chavez era. Often these changes are seen as the sole result of the election of Chavez. This formulation downplays the broader context of the development of social movements in both Venezuela and the region. The extent of Chavismo’s successes and the achievements of the Bolivarian Revolution would be unthinkable without the social movements and civil society that support and give viability to the Chavista government.

One important achievement of the Bolivarian Revolution is the inclusion and participation of broader social sectors in the democratic process. This new participation has manifested itself in various forms including: local public planning councils that work to develop public policy, participatory budget-allocation, co-management of state-owned factories, workers councils, Bolivarian circles, social “missions”, community radio, and most importantly communal councils. Although the communal councils undeniably received a huge boost when they were legitimized, promoted and began to receive funds from the Venezuelan government, communal councils and neighborhood associations, were organizing themselves independently and outside of the state prior to their official recognition by the Chavista government. Many of these forms of popular organizations that were formed under Chavez have distinct genealogies that predate the Chavez government and are part of a long history of social movements in Venezuela.

Contemporary expressions of popular power and community based organizations were
shaped throughout 50 years of political activity. Communal council and commune activists trace their heritage to the clandestine movements against the military regime in the 1950s, the guerilla struggles of the 1960s, and the urban committees of the 1990s. With this in mind, this chapter will explore these genealogies as we look at social movements, the left and popular organization from the restoration of formal liberal democracy in 1958 to the present.

This chapter will further explore the dynamic between the Venezuelan state, which has committed itself to a discourse on grassroots political participation and civil society which has responded to this call in ways that often exceed and challenge the expectations of the government. The Bolivarian process has raised Venezuelan’s expectations of the state, and its very success depends on both the actions of grassroots activists and the Chavista government. While the government has opened up spaces for grassroots organization, what social movement actors in Venezuela see as radical transformation still requires direct confrontation with those in political power. The Bolivarian process is not something that can be decreed from above, but must involve struggle, organization and ordinary people’s ability to act independently of the state.

Part one gives a brief history of popular organization and the left in Venezuela from 1958 to the Caracazo. Part two analyzes the economic and social crises leading up to Hugo Chavez’s election in an attempt to understand the broader context of resistance and social movements in which he came to power. Part three analyzes the relationship between civil society and the state by looking at the 2002 coup, the creation of the 1999
constitution, the radicalization of Chavez and the activity of popular movements. Part four focuses on participatory democracy as a form of popular power.

A History of Popular Organization and the Left in Venezuela from 1958 to the Caracazo

The Jimenez Dictatorship and the rise of Punto Fijismo

Representative democracy was established with the overthrow of Dictator Perez Jimenez in 1958. Soon after the ouster of Jimenez, the leaders of the non-communist parties who opposed the dictatorship, signed what was called the Pacto De Punto Fijo. The power sharing agreement was signed by Accion Democratica (AD), the Comite de Organizacion Politica Electoral Independiente (COPEI) and the Union Republicana Democratica (URD), with the URD resigning four years later. The pact was intended to preserve Venezuelan democracy by respecting the outcomes of popular elections, minimize public interparty rivalries, avoid efforts to for the military to exploit political divisions and to incorporate losing parties in their cabinets (Tinker Salas 92-93). But the pact also included many anti-democratic measures that served to curtail the role of the left by excluding left-wing parties from the political process. Many of the left-wing parties that were critical to the overthrow Jimenez were formally excluded. The Venezuelan Communist Party (PCV) for example who was part of the prodemocracy umbrella group Junta Patriotica (Patriotic Council) had garnered significant support in the barrios for their role in the overthrow of the dictatorship. Their exclusion from the pact and the consolidation of power between the AD and COPEI served to tame and channel
the energies of the popular masses that struggled to remove the dictator from power and
deny them access to official levers of power.

As George Ciccariello-Maher (2013) argues it was with the establishment of
formal democracy that a new struggle for substantive democracy and equality was born.
Student movements, movements of the left parties and later the guerrilla movement were
all struggling against this exclusionary form of liberal democracy. These movements
were a direct predecessor to movements today. Not only are many ex-guerillas in the
Bolivarian government today but also the seeds for a whole layer of social movements
against liberal democracy came out of these movements. The new struggle was a
struggle for more radical change rather than gradual, for more direct and participatory
democracy rather than limited forms of formal, representative democracy.

Guerilla movement

In the early 1960s the Venezuelan left turned to armed struggle. Many of those
who participated in the struggle against military rule became quickly disillusioned and
dissatisfied with the exclusionary form of democracy of puntofijismo as well as the
repression that came with it. The state targeted repression against parties left of AD (the
PCV was eventually made illegal) and the militants of these parties were tortured and
executed (Cicciariello-Maher 2013, pp28). Students, workers, campesinos and the
unemployed who took to the streets to radicalize the new liberal government were
attacked and gunned down. As a result of this and repression, and few options, the
Venezuelan left turned to guerrilla struggle. Leftists and revolutionaries began to form
small guerilla units in the mountains and barrios. In April of 1960 a section of militant
youth left the ruling AD party to form the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR). Inspired by the Cuban Revolution and the exclusion from the Punto Fijo Pact, various guerilla factions formed the Armed Forces of National Liberation (FALN). The FALN was made up of the PCV, the MIR, along with independent militants, dissident soldiers and communists (McCauhan 2005, pp58).

The guerillas carried out a wide range of actions including hijacking a cargo ship, burning a Sears Roebuck factory and kidnapping the deputy head of a U.S. military mission. From the very beginning the guerilla movement faced severe repression under the AD government. In 1963 alone the government cracked down on opposition deputies, arrested and jailed some 1,200 suspected communists including one of its principal leaders Teodoro Petkoff (McCauhan 2005).

In the mid-1960s the PCV shifted its attention away from armed struggle and toward prisoner release. The retreat from armed struggle created tension within the movement resulting in the expulsion of Douglas Bravo, another principal leader of the movement. The FALN continued its armed struggle until the early 1970s, where failing to win widespread support, the armed struggle collapsed. Though the armed guerilla movement was short-lived the memory of the struggle remained and as Sujatha Fernandes (2010) argues:

“The partial autonomy of urban social movements was established during these years of armed struggle, especially in the parishes such as 23 de Enero. Guerilla activists forged an alternative pole of historical memory that existed alongside and in contrast with a deepening clientelist relationships between barrio residents and the state” (Fernandes 2010, pp 49).
With the 1969 election of Rafael Caldera of COPEI began the pacification process, which effectively disarmed the guerilla movement. The left responded to the failure of the strategy of armed struggle in various ways. Some formed political parties, like the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) led by Petkoff, some began to engage in cultural activism while others created mass fronts (Fernandes 2010). Many on the left began to organize cultural workshops calling for a democratization of culture. Neighborhoods like 23 de Enero began to form cultural and community based organizations. Community based organizing that was pushed to the sidelines during the armed struggle began to emerge. Rather than a focus on state power, these organizations focused on more local concerns including the creation of theater and sports groups, drug awareness campaigns, and demands on local government for improvements in sanitation, health and infrastructure (Fernandes 2010, pp 52). Neighborhood associations grew to become more prominent in the 1980s.

**Economic and Social Crises Leading up to the Election of Hugo Chavez**

In order to provide the reader with the basic grounding necessary to understand popular power in Venezuela, it is important to first give a brief history of the region from the great depression to the social and economic crises of the 1980s and 1990s. From the Great Depression to the late 1960s import substitution industrialization (ISI) was the prevalent trade and economic policy in Latin America. ISI promotes “inner directed” development involving the replacement of imported goods with goods produced domestically. Government manipulation of the exchange rate, import tariffs, subsidized credit for substitutive investments and direct or indirect subsidies to hold down costs of
inputs for substitutive production were all policy instruments used to achieve inner directed development (Enriquez, 2000; Jonakin; 1997; Jonakin et al., 1999; Echanove, 2003; Cupples, 2004; Waitzkin et al., 2007; Walker, 1997; Mohan et al., 2000; Lehmann, 2000).

This strategy relied heavily on state intervention to control trade and investment. ISI policies deepened the dependence of developing countries on developed world economies as the former relied heavily on imported finished products like machinery. Over-valued exchange rates exacerbated the problem as income inequalities between urban and rural areas widened drastically. Debt in Latin America had been a constant characteristic as local markets were not large enough to sustain any firms. Consequently the funding of capital goods was through loans and trade deficits. An already weak and indebted Latin America was devastated by the oil crisis in the 1970s, which caused foreign debt and interest rates to skyrocket (Harvey, 2005; Korten, 2001; Mohan et al., 2000).

The Bretton Woods institutions, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and later the World Trade Organization (WTO) began to set terms of financial settlements between nearly bankrupt countries and international lenders. Structural adjustment programs, the packages of policy prescriptions necessary for a developing country to receive loans, became the standard economic policy in Latin America (Mohan, 2000; Korten, 2001; Harvey, 2005). State interventionist policies were replaced by market oriented, “laissez-fair” economic doctrine, later known as neoliberalism.
By the 1980s neoliberalism had become the dominant political ideology in the region. Neoliberalism, which meant fiscal austerity, privatization of state assets, liberalization of trade, deregulation, and free trade, did not have the results its adherents had claimed. The aggregate trade deficit of low-income countries increased from US$6.5 billion of US$34.7 billion between 1980 and 1992. The IMF and World Bank lent out more money to cover growing trade deficits and as a result international indebtedness increased from US$134 billion to US$473 billion between 1980 and 1992 (Korten, 2001). Inflation in Latin America increased 26 times between 1981 and 1990.

Neoliberal structural adjustment also disproportionately affects the poor, primarily by: 1) the distribution of real income by the market, and 2) the provision of public goods by the state (Azam, 1994, Cupples 2004, Enriquez 2000, Jonakin 1997, Lehmann 1992, Mohan et al. 2000, Waitzkin et al 2007). Inflation due to devaluation mainly affects the poor who do not own any land or real assets. Public workers, such as teachers (in Africa), have faced a 33% decrease in salaries (Mohan et al., 2000). The poor are further disadvantaged by cuts in subsidies for essential commodities, healthcare and education. Many countries reduced labor costs, downsized the labor force, reduced real wages, and intensified work. The minimum wage in Latin America fell by 25% in the 1980s, and average earnings in the informal economy decreased by 42% (Mohan et al., 2000). The cost of living increased dramatically as a result of structural adjustment. From 1980-1999 per capita growth in South America was 11% compared to the 80% growth the 20 years prior to the neoliberal period. Between 1960 and 1995 the ratio of average income between the world’s poorest and richest countries increased from 18:1 to
Neoliberalism also contributed to a number of economic crises in Latin America including Argentina in 2001, and Mexico in 1994. Despite these realities for many Latin Americans the wealth redistribution towards the rich and the accumulation of financial and political power led many in the world’s upper class to see neoliberalism as a resounding success (Martinez et al., 2010).

In Venezuela the picture was similar. Venezuela’s 20-year economic decline began in 1979 due in large part to heavy indebtedness, increasing oil production costs, and neoliberal policies. Real per capita income suffered a steady decline of 27% from 1979-1999, a decline that was greater than any other country in the region. By the early 1980s, poverty and inequality sky-rocketed to the highest levels in Latin America. Poverty increased from 17% in 1980 to 65% in 1996 (Wilpert, 2007). The lower classes increasingly felt isolated and excluded from public decisions and power (Martinez, 2010).

The 1989 Caracazo

The dissatisfaction came to a head in February 1989. In the 1988 presidential campaign, Carlos Andres Perez ran on an anti-neoliberal platform. Just a few weeks after taking office, Perez implemented a harsh neoliberal IMF-imposed structural adjustment program. On the morning of the 27th, ten days after Perez announced the SAP, commuters who traveled to the city by bus noticed that, because of the increase in gas prices, the fares had doubled. Venezuelans immediately began protesting. By mid-morning protests had spread to the country’s major cities. Buses were overturned and burnt, shops and supermarkets were looted and destroyed. The protests and destruction
turned into an outright rebellion that lasted a few days. The rebellion, later called the Caracazo, was followed by brutal military repression. Perez reacted to the rebellions by unleashing the police and military to squash not only the protesters but also the poor population. By the end of the Caracazo between 300 and 3,000 people had been killed (Wilpert, 2007; Gott 2005).

Much like elsewhere in Latin America, the failures of neoliberalism to accomplish its economic promises resulted in a rise of resistance against the economic doctrine across Latin America. The Zapatistas directly challenged the Mexican State, the Landless Peasants Movement (MST) in Brazil organized large land occupations, and indigenous movements in Bolivia and Ecuador mobilized in defense of natural resources and the environment. Venezuela was not different.

Primarily as a consequence of the Caracazo, new human rights groups, social movements, civil and community associations and political parties emerged. Community organizations and networks of Afro-Venezuelans, indigenous and woman's organizations were established and a flood of neighborhood assemblies developed (Ciccariello-Maher 2013). Many of the predecessors to community and neighborhood associations that exist today, including the communal councils, can be traced back to the aftermath of the Caracazo. One such organization is the Coordinadora Simon Bolívar, a grouping of 14 grassroots collectives which cropped up in one of Venezuela’s neighborhoods in response to the police repression of the Caracazo. Grassroots indigenous movements like the Regional Organization of the Indigenous Peoples of the Amazonian State (ORPIA), Indigenous Federation of the State of Bolívar (FIB), and the National Indigenous Council
of Venezuela (CONIVE) also began to organizing themselves to insert their political goals well into the 1990s.

**The 1992 Coup**

Another consequence of the Caracazo was increased membership and support for the Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement 200 (MBR 200). Founded by Chavez, the MBR-200 began as a secret cell within the army with the aim to seize power of the state. The movement came out of a general disillusionment with corrupted democratic institutions. One major influence on both Chavez and the MBR-200 was Douglas Bravo. Bravo, who was introduced to Chavez in the early 1980s by Chavez's brother, had the idea to take over the state not through guerilla warfare but rather to infiltrate and take power through the armed forces. Because an overwhelming majority of the armed forces were made up of workers and peasants, Bravo saw the military ripe for infiltration. For Bravo an alliance between civilians and the military was crucial. The goal was to take power through a coup lead by a mix of civilian and military leaders. The MBR-200 was thus formed to spread revolutionary ideology in the ranks of the military.

The Venezuelan military is unique relative to others in Latin America. The military historically recruited out of the working class and peasantry, making its makeup uniquely of the popular classes. But perhaps more importantly, starting with the Andres Bello plan in the 1970s members of the armed forces were permitted to leave the barracks to attend universities (McCaughan, 2005; Tinker Salas, 2015). Many soldiers studied philosophy, political economy, philosophy, engineering, medicine, sociology, and learned professional skills and social sensitivity. The university setting also provided a forum
where officers and soldiers could engage with others in the university and have radical debates (McCaughan, 2005; Tinker Salas, 2015).

Though the clandestine organization was formed in 1982, it was not until the massive repression of the Caracazo that their ranks began to swell. When the Carlos Andres Perez government called on the army to put down the rebellion, many in the armed forces were appalled by the use of excessive force. On February 4th, MBR-200 took over various key strategic locations in Caracas, Maracaibo and Maracay. It was not long before the plan began to unravel. Communication began to break down, expected support from both other military units and civilians didn't materialize and rebels failed to capture the presidential palace. Recognizing defeat and wanting to avoid further bloodshed, Chavez called on his comrades to surrender. As a condition of surrender the Perez administration permitted Chavez to address the nation on television. In addition to calling for his comrades to lay down their weapons, the speech did two things that catapulted Chavez from a little known soldier into the national spotlight. First he took full responsibility for the failed coup. This was significant for a country who had grown accustomed to political scandals, corruption and a climate where political leaders rarely took responsibility for their actions. Second, he called for his comrades to surrender and said that the rebels had failed to achieve their objectives por ahora ("for now"), suggesting that this is only a minor setback for the Bolivarian Revolution and that the struggle had only begun. Chavez was subsequently arrested and sentenced to prison.

Military coups are not uncommon in Latin America. Traditionally military coups in Latin America, especially during the 1970s were orchestrated by elite members of the
armed forces and generally were in line with right wing interests and to protect the
privileges of the wealthier classes. What makes the 1992 coup attempt unique is that it
was carried out not by elite officers but rank and file soldiers and middle level officers.
That MBR-200 was a left-wing movement and that members were radicalized over the
course of ten years of clandestine activity also distinguish the 1992 coup to other coups in
Latin America (Ellner, 2008; Tinker Salas 2015).

**Between the Coup and the election of Chavez (1992-1998)**

Shortly after a military second coup attempt, Perez was removed from power in
what amounted to a congressional coup. After the Caracazo, two failed military coup
attempts and multiple charges of corruption, Perez lost the support of elites in AD.
Congress charged Perez with corruption and he later resigned (Gott, 2005). Rafael
Caldera who left COPEI to form a new political party, Convergence, won the 1993
elections. In 1994 Caldera fulfilled his promise and pardoned Chavez and other
members of the MBR-200 who participated in the coup. Like Perez before him, Caldera
quickly turned to the IMF for loans conditioned by neoliberal SAPs. Also like Perez he
did so in direct contradiction to his campaign promises. These reforms further
aggravated the problems of poverty in Venezuela due to its cuts in social spending,
privatization and the increasing costs of services (Wilpert, 2007). The passage of these
reforms further contributed to the loss of credibility for Venezuela’s political class. The
social and economic crisis, the de-legitimization of the major political parties and the
political elites, and the emergence of grassroots social movements opened a space and
created the conditions for Chavez’s electoral triumph in 1998.
Meanwhile, the MBR-200 maintained their opposition to elections until 1997 when they transitioned into a new party, the 5th Republic Movement (MVR), to represent a shift in strategy from armed struggle to electoral politics. The party was formed to support the electoral goals of the MBR-200, most importantly the 1998 presidential campaign of Hugo Chavez.

The years leading up to the 1998 election were marked by neoliberal structural adjustment and austerity. Neoliberal policies in the 1980s and 1990s resulted in drastic increases in poverty and inequality. In 1978 the poverty rate was 10 percent while 2 percent lived in extreme poverty. By 1998, the poverty rate had reached 81 percent while 48 percent lived in extreme poverty (Fernandes, 2010).

Several factors contributed to Chavez's electoral success in 1998. Among them were general disillusionment with rises in poverty and inequality, disillusionment with traditional political parties, frequent charges of corruption and incompetence as well as the political establishment's unwavering support for unpopular austerity and neoliberal policies. The MVR joined with various other small leftist parties to form a broad coalition called the Polo Patriótico (Patriotic Front). The Patriotic Front included the PCV (Partido Comunista de Venezuela), MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo), MEP (Movimiento Electoral del Pueblo) and the PPT (Patria Para Todos). Chavez ran on an anti-neoliberal platform that called for a constitution to replace the existing document drafted during the puntofijismo period. Chavez's electoral success in the 1998 elections can be attributed greatly to his opposition to the neoliberal policies and that he came from outside and was independent from the political establishment.
Community organizations and networks of Afro-Venezuelans, indigenous and women's organizations that had emerged from the Caracazo and before were challenging and offering a different narrative of democracy opposed to what many saw as the limitations of representative democracy. These organizations were assuming a greater role in society.

**The Relationship Between Civil Society and the State**

**Constitution**

One of the first acts of the Chavez administration was the re-writing of the constitution. He was able to achieve this because of the tremendous dissatisfaction with the current political system. The constitution was approved in a popular referendum in December of 1999. The new constitution added two branches of government, changed the country’s name, introduced popular referenda and local planning councils, recognized Venezuela’s large indigenous population, recognized housework as an economic activity and in some ways strengthened presidential power. Many commentators argue that Venezuela has the world’s most progressive constitution in the sense that it provides for broad citizen participation and comprehensive human rights protections (Wilpert, 2007). Title III includes more than 100 articles directly addressing a wide range of civil and human rights. Human rights were a central component in the constitution and often went far beyond what most constitutions incorporate and often beyond liberal notions of human rights (Bean 2016). Not only are civil and political rights included but also social and economic rights such as the right to employment, education, healthcare and dignified housing. These rights are seen as fundamental, and an obligation of the state. For some
the constitution has come under some criticism for guaranteeing more than what the state should provide its citizens (Boudin, 2006; Wilpert, 2007). Nevertheless, the constitution and its framing in the language of human rights and participatory democracy served as a launching pad from which social movements could base their struggle. What is important for this chapter is not so much the content of the constitution but the role of civil society and social movements in its construction. Additionally important are the ways in which civil society and social movements have used the human rights language in the constitution to bring the document to life.

One of the most unique aspects of the constitution is that it was written with the direct participation of the Venezuelan people. They were able to follow the debates on television, as well as participate in public forum sessions. One such movement is the Centro de Estudios de la Mujer (CEM – Center for Women’s Studies), based at the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV – Central University of Venezuela). In addition to being a research center, the CEM has played a significant role in pushing for women’s rights and pushing the agenda of the women’s movement. Article 88 in the constitution (the aforementioned provision that recognizes work in the home as an economic activity and therefore eligible for social security) was the result of proposals from the CEM. Other provisions in the constitution including sexual and reproductive rights, the use of gender-neutral language, the right to decide how many children to have, equality with men, and affirmative action for women were proposals that were taken to the constituent assembly by people from the CEM. Since the approval of the constitution, the CEM has continued to push the government to institute initiatives and programs that live up to the
principles of the constitution, including the Women’s Development Bank, the Inamujer-National Women’s Institute, and the social mission Madres del Barrio (Mothers of the Slums Mission) (Martinez et al., 2010).

Another group that was instrumental in the construction of the constitution was indigenous peoples. Indigenous organizations participated in the construction of the constitution with an exceptional level of access. One of the most important indigenous organizations in this process was the National Indigenous Council of Venezuela (CONIVE). CONIVE convoked various forums and consultations to mobilize support for their proposals to the National Assembly. The result was the Venezuelan constitution dedicated an entire chapter to indigenous peoples. The constitution recognizes collective cultural rights of indigenous peoples- their languages, customs, culture, and traditional lands. Indigenous peoples were granted various entitlements, communal land titles and the right to their own educational institutions (Martinez et al., 2010).

Not only did existing social movements participate in the construction of the constitution but new social movements were created in the process. One such movement is the Network of Afro-Venezuelan Organizations which is made up of over 30 groups and takes on issues that uplift Venezuela’s black population.

**Popular Movements**

In his first two years, Chavez’s social and economic policies were strikingly similar to his predecessors. No redistributions of wealth, no limitations on profit and no expropriations had taken place. In fact, the emergence of the opposition had more to do with the elimination of governing elites from centers of power and a forced vote on the
leadership of the Confederation of Workers of Venezuela (CTV). Chavez’s first years in office, despite his radical speeches, were quite modest. He was elected primarily by the Venezuelan middle class who desperately wanted a solution to the corrupt and inefficient political system without disrupting the status quo. The poor, who were later to be Chavez’s primary base of supporters, voted for Chavez but had much lower rates of participation and registration. Unlike later elections, Chavez would have never been elected by the poor themselves in the 1998 election (Wilpert, 2007). By the recall referendum in 2004 the middle class had abandoned Chavez and the poor became his primary base of support. This section examines how the relationship between civil society, neighborhood associations, and the state brought about this change.

One example of this relationship is the development of community media. Catia TVe, born out of the Manicomio Film Club and the repression of the 1980s, was one of Venezuela’s first community television stations. During the 2002 coup, as the private media ramped up their anti-Chavez campaign, Catia TVe and other community stations helped the Venezuelan people get accurate information. For example they reported that Chavez had not resigned and that he was being held against his will. Prior to the coup, community media was not a top priority for the government, but the role of community media in defeating the coup was obvious. Shortly after Chavez returned to power, the government began to support community media by providing equipment, funding and broadcast licenses (Martinez, 2010).

As demonstrated in the example of Catia TV, advances in Venezuelan society during the Chavez era have been the result of popular movements pushing for more radical
changes. Some of these movements include but are not limited to communal councils, workers councils, Bolivarian circles, grassroots community organizations, community media and the labor movement. Worker takeovers of factories, land reforms, concerns related to housing, corruption and infrastructure have been among the issues addressed by grassroots organizations. Popular movements supported Chavez in implementing these reforms and even pressured him to deepen these reforms (Wilpert, 2007). Carlos Martinez, et al. (2010) locates the rise of popular power in a dialectic between the self-organization of ordinary Venezuelans and the government’s receptivity to these movements from below:

Venezuelans have created cooperatives; taken over factories; occupied urban and rural lands; launched community radio and television stations; built centers for culture and popular education; participated in creating national legislation and found numerous other means of bringing the government’s discourse of popular power into a reality. Many of these actions have been motivated by the words of President Chavez or have been facilitated by government initiatives. Meanwhile many people behind these actions continue to pressure the government to survive or succeed (Martinez, et al. 2010, pg. 4).

While the taking of power has been from above in the sense that the government is stimulating and facilitating much of this activity, social movements have played an integral role in building popular power that goes beyond the scope of government and in implementing the process of change. Movements that have been organizing before the election of Chavez have simply taken advantage of the opportunities the Chavez administration has created (Martinez, 2010).

Neighborhood associations and community groups have been organizing around issues of improving the water supply, health care, land distribution and other government
programs prior to Chavez’s election. It was not until 2006, eight years after being elected, that the government began to legitimize their self-organization by passing the Communal Council Law.

The labor movement has also been an impetus for radical change. When the conservative CTV sided with the coup-makers in 2002 a new union federation was formed, the National Union of Venezuelan Labor (UNT). The UNT has grown to be larger than the CTV and has supported radical reforms like the taking over of idle factories and transforming them into worker self-managed or co-managed factories. The labor movement understood that Chavez, and now Maduro, must be pressured and criticized in order for their movement to advance.

Many of the community groups throughout the country pre-date Chavez. One such organization is the Coordinadora Simon Bolivar, a grouping of 14 grassroots collectives which cropped up in one of Venezuela’s neighborhoods in response to the police repression of the Caracazo. Grassroots indigenous movements like the Regional Organization of the Indigenous Peoples of the Amazonian State (ORPIA), Indigenous Federation of the State of Bolivar (FIB), and the National Indigenous Council of Venezuela (CONIVE) were organizing themselves to insert their political goals in the 1990s. Another example is the Popular Education Centers (PECs) that were established in the mid-1970s. PECs were responsible for carrying out various projects in the community including training centers, transportation, and human resource training. These centers worked until 1994 when the boom of neighborhood associations and communal councils began to emerge as the popular mode of community organization.
It was only in 2006 with the Communal Council Law that the government began to promote their self-organization. These groups are the most outspoken about the shortcomings of the government and keep the issues of corruption, the slowness of reform, and participatory democracy on the top of the government’s agenda (Wilpert 2007). Through the introduction of comprehensive social programs, promotion of cooperatives, workers councils and communal councils, the nationalization of industries, and the regulation of capital, Venezuela has gone further than any other country in reversing neoliberal policies. Many of the advances in social programs and participatory democracy would not have been achieved without pressure from below by community groups, social movements and marginalized Venezuelans.

2002 Coup

One example of this relationship is the activity of Venezuelan civil society in the aftermath of the 2002 coup. The 2002 coup also provides further evidence, manifest in the response from Venezuela's oil company (PDVSA), of the threat that Bolivarian process posed for neoliberal policies. Had it not been for the mobilization of the Venezuelan people and social movements, Chavez’s presidency would have ended in 2002. As part of Venezuela’s renationalization of the nation’s oil production, Chavez transformed minority state participation into majority participation. In response, the oil company (PDVSA) organized a general strike for 11 April 2002. On the morning of the 11th, opposition protestors started a march from the state-owned oil company. On the other side of town Chavez supporters gathered around the presidential palace. Breaking with its announced plan, the opposition march changed course and headed toward the
presidential palace. Amidst the confusion of the merging marches, snipers began shooting into both crowds. The private media, primarily Radio Caracas Television (RCTV), reported that the Chavez supporters instigated the violence against the demonstrators and broadcasted manipulated video images of Chavez supporters on a bridge shooting opposition demonstrators below (Golinger, 2007; Boudin et al., 2006). This video served as a major justification for the coup. Videos taken from other angles later showed that the images shown by RCTV were manipulated and that the Chavez supporters were shooting at snipers who were openly firing upon their march (Golinger, 2007; Gott, 2005; McCaughan, 2005).

Soon after the opposition kidnapped Chavez, RCTV announced that Chavez had willingly resigned. Shortly after the kidnapping, Pedro Carmona, the president of businessmen’s federation, Fedecámeras, and one of the principle organizers of the coup, assumed the presidency. He then organized a cabinet of like-minded business colleagues, suspended all democratic rights, dissolved the National Assembly and the Supreme Court, and revoked the 1999 constitution. Although the private media had announced that Chavez had resigned, grassroots word-of-mouth networks spread the word that Chavez in fact had not resigned and that the dead and injured in Miraflores were Chavez supporters. As word spread through the barrios, ordinary Venezuelans sprang to action. Over a million Chavez supporters began to rally around the presidential palace in support of their democratically elected president. When demonstrators surrounded the palace in attempts to reinstate Chavez, the private media orchestrated a complete blackout on the demonstrations, instead showing reruns of Tom and Jerry cartoons and the movie Pretty
Woman. As the protestors and military officers loyal to Chavez surrounded the palace, Carmona had no choice but to step down. In just forty-seven hours the coup was over and Chavez was reinstated. It was through the organization and mobilization of civil society, social movements, and the poor from the barrios that Chavez was returned to power. Had it not been for the active participation of various sectors of Venezuelan society, the Chavez regime would have ended in 2002 (Golinger, 2007; Gott, 2005; McCaughan, 2005).

**Participatory Democracy**

Democracy is based on the idea that the general public should participate in the decision-making process that impacts their daily lives. In this conception, the shortcomings of representative democracy are becoming more and more apparent in our contemporary society. As economic power becomes more concentrated and powerful, its influence on representative politics increases. Powerful economic interests are becoming increasingly able to make their desires felt in the legislative process. This is accomplished in a variety of ways including, the calculated use of corporate media, the funding of powerful lobbies and various methods of manipulating the electorate. Representatives depend more on lobbies than their constituents during election cycles, resulting in lobbies having a greater influence on policy than everyday voters. The media often relies on images and personalities rather than the debate on important issues. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, in 93% of House of Representative races and 94% of Senate races (in the United States), the candidate that spent the most money ended up winning. Most of the money that comes from political financing comes from
corporate donations, political action committees, and wealthy individuals. The concept of one person, one vote is becoming harder to reconcile with representative democracy. Money, not people, tends to have more influence on the political process. The intention of the “rule of the people” was to guarantee that political decisions were inspired by and dictated by the interests of the people. When representatives make the decisions, there is no guarantee that political decisions will reflect the desires of the people.

The concept of participatory democracy holds that citizens should be active participants in the process of governing the country. In this model citizens must play a significant role in developing government policy and prioritizing budgets and projects in a way that the needs of the entire community are considered. The main principle behind participatory democracy is the constant participation, consultation, and discussion by citizens in the political process. This conception of democracy is quite different than the representative model where the extent of participation among citizens is going to the voting booth once every two to four years. The constant participation of citizens in the political process serves to better ensure self-determination. Participatory democracy strives to create an active political culture, opportunities for the incorporation of broader sectors of the population into the political process, and a more healthy civil society in general.

The Bolivarian Constitution provides for broad citizen participation in the democratic process. This new participation has manifested itself in various forms including: local public planning councils that work to develop public policy, participatory budget-allocation, co-management of state-owned factories, workers councils, Bolivarian
circles, social “missions”, community radio, and most importantly communal councils (Boudin et al., 2006).

For the purposes of this chapter I will discuss two of the aforementioned forms of participatory democracy practiced in Venezuela, the local public planning councils (CLPPS) and communal councils. Largely modeled after participatory local budgeting in Porte Alegre, Brazil, CLPPs aim to provide citizens the necessary tools to influence decisions that affect their well-being. The law of Local Public Planification Councils was established in article 182 of the Constitution. The law required that 335 municipalities implement them by 12 October 2002. Currently many sectors of the civil society are being represented in the CLPPs including education, health, transportation, culture, sports, ecology, security, women, people with disabilities, land committees and others. Citizens in CLPPs develop annual budgets and actively supervise its implementation. The idea behind the people directly participating and influencing local planning and the allocation of resources is that they have the most comprehensive understanding of their own communities.

This is not to say that the CLPPS are not without their problems. Not all citizens can attend meetings, the degree of participation across different councils varies, elected officials still often have the final say on the realization of decisions made by the council and the councils are not supported by all mayors, governors, public officials, and those in the government. Nevertheless the institution of CLPPS is a positive step towards participatory democracy (Wagner, 2004).
Perhaps the most widespread and most effective instrument of self-organization and self-government so far in the Bolivarian process are the communal councils and the communes. Since the passage of the 2006 Law of Community Councils over 45,000 communal councils and over 1,400 communes have been established. These councils are grassroots neighborhood-based bodies that bring together existing community organizations that have emerged in mostly poor neighborhoods around issues of water, electricity, health, education and media. The communes are a larger body of self-governance that make up a collection of communal councils. Decisions made in communal councils and the communes are made in citizen assemblies and are open to the whole community. Communal councils are funded by the state, and are encouraged to play a direct economic role, such as creating cooperatives or taking over idle factories (Azzellini, 2009; Azzellini, 2013; Ellner, 2009).

Like the CLPPS, communal councils are also not without problems. Although communal council decisions are binding and give ordinary Venezuelans more direct control over their own lives, they have no power to influence national and international policies. Despite their shortcomings the emergence of communal councils, workplace councils, CLPPS, participatory budget allocation, Bolivarian circles, co-management and cooperatives have resulted in a growing incorporation of broader social sectors into the decision-making process.

Although early experiments in participatory democracy can be found in the West, notably classical Greece and parts of Spain in the Spanish Civil War, in our contemporary age the global south is taking a lead in its promotion and practice in
participatory democracy. While Western notions of representative democracy are losing favor in many parts of the global south, citizens are reconfiguring democracy under their own terms. Since 1989 participatory budgeting in Porte Alegre, Brazil has allowed residents to directly participate in the allocation of city funds. Budgeting decisions are made by dozens of assemblies made up of poor and middle class men and women across the city. Currently more than fifty thousand residents participate in the budgeting process in a city of a million and a half people (Lewit, 2002).

Responding to the economic crisis of 2001, workers in Argentina created hundreds of neighborhood assemblies. Argentines also began to take control of factories. The number of occupied and worker-controlled factories subsequently grew into the hundreds (Sitrin, 2006). Building off factory occupations that took place during the Dirty War of the 1970s, workers cooperatively run the factories, decisions are made democratically by worker assemblies rather professional managers and profits are distributed equitably to all workers (Ranis, 2006).

Experiments with participatory budgeting, worker-controlled workplaces, communal councils, local public planning councils, in short experiments with participatory democracy, are not without their own shortcomings and limitations, but they do offer an alternative path to economic development and a more democratic polity.
CHAPTER FOUR

What is a Commune and How does it work?
Today there are 45,000 communal councils and over 1,400 communes. This has grown significantly since the passage of the Organic Law of the Communes, which legitimated this level of popular power. For a point of comparison there were only 12 communes in 2013, compared to 1,400 in 2016. Not only have the number of communes been on the rise in recent years but also the percent of communal councils that have been integrated into the communes. Thirteen thousand, just over one fourth, of the 45,000 communal councils in the country are now integrated into communes.

The communes have not only grown quantitatively but also qualitatively. The first communes focused primarily on infrastructural projects, focusing on water, roads, parks etc. In the past year many communes have shifted their focus to production. The shift to production was a response to a number of socioeconomic factors.

First, Venezuela is a country whose oil reserves make up 95 per cent of its total export earnings and the oil and gas sector is about 25% of its gross domestic product (OPEC 2016). In the summer of 2014, for a number of reasons the price of oil began to drop. By the beginning of 2016 the price of a barrel of oil dropped by more than 70% (Krauss 2016). Oil prices fell to $33 dollars a barrel, the lowest rate in more than thirteen years (Lopez 2016). Venezuela needs oil prices to reach $111 a barrel to break even on their national budget. The fall of oil revenue resulted in a decline in the ability of the government to import raw materials and foodstuffs, to maintain the social programs and to maintain subsidies on regulated goods which could previously be sold at a loss. One response of the government to the sudden decline in revenue was to print more money. The injection of enormous amounts of money into the economy, the prioritization of the
payment of foreign debt over importing goods, and an increase of corruption all led to massive inflation (Manuare and Juarena 2017). Some estimates put the country's inflation rate at around 270% (Lopez, 2016). The drop oil prices coupled with high rates of inflation has led to high levels of capital flight, with one estimate that capital flight has taken $250 billion out of the country in the last few years (Barreto 2015). In addition to some capital sectors migrating from Venezuela, there are also other commercial sectors of concentrated capital that are moving from agricultural sector to the financial sector. So what we see is a decrease in agricultural production. These two processes opened a space that the communes are filling. In 2015 alone the communes produced over 60,000 hectares of agricultural production, including corn, rice, beans, coffee, cereals etc. To put this in perspective, according the ministry of agriculture 66,000 hectares is equivalent to one month of national consumption. In other words, the communes are now producing on twelfth of the agricultural products that Venezuelans consume per year, and this number is expected to increase. The Ministry of Communes estimates that communal agriculture production will exceed 100,000 hectares in 2016. Although production in the agricultural sector has certainly been the most significant, communes also have increased production in other sectors, like textiles.

In addition to the shift from infrastructural projects to production, another qualitative shift with regards to the communes is the creation of *mercados comunales* or communal markets. Communal markets were created in the second half of 2015 as a response to the economic crisis and as an alternative to the traditional distribution and exchange of goods dictated by the free market. One strategy of the right wing opposition
to the Chavista government has been attempts to destabilize the economy in order to undermine the Bolivarian process, in what is broadly in Venezuela called the economic war. This has manifested itself in various ways including, speculation and the creation of manufactured shortages. Venezuela subsidizes basic goods like flour, black beans, chicken, milk, gas, diapers, eggs, in order to ensure that products that were unaffordable under previous administrations were accessible to the majority of Venezuelans. This leads to a number of problems.

First, is the problem of contraband where much of the food and regulated goods are hoarded and then sold in the black market at exorbitant prices or across the border, particularly in Colombia, at often a 100 percent markup. A second strategy of the business class is hoarding not to resell on the black market or across the border but simply to manufacture shortages as an attempt to destabilize the economy and undermine the Maduro government. Government officials have on various occasions found warehouses full of basic goods, rotting because the private companies wanted to create the sensation that there are no products in the country and make the argument that it is the result of mismanagement of an incompetent government. This is of course not to say that the government is not to blame at all, but the hoarding of regulated food and medicine by private companies is very real problem with devastating consequences. In one case, in the municipality of San Francisco in the state of Zulia, the government found a warehouse by the company Herrera C.A. that had over 1.5 million diapers; 360,000 kilos of detergent; 277,000 units of soap, and 14,000 units of baby formula in addition to corn flour, black beans, rice, shampoo and other items (Fischer-Hoffman, 2015). In
another case, the government found a warehouse in the state of Aragua where they found 14 million syringes, and 2 million surgical gloves among a whole slew of other medical equipment (Cawthorne, 2014). And this is while the supermarkets are severely lacking these products and Venezuelans are waiting for hours to purchase scarce products.

As a response to the economic war, speculation, hoarding, and more generally the vicissitudes of the market, the government created communal markets as a strategy to try to break the economic dependence of the private sector. An alliance between the government and the communes was established for the creation of communal markets which integrates state national distribution with the communal production. As of 2016 there is just over 1,000 communal markets in the country. Communal markets are spaces for direct distribution, from producer to consumer, without intermediation. This is a space where the communes are bypassing the free market and private or state intermediaries to distribute products produced by the communes directly to the consumers. Each weekend in several territories in the country, communal products go directly to communal markets. This is a space where different communal producers can bring their products to distribute, and the transportation of the goods to the market is also owned by the communes. The dates and times of where the food will be distributed is announced beforehand and anyone is welcome to come buy the products that are sold at regulated prices.

Producing for the free market can create all sorts of problems. First as we see with the fluctuation of oil prices, the rise and drop in prices can create crises, often leading to limited access to basic goods. Also, producing for the free market, despite
being produced in a commune, can reproduce the same patterns of accumulation and can reproduce the same pattern of exploitation as production in the state or private sphere. Producing for the communal market, as system of direct distribution of goods based on need, in theory is supposed to avoid some of the limitations of the free market. Since the creation of the communal market, much of the production from the communes is still bought and sold by private companies and the state but the percent that is being distributed through the communal markets has increased significantly (Vargas 2015).

What is a Communal Council, A Commune and How do they Work?

Communal Councils

Although as mentioned earlier various types of popular organizations and neighborhood associations predated the Chavez era and many date back to the 1989 Caracazo, it was not until the 2006 Law of Community Councils that many of these organizations were legitimated by the state. The 2006 law was then reaffirmed and updated in a second law of Communal Councils in 2009. The law calls for the creation of new councils and for the legitimization of existing neighborhood based organizations in order to create non-representative structures of direct democracy. These organizations are grassroots neighborhood-based bodies that bring together community organizations that have emerged in mostly poor neighborhoods around issues of water, electricity, health, education and media (Azzellini 2009, Ellner 2009, Fuentes 2010). Since the passage of the 2006 Law of Community Councils over 45,000 communal councils have been established.
Communal councils (CCs) are similar to workers councils except that they are organized at a community level instead of at the workplace. These councils are permanent governing structures that play a significant role in encouraging the incorporation of broader social sectors into the political decision making process. They enable previously excluded sectors of society to directly manage public policy and projects that affect their daily lives. Although CCs are functioning in various areas around the country they are concentrated in underprivileged communities. They often take over activities that were previously the responsibility of the local, state, or national government. The Communal Council Law recommends that in urban areas each council should contain 200-400 families, in rural areas at least 20 families and at least 10 families in indigenous communities (Lerner 2007). The councils decide their own geographic boundaries and all decisions are made in neighborhood assemblies. The assemblies are open to the whole community and decisions are made by majority vote in which every citizen over the age of 15 can vote. A minimum of 30 percent of residents must be present for a vote on any decision. Council decisions are binding. If a majority of CCs make a decision then the mayor and local officials must abide by it (Wilpert 2007). Some of the projects that CCs have overseen include the establishment of over 300 communal banks, street pavings, sports fields, medical centers, and sewage and water systems (Lerner 2007).

Funding for communal councils come mostly from municipal, state and city governments but they can also get funds from their own fundraising and donations. They are encouraged to play a direct economic role, such as creating cooperatives or taking
over idle factories. But money does not only go into the councils it can also flow out. Councils often award grants for community projects and give loans to cooperatives or other activities (Lerner 2007, Azzellini 2009; Ellner 2009).

**Communes**

The communal councils are the basic level of a number of levels of popular power in Venezuela. In 2007 Hugo Chavez called for the creation of the communal state, which is supposed to replace the bourgeois capitalist state. In order to replace the capitalist state and achieve the communal state, various levels of communal popular power were to be established (Azzellini 2013). The first, at the neighborhood level are the communal councils, second are the communes, followed by the communal cities and then eventually the communal state. Each of these communal organizations are to be structures of bottom up self-administration. At the base is the communal council, organized at the neighborhood level, then communes are larger bodies of popular power that are made up of a collection of communal councils, then the communal city is made up of a collection of communes and so on. At this point in the Bolivarian process, the highest stage that has been achieved is the commune, though we have seen the collaboration of large groups of communes giving us a glimpse of what the communal city can look like.

The stated aim of the commune movement as a whole is to replace the state’s representative political structures. Communes are made up of groups of communal councils in a specific geographic territory and the decisions in the communes are made in the council assemblies. The councils decide the geography of these communes. While the councils develop more local short term projects, the communes develop medium and
long term projects, often affecting larger geographic areas. (Azzellini 2013, Robertson 2014).

In order for a group of CCs to create a commune they must first do a census of the territory and write a foundational letter that gives a static description of (all the details and demographics of the territory) as well as the functional description or stated goals and priorities of the territory. For example the static description includes information like the geographic territory, inhabitants, number of CCs, and the limits of the commune. And then they have the function description which describes what the stated purpose of the commune, their plans and how social relationships integrate together. The letter has to be based on the history of the CCs. Before the foundational letter is submitted it is discussed and approved in a citizens' assembly with all the CCs that make up the commune, to ensure that everyone agrees with the letter before it is submitted. A vote is taken at the assembly and at least 70% of the members of the community have to vote for the letter in order for it to pass. The letter is then taken to the Ministry of Communes to be approved. The Ministry then enters the commune into the Integrated System of Popular Power (SIPP) and the commune is given a code that represents their commune. Currently there are over 1,400 communes in the country.

The geographical boundaries of the various instances of popular power do not follow formal political divisions. A commune for example can include CCs from different cities, counties or even states and are not confined to existing political boundaries. The geography of each of the communes and which particular councils make up each commune are decided by the councils themselves. Their territorial boundaries
are typically organized to reflect similarities in geographic or economic criteria or in contiguous territories where both communities benefit from collaboration or joint projects, rather than through formal political delineations of the territories.

**Three Case Studies**

To get a good understanding of how communes function and what they look like on a practical level, the following section, based on my interviews and observations focuses on three specific communes, *Comuna El Sur Existe*, *Comuna El Maizal*, and *Comuna Pío Tamayo*. These three communes were chosen for two reasons. First, while there are many communes that are not functioning very well, it is important to look at those that are functioning well to see the potential of communes and the potential working people have through networks of popular power in actively participating in their own development more broadly. The second reason I chose these three communes was to take a look at three different types of communes, one being urban (*Comuna Pío Tamayo*), another being rural (*El Maizal*) and the last being an urban/rural hybrid (*Comuna El Sur Existe*). I will begin with the latter.

**Comuna El Sur Existe**

In 2007, three years before the Organic Law of the Communes recognized communes as a legitimate form of popular power organization, a group of people in Valencia started a social, cultural and sports project. Despite some early successes, they were limited by the space they had in order to carry out their projects. In their
community there was 207 hectares of land that was once used as a stable to train race horses. With the passage of the Communal Law in 2010 and they were able to take control of part of this land as well as an old abandoned building. This land and the abandoned building became what is now the commune El Sur Existe (The South Exists).

The name comes from a poem by Uruguayan poet, playwright, novelist, and essayist Mario Benedetti. The poem is an indictment on the imperial policies of the global North and of the United States more generally, but also the way in which the global South is not just an object in which the global North acts upon but subjects, with agency, who make their own history despite, and in the face of imperial aggression from the North. The final stanza of the poem reads:

The North is the one who orders
   But down here, down
      Near the roots
   Is where memory
   Omits no memory
   And there are those
   Who defy death for
   And die for
And thus together achieve
   What is impossible
   That the whole world
   would know
   That the South,
   That the South also exists.

According to the comuneros in Commune El Sur Existe, the commune is the expression of this sentiment. In the face of imperial aggression and neoliberal globalization, the commune has created networks of popular power, instruments of direct self-management, to meet the needs of their communities. Using the resources and creativity that these
local communities have, communes are creating something inspiring that possibly the "whole world would know that the South also exists".

The commune *El Sur Existe* lies just over 100 miles east of Caracas in the industrial and manufacturing city of Valencia, Carabobo. Located in a valley surrounded by the mountain range *Cordillera de la Costa*, Valencia is the third largest city in Venezuela. Most communes in Venezuela fit under three categories, rural, urban or indigenous. *El Sur Existe* is a mixed commune that consists of 12 urban and 7 rural communal councils.

*El Sur Existe* is involved in a number of projects and endeavors but what seem to be the three most central to the commune are a small textile factory, a grocery store and a paper store. In 2013 the commune took over an abandoned building and turned it into a textile factory. Among the products produced in the factory, school uniforms is its primary focus. They produce over 5,000 school uniforms per year. The second project is the grocery store. The store distributes products produced not only in their commune but also neighboring communes in the state of Carabobo. The store sells milk, eggs, cheese, meat, yogurt that is produced in the communes. The products are sold at regulated, solidarity prices. The third project of the commune is the paper store. Like the grocery store, all products are mostly produced in the communes and are sold at regulated, solidarity prices. For example, the school uniforms that are produced in the factory in *El Sur Existe* are sold at solidarity prices in the paper store. Other products sold in the store include, paper, notebooks, pens, pencils, and other school supplies. In addition to these projects, the commune also works with the national orchestra and teaches music to
students in the area, run a baseball training program, and controls the Aldea Boliviariana
University. In the university the students are in the classroom part of the day and work
the land for the rest of the day, inspired by the Robinsonian (an educational theory
created by the national liberation hero Simon Rodriguez) idea of learning while you
practice. The commune is also currently trying to gain control of what remains of the
207 hectares in order to grow food.

**Comuna Jose Pío Tomayo**

All decisions in both the communal councils and the communes are made in
popular (or citizen) assemblies. Decisions are made by a simple majority and according
to the Law of the Communes 30% of the members of the commune must be present to
vote. Each communal council elects spokespeople to represent their council in the
commune, and a typically a spokesperson from each communal council must be present
for a vote in the commune. Assemblies are typically held once a week or more
frequently if necessary.

The needs and goals of the commune and the projects aimed to achieve these
goods are decided by the communes themselves. The commune conducts participatory
diagnostics of the community and decides in the assemblies what the community needs
most and what projects they want to carry out. In the case of Comuna Pío Tomayo, the
commune did a diagnostic of what the community needed, and in an assembly of over
1,000 people they decided that the most pressing issue was housing.

Communal projects can either be something that they create on their own or they
can choose to work with an existing social program, or what in Venezuela is called
"social missions". Social missions are social programs implemented early in the Chavez administration that are primarily funded by oil profits. These missions span from education (Mission Robinson an adult literacy program), food (Mission Mercal, which provides access to basic foods at a discounted price), healthcare (Mission Barrio Adentro, which provides free healthcare services to under-served and impoverished communities), land reform (Mission Zamora, which redistributes land to the poor), indigenous rights (Mission Guaicapuro, which restores communal land rights to indigenous communities), to housing (La Gran Mision Vivienda Venezuela, a low-cost housing program).

Pío Tamayo (named after a Venezuelan Marxist and poet who also was one of the founders of the Communist Party in Cuba), recognizing the need for safe, affordable housing, decided to work with Gran Mision Vivienda to build and restore houses in the community for those who needed it. Initially proposed by Hugo Chavez in a nationally televised TV program in 2011 as a response to the country's housing crisis, Gran Mision Vivienda has become the country's largest housing program. Since its launch in 2012, over 1 million houses have been built for low-income Venezuelans. The mission sustains three different types of housing projects, new houses (building a house from scratch), substitution (when the materials from the old house are used in the construction of a new house) and recuperation (when an existing house is renovated, retrofitted or remodeled to meet operational standards).

After the commune decided to work with Gran Mision Vivienda to build and restore houses, they began to organize workshops on the three dimensions (new, substitution and recuperation). With the government funding provided to the commune
through the *Gran Mision Vivienda* program, over 315 homes were built or restored in Pío Tamayo. The actual construction of some of the larger housing complexes that have parking lots, cultural centers basketball courts etc. are contracted out to public or private companies, but most of the more simpler houses and much of the substitution and recuperation are self-constructed by the commune members themselves. Communal members receive training in construction and are supervised during the construction of the foundation of the houses.

Other projects that the Pío Tamayo commune are involved in include: the worker's takeover of an abandoned beer factory, the buying and selling of pigs, and the distribution of communal products from other communes. Just after Chavez was restored to power after the 2002 coup, a Brazilian transnational beer company called Brahma (now a subsidiary of Anheuser Busch) shuttered its door and fled the country. Because the poor water system in the area and the communities need for a reliable source of potable water, workers took control of the factory and turned it into an industrial water production plant. The plant now produces and distributes water for local consumption. Despite court orders to remove the workers, they continue to fight for the expropriation of the factory and to be placed under direct democratic control of the commune.

The company, now ran by the commune has been renamed The Company of Direct Communal Social Property Proletarians Unite (Empresa de Propiedad Social Directa Comunal Proletarios Unios), employs 85 communal members whose salaries are paid by company profits. Profits that do not go towards salaries are used for what is called "reinvestment social funds". This money is used for health care, education and for
training whether that be funding to attend workshops, encuentros, and congresses. And what is left of the profits is used to buy and sell pigs.

The purpose of the buying and selling of pigs is to increase food production for the community. Currently the commune has 120 pigs and will be using those pigs for food. Pork is a staple food in many Venezuelan dishes, most importantly a traditional Christmas dish. The idea to use profits from the worker controlled water processing plant was not only a means to feed the community but, as I was told by one communal organizer, as a way to ensure that every family in the community would have pork for their traditional Christmas dinner.

**Comuna El Maizal**

The origins of Communa Maizal is typical to the origins of many other communes across the country, particularly in rural areas. El Maizal sits on 2,000 hectares of land, in the rural outskirts of Barquisimeto, Lara. Much of the land currently controlled by the commune was previously owned by the wealthy Alvarado family. In late 2008, community members made proposals to the Chavez administration to expropriate the land and put it under collective control of the community on grounds that the land originally belonged to the people in the area until a group of wealthy families illegally took the land from them. In the proposals the people in El Maizal made clear that they were going to use the land to produce. Not too long later, on his famous weekly television show Alo Presidente, Chavez announced that the land in El Maizal would be expropriated and given back to the people and that the land could no longer be divided into sectors for private production. The goal of this expropriation was to stimulate
agricultural production by transferring vast plots of idle land from private ownership to local farmers. The recovery of the land must be accompanied by collective production by the community. So in March of 2009 the commune El Maizal was founded. Now the commune is made up of 22 rural communal councils (encompassing over 3,500 families and over 8,000 people) and produces a variety of agricultural products including corn, black beans, coffee and beef. Financial resources garnered from agricultural production is used in the community for health care, food for communal schools, and infrastructure. In addition to agricultural production, El Maizal also has a social production enterprise which provides gas for its 22 communal councils.

Of the 2,000 hectares of land controlled by the commune only 800 is used for production, the remaining 1,200 hectares is a national reserve, protected by the commune. Five hundred hectares of land is dedicated to the production of maize, beans, and coffee with the remaining 300 hectares used for cows and the production of beef. The maize that is produced in the commune is sold to the state, and the coffee is sold to both the state and private companies.

The El Maizal commune is comprised of land from two states. The commune sits on the border of southern Lara and northern Portuguesa. With just over 250 registered communes, Lara has the highest concentration of communes in the country. The high concentration of communes in Lara is no accident. Lara has a rich history of militant campesino struggle dating back to the 1960s.

Communal Coordination
As mentioned earlier the stated goal of the various levels of popular power is to not only transfer political power and decision making to popular sectors of society in the short term but to eventually replace the capitalist bourgeois state with the communal state in the long term. The plan, laid out by Chavez, would begin with the first level of popular power, then communal councils, then the communes, then to the communal cities and eventually the communal state. To date 45,000 communal councils and over 1,400 communes have been constructed, and although the third level of popular power, the communal cities, has yet to be constructed there are various ways that communes have begun to coordinate on various projects and create structures that allow for the collaboration between communes. This section will discuss a few of these structures of collaboration.

At the most basic level, many communes collaborate on various projects that impact the geographic territory that encompass both (or in some cases more than two) communes. Pío Tamayo commune mentioned above is involved in two such projects. First, Pío Tamayo has coordinated with a neighboring commune (Comuna Socialista Maria Colmenarez) on a housing project. Using the resources that were allocated to Pío Tamayo to build houses, the two communes decided to collaborate and build houses for families in both communes. Together the two communes collaborated to construct eleven houses.

Pío Tamayo also collaborates with Comuna El Maizal. El Maizal is a rural commune and one of the most productive communes in the state of Lara. Pío Tamayo is an urban commune that does not have the same space as El Maizal to grow food, but does
have the capacity to distribute products produced by other more productive communes like El Maizal. On several occasions Pío Tamayo has collaborated with El Maizal to distribute their products to consumers or buyers.

More important than instances of ad hoc collaboration between neighboring communes are the more formal structures of communal collaboration that provide spaces for larger and more encompassing bodies of popular power. In the state of Carabobo there is a formal structure called the Bloque Gran Comunal. This structure was created through collaboration between various communes in the area who decided in their citizens' assemblies to create a formal structure that took on more long term projects and projects that encompass larger geographical areas. This is a space where thirty six communes from the state of Carabobo coordinate larger and more long term projects that affect families in those territories. Bloque Gran Comunal meets almost once a week to discuss and organize matters that relate to their territories. With anywhere between 200-400 families represented in each communal council and 3-30 communal councils represented in each commune, the Bloque Gran Communal is likely a self-governing organ of direct democracy and popular power that encompasses a territory that includes over 100,000 people.

One other important block of communes is the *Gran Asamblea Comuna del Corredor Político Territorial Fabricio Ojeda* (henceforth the *Gran Asamblea*) which comprises twelve communes, including urban, rural and mixed communes, and 159 communal councils in the states of Lara and Portuguesa. The Gran Asamblea meets four times a year on a quarterly basis. At these gatherings communal spokespeople both
discuss more long-term projects in which the communes can coordinate as well as decisions that were made in the citizen's assemblies of the communes. The Gran Asamblea and the Bloque Gran Comunal mentioned above are in between two instances of popular power, they are collections of communes but not yet legitimated as communal cities. Because of their legal status, the finances used to fund projects carried out by these two bodies come from the communes and communal councils. They may also use funds they may have earned through productive projects.

Most decisions in the corridor are made in the CCs, where the decisions are made in their respective citizens' assemblies. Decisions are then taken to the communal parliaments in each commune to be discussed and debated. Then the corridor (which represents the twelve communes in the Gran Asamblea) discusses the decision in its own parliament. After the parliament of the corridor makes its recommendations those decisions are then taken back the CCs. In short, decisions are made, discussed and debated in a circular pattern where each level of popular power is able to discuss and make recommendations on the decisions made that affect the territory of all the communes and CCs represented in the corridor.

Large blocks of communes like the two mentioned above are not just bodies that collaborate on infrastructural or productive projects that affect their territories but also spaces where larger strategic discussions take place. Larger questions of political economy and debates about how the communal movement should orient itself to the state are also common topics. In my field work I heard discussions on strategies to combat the economic war, how to orient to the upcoming mid-term elections, how to consolidate
popular power, strategies to increase production and better organize the distribution of products, and better ways for the communes to coordinate. One particularly common theme was the communal state and how to best achieve it. There tends to be a general agreement about how taking power and control of the state is best achieved through the self-management of production and true independence comes when workers control the means of production, but how to get to this point has is the subject of debate.
CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion
Communes and Globalization from Below

Globalization can be considered as series of processes which embody an intensification of worldwide social relations, interconnectedness, interdependence (local happenings shaped by events occurring in other parts of the world and vice versa), and the compression of time and spatial distances. Although people, ideas and goods have been moving across the globe and becoming more interconnected for centuries, it was not until the rise of neoliberalism in the late 1970s and its consolidation in the early 1980s that globalization took a new and accelerated form. Neoliberalism is an economic doctrine that comes from a variety of sources including the classical liberalism, the Austrian school of economics and Friedrich Hayek as well as the Chicago School of Economics and Milton Friedman. Neoliberal philosophy claims that free trade, and unfettered free markets are the most efficient way to produce the greatest social, political and economic good. Policies often associated with neoliberalism include the privatization of public assets, economic liberalization, the reduction or elimination of trade tariffs and barriers, fiscal austerity, deregulation, reductions in government spending, free trade among others. But as David Harvey (2005) argues, neoliberalism should not merely be seen as a litany of economic policies but also as a concerted effort by the capitalist class to reconstitute and restore power. In other words neoliberalism is a class project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to reconstitute the power of economic elites (Harvey, 2005; McMichael, 2016).

Further, Wendy Brown (2003, 2015) argues that neoliberalism is also a mode of the modern form of power that Foucault calls "governability" (i.e., knowledge and
techniques that are concerned with the regulation of everyday conduct, even non-economic contexts). Aihwa Ong (2006) argues that this extension of market rationality (through neoliberal governmentality) can predominate even in contexts where neoliberalism as an economic doctrine is not central. Sujatha Fernandes (2013) suggests that this is the case in Venezuela where:

"a postneoliberal formation has adopted antineoliberal reforms, while its ongoing subjection to the requirements of a global economy has given impetus to neoliberal rationalities and techniques in a range of state and nonstate arenas."

But globalization is not just a political project promoted and facilitated by economic and political elites from above. In what has been called alternative globalization (see e.g., Peter Evans, "Is Alternative Globalization Possible" (2008), globalization from below, counter-hegemonic globalization or deglobalization, transnational social movements from below have fought to create alternatives to corporate-led globalization. Not simply a reaction to or resistance to top-down globalization, globalization from below is also a movement, or movement of movements (see e.g., Jackie Smith, Democratic Globalization; and Manuel Castells, Networks of Outrage and Hope, 2015), to create a different kind of globalization, one based on democracy and social justice. To use Peter Evans (2008) definition, counter-hegemonic globalization is a “a globally organized effort to replace the neoliberal global regime with one that maximizes democratic political control and makes the equitable development of human capabilities and environment stewardship its priorities”. Movements for globalization from below not only take advantage of spaces, instruments and institutions that have been created by corporate globalization but have also played a role in creating
spaces and institutions to struggle for a more socially just and democratic globalization. Though globalization from below can also press for less socially just and undemocratic globalization, for example Daesh (a.k.a. the Islamic State), or Al-Qaeda (which seek to institutionalize a global Umma). Just because it comes "from below", does not make it more socially just.

As I discussed in chapter two, various examples and theories of globalization from below include: transnational social movements (Peter Evans 2012), deglobalization (Bello 2005), the World Social Forum (de Sousa Santos 2005), the Zapatista movement (John Holloway 1998, 2002), the Free Burma Movement (Dale 2011), the Global Justice Movement (La Botz 2000), the Bolivian Water Wars (Assies 2003), among others. These authors are interested in the ways in which counter-hegemonic social movements have played a role in shaping our global world and challenging hegemonic neoliberal globalization from above.

The Bolivarian Process, in which the communes are a central component, have played an important role in movements of democratic globalization from below, both as a resistance to corporate led globalization with the struggle to defeat the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) and as a movement to create alternatives forms of globalization with the creation of various institutions that promote regional integration, including The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), The Bank of the South (BancoSur), The New Television Station of the South (TeleSUR) and the Andean Community of Nations (CAN). These institutions together can be called "south-south integration".
In 1994 the United States, Canada, and Mexico signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), a neoliberal policy measure for regional commercial integration. NAFTA set the tone for the expansion of ‘free trade’ in the region. Nearly a decade later, with the hopes of expanding ‘free trade’ across the whole region, U.S. policymakers proposed the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). De La Barra et al. (2009) explains what was at stake:

The acceptance of the FTAA by Latin American and Caribbean countries would have amounted to an economic order characterized by less accounting, less transparency, less respect to the human rights, less preoccupation for reducing poverty, more damage to the environment, and further increases in the already massive external debt (De La Barra pg. 71).

De la Barra et al. (2009) goes on to say that the FTAA agreement would further impede democratization, and weaken national sovereignty.

Knowing very well the impacts that NAFTA had on Mexico, and the repercussions of a continuation and deepening of neoliberal policies throughout the region, a broad movement against FTAA emerged. Protests, demonstrations, popular plebiscites, and forums organized by nascent transnational social movements began to take form. A broad range of organizations, committees, and activist groups mobilized against FTAA. As a result of the growing regional opposition to FTAA, the United States was given a decisive blow, in 2005 FTAA was declared dead. With the defeat of the FTAA, Latin American social movements won its first struggle against neoliberalism. This victory opened the door for the creation of alternative paths of development in the region (Goodale and Postero 2013; Hershberg and Rosen, 2007; Kaltwasser 2011).
South-south integration is an economic and social development model promoted by social movements and left-leaning governments in Latin America. South-south integration comes as a response to neoliberal, finance led development and its emphasis on (uneven) competition, individualism, free trade, privatization, competitive advantage and deregulation. The key components that drive south-south integration are therefore, cooperation, solidarity, sustainability, cooperative advantage and participatory democracy. Among the initiatives taken by South American governments to promote regional integration and growth are the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), the Bank of the South, Fund of the South, Television of the South (Telesur), Andean Community of Nations (CAN), Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), and the Common Southern Market (Mercosur). These regional integration initiatives have impacted development to varying degrees, and have experienced various successes and failures.

ALBA was proposed by Venezuela President Hugo Chavez in the context of the and as a response to the failure of FTAA. Breaking from neoliberal tradition, ALBA aims to “promote trade and investment between member governments based on cooperation, and with the aim of improving people’s lives, not making profits” (De la Barra et. Al 2009). Free health care, education, alternative media, state ownership of natural resources, environmental sustainability and a promotion of social movements are the stated objectives of ALBA.

According to Thomas Muhr (2010) ALBA's integration initiatives employ five mechanisms that make it a counter-hegemonic globalization project. Regionalist inter-
state, bi-national, multi-national, sub-regional and transnational agreements allow the project to compete with capitalist globalization across local, national, regional and global spheres through popular social movements, worker’s and communal councils, cooperatives, and state-worker-managed factories. ALBA should be seen as a form of developmental regionalism, meaning that it is interventionist but does not delink from the global economy. Central to this regionalism is the Venezuelan notion of endogenous development. Endogenous development promotes a needs-based economy based on human need before profit and with an emphasis on the community (Muhr 2010).

The Bank of the South and the Fund of the South, also proposed by Chavez, aims to utilize monetary reserves to provide assistance with no conditionalities to protect against speculative global capital, and as a regional credit mechanism to finance integration infrastructure and regional development. The role of the Bank of the South and the Fund of the South is to serve as an alternative to the World Bank.

UNASUR is a regional organization with the intention to form a continental bloc, modeled on the United Nations. The parliament is located in Cochabamba, Bolivia and the bank in Caracas, Venezuela. The Telesur initiative has introduced alternative media programming regionally to serve as a counterbalance to the monopolization of media by transnational corporations. MERCOSUR developed by former Argentine president Nestor Kirchner, is the largest trading bloc in South America and was created with an interest to eliminate obstacles to regional trade. CAN is a smaller regional trading bloc comprising the countries of Colombia, Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia.
The Bolivarian movement was fundamental in the construction of various institutions of regional integration. But it is important to note that the communes are central to the Bolivarian process as a whole and the future of the process depends on the future of the communes. Here one communal organizer I spoke with explains the relationship between the communes and Bolivarian process:

The relationship is basic. It is the root of the Chavista project. The relationship between the state and the communes are basic in the sense that the roots of the revolution are to take power, to transfer power to the people through their territories and the only way to do that is to have an organization, this organization is called communal councils. So the territory, the new power of the territory, the new establishment of power is going to be represented by the commune but actually the main role of the communal council is to take power and to organize themselves. This situation will be a way of self-governing of the people and this self-governing will go against the traditional set or forms of power and institutions, like the governor, the county, or even the president. So the victory of socialism is about the construction of this power to the territories. They have to take power through territories around organizations of communal councils and represent through the parliament of the communes (Alex Interview 7).

The transfer of power from traditional structures of power to structures of popular power and the masses through communal councils and communes that is at the core of the Bolivarian process, which is at its core, an alternative to neoliberal models of development.

**Communes as Globalization from Below**

The communes in particular should be considered an example of democratic globalization from below for two reasons. First they are a central part of a global movement against corporate led globalization and neoliberal forms of economic development. Communes are an experiment of a different kind of grassroots
development opposed to IMF and World Bank prescribed reforms like privatization and free trade. In other words in addition to being a central component of the Bolivarian process that promotes south-south integration as a means to break from the political, economic and military control by hegemonic forces from the global north, the communes also offer alternative modes of production and development to the privatization and free trade policies championed by those very hegemonic forces including international financial institutions like the World Bank and the IMF. Second is the way in which the communes have coordinated and cooperated with other transnational movements in an effort to build new democratic spaces for a more just globalization. The alternative models of development and the ways in which the communal movement works with other movements for similar aims are an important way in which the poor and working people exercise agency in the face of corporate globalization.

**Alternative Model to Neoliberalism**

My argument that the communal movement offers alternatives to corporate globalization and is an important component to south-south integration projects rests on four characteristics that I have identified. The four characteristics will be discussed in turn and include the following: participatory decision-making instead of top-down decision making, endogenous development instead of neoliberal development, communal markets instead of the free market, and communal ownership over production instead of private ownership. These four components are central to the ways in which workers, through networks of popular power, exercise agency over their own development.
Participatory democracy

Participatory democracy is an integral component of the Bolivarian process and it should be seen as a deeper and more inclusive form of democracy than representative democracy that is often promoted by Western governments and liberal human rights organizations. In the representative model, political participation is often limited to the electoral sphere. Citizens elect representatives and those representatives are, in theory, held accountable to their voters through decisions. Democracy, therefore exercised through the periodic activity in elections, rather than the day-to-day activities of governance. Participation, therefore is confined to activities within the framework of consent to be governed.

The concept of participatory democracy holds that citizens should be active participants in the process of governance and decision making over the territory in which they live or work. In this model citizens must play a significant role in developing government policy and prioritizing budgets and projects in a way that benefits the entire community. The proportion to which a decision affects a particular individual or community, those affected are to have the same proportion of decision making power over that decision. The main principle behind participatory democracy is the constant participation, consultation, and discussion by citizens in the political process. This conception of democracy is quite different than the representative model where the extent of participation among citizens is choosing every two to six years which person they entrust to make decisions for them. The constant participation of citizens in the political process serves to better ensure self-determination. Participatory democracy strives to
create an active political culture, opportunities for the incorporation of broader sectors of the population into the political process, and a more healthy civil society in general.

The Bolivarian Constitution provides for broad citizen participation in the democratic process. This new participation has manifested itself in various forms including: local public planning councils that work to develop public policy, participatory budget-allocation, co-management of state-owned factories, workers councils, Bolivarian circles, social “missions”, community radio, and most importantly communal councils and communes.

The 2006 Communal Council Law (which was later updated in 2009) and the 2010 Organic Law of Communes established two important levels of participatory democracy, the communal councils and the communes, respectively. The Law of the Communes consists of 65 articles relating to the organization and establishment of communes across the country. According to Assembly member Ulises Daal, the Law was the result of open debates in which over 61,850 communal council voceros (spokespeople) participated (Reardon 2010). Communal councils and communes are grassroots neighborhood bodies of popular power that bring together community organizations to make decisions that directly affect their lives. Rather than local, state or federal elected officials making decisions that affect the community, the community themselves through the communes and communal councils are making these decisions themselves. The communes and councils are permanent governing structures that enable previously excluded social sectors into the political decision making process. Through these structures of popular power, everyday Venezuelans are encouraged to directly
manage public policy and projects that affect their daily lives. The levels of participatory
democracy begin with the communal council at the most neighborhood level, then are the
communes with are collections of communal councils, followed by communal cities and
then eventually the communal state. Each of these are to be structures of participatory
self-administration. At this point in the Bolivarian process the highest state that has been
achieved is the commune, though we have seen the collaboration of large groups
communes giving us a glimpse of what the communal cities can look like.

All decisions made in the communal councils and the communes are made in
popular assemblies. The assemblies are open to the whole community and every citizen
over the age of 15 can vote. According to the Law of Communes, decisions are made by
a simple majority and 30% of the members of the commune must be present to vote.
Each communal council elects a spokesperson to represent their council in the commune
and typically a spokesperson from each communal council must be present for a vote in
the commune. The needs and goals of the commune and the projects aimed to achieve
these goals are decided by the communes themselves. The commune conducts
participatory diagnostics of the community and decides in the assemblies what the
community needs most and what projects they want to carry out.

Here one communal organizer explains how the communes through these
diagnostics determine what are the most pressing needs of the community:

We have made plans, short, middle and long term in every single
centimeter of the territory... So we, because of our communal discussions,
made decisions to do certain things, and those certain things are related to
our problems so that we can make decisions about food, construction of
houses, education, health, sports. For example, through participatory
diagnosis we decided to build houses because it was the main problem of
the comuna, through this diagnosis we saw the main need was to build houses, so we started to build houses first. (Jose, Interview 7).

Decisions about what is to be built, what projects are a priority, and how the budget is spent, whether that be houses, education, health or sports, are participatory. Commune activists are very conscious of how the levels of participation that exist today are very different from how projects were carried out and decisions were made prior to the creation of the communes. Dairobus, a comunera from a commune in Caracas compares how community problems were solved before the creation her commune to how they are solved now:

The communes took place when the revolution delivered power to the people, it delivered the participation of the people. So the communal councils are constituted by the same necessities and the same problems like water or other issues. And they shared the same problems. So before these associations, the people told the state their problems and the state went and tried to solve the problems. With the communes it is different because we make our projects and we ourselves develop these projects. So we ourselves solve the problems. There are not private enterprises who do the projects. But our people are the ones that work in the projects. So it is not like before where the associations put forward a proposal to the state and the state would contract a private enterprise. Now we ourselves develop the project. So before these neighbors associations did not have a legal background. Now the CCs and the Communes have a legal background. There are laws of the CCs and the law of communes and the law of popular power. They are now legally protected (Diarobis Interview 2).

So rather than the state or private enterprises, or the state contracting out private enterprises, it is through the participation of those in the community that not only define and prioritize the problems of the community, but they also develop projects and actively work in these projects to solve the problems they may have in their territory.
Not only are everyday Venezuelans actively participating in decisions that directly affect them but the decisions that are made in the communes and communal councils are binding. Local and state officials must abide by the decisions made in the communes. If the commune decides they want to construct a basketball court in their community the Law of the Communes states that those officials must abide by that decision. That this power that is granted to the communes is significant in terms of the actual decision making power that is vested the in the direct participation of citizens through the communal citizen assemblies. This distinction makes the Venezuelan communes distinct from similar neighborhood councils around the world, like for example the consultative councils in Mexico discussed in chapter two. The consultative councils in Mexico play only an ancillary role to established institutions, they consult in the formulation of policies, evaluate policies, and make recommendations for specific issues to government agencies. But ultimately the decision remains in the established institutions. In practice these councils and the decisions are often used by local officials as simply a formal window dressing so they can tell their constituents that they met and consulted with the community, even if decisions made by the community were not ultimately implemented. With the communes in Venezuela, this is not the case, decisions made by the communes are binding.

Endogenous Development

The dominant approach to economic development is neoliberalism. This development model rests on the idea that the most effective way to foster development in the developing world is to remove any barriers to the free market. Growth according the
neoliberal model is best achieved by full integration into the world market. Some common policies associated with neoliberalism include; the removal of the state from control, regulation or ownership from the economic system; decreases in government spending; the reduction of labor, trade, or environmental regulations; reduction in tariffs and barriers to attract foreign investment and production that is guided by export-led development based on the needs of the world market.

Endogenous Development is a socioeconomic model of development that is driven from within or from the inside (of the state or local community), rather than development from without or from the outside. This model focuses on development based on the country's developmental needs rather than by the demand of goods on the international market. In other words as neoliberal development rests on the privatization of government industries by selling them to foreign owners, endogenous development, is development that is inwardly creating (Howard 2008). In the case of Venezuela, that means focusing on Venezuela's own unique assets, preserving Venezuela's traditional farming methods and native seeds, as well as native seeds rather than using genetically modified seeds imported from abroad (Schiavoni and Camacaro 2009). The Bolivarian Constitution promotes the concept of what is called "integral rural development" which both encourages new collective forms or property as well as increased food production to fight against food insecurity. The goal is not only to make the Venezuelan economy more self-sufficient, one that would favor products made in Venezuela, rather than simply producing for the export, but also development that is organized from below, one
that motivates community participation and planning in the economy through new forms of organization, and is based on the values of cooperation and solidarity (Wilpert 2007).

One of the central new forms of organization that promotes endogenous development are the communes. A lot of the production that takes place in the communes is still bought and sold by the private companies and the state, but a growing percentage is produced for local and domestic needs rather than for the international market. Decisions about what is produced are often made in citizen's assemblies taking into account the direct needs of the local community. The once-abandoned Brahma beer factory is one example. When the commune decided to take over the factory, the community, through citizen's assemblies and participatory diagnostics of the community and its needs, decided that what the community needed the most was a clean, reliable source of potable water. So based on the needs of the community rather than the needs of the international market, the decision was made to turn the factory into a water production plant. The decision was made with community participation, was based in the existing capacities and necessities of the community, was organized from below, and was based on the values of cooperation and solidarity.

The factory takeover in Comuna El Sur Existe, and the subsequent projects that developed from the takeover is another example of endogenous development. The commune decided, once again in a citizen's assembly, to use the factory to produce textiles. The community saw a need for school uniforms for local school age students, and decided to produce uniforms for the children. The decision was not made because school uniforms would be able to be sold for a high profit margin on the international
market but rather the community assessed the needs unique to their community and decided to produce school uniforms to meet those needs.

The communal markets discussed below is another mechanism by which the communes produce directly for the country's developmental needs based on the values of cooperation, participation and solidarity. The communal market is an attempt to break the dependence on the private sector for the production of basic goods, as well as a way to circumvent the vagaries of the world market. Food that is produced in the communal markets are distributed directly to local communities and are sold at regulated prices. Endogenous development is therefore a counterstrategy to the neoliberal model, whereby the neoliberal principles of private production, production for the global market and development that is driven by international capital is replaced by collective production, production for domestic needs and the socioeconomic development driven from within.

Communal Control of Production

The private production of goods and services and by extension the privatization of public assets, is central to neoliberal globalization from above. This section will show how communal control of the means of production offers an alternative to private, top-down production processes. But before I discuss the Venezuelan experiments of communal control of production, I will first discuss the centrality of private production to the neoliberal project of globalization.

The privatization of the means of production has long been promoted by hegemonic forces in the global north. These measures have been imposed through financial institutions like the World Bank and the IMF as conditionalities for indebted
countries to receive loans. The nationalization of previously privately owned firms have also been key factors in various coups in Latin America. Two prominent examples are the U.S.-backed coups of Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz in 1954, and Chilean president Salvador Allende in 1973. Prior to the coup in Guatemala, Arbenz passed an agrarian reform that nationalized land owned by U.S. based United Fruit Company. In the case of Allende, one of key reasons for his ouster was the nationalization of large-scale industries, most notably copper, banking, and the healthcare and education systems.

Privatization is also central to the neoliberal project in the form of what David Harvey (2003) calls accumulation by dispossession. Accumulation of dispossession is the act of centralizing wealth and property into the hands of the few by dispossessing the public of their wealth or land most commonly by transferring property from public ownership to private property. This serves the interests of the capitalist class as it transfers common property to privatized property. The privatization of water is but one example. The Bolivian water wars of 2000 and the sale of the public water system to a consortium of private multinational corporations are one clear example of this phenomena.

Facing an economic meltdown marked by high rates of inflation, the Bolivian government looked to the IMF to bail them out. In return for loans from the IMF the Bolivian government signed a number of structural adjustment programs that required, as conditions for loans, that the government privatize its airlines, railways, telephone systems, hydrocarbons and water. Bolivia put its state-owned water company SEMAPA up for sale. Only one party bid on the project, Aguas del Tunari, a consortium of
companies led by the U.S. backed Bechtel company. In order to legally sell the company the Bolivian government had to first pass law 2029 which verified the contract. Law 2029 gave Aguas Tunari monopoly control over all water resources, created broader restrictions on water used for irrigation and other community based uses, and also required Bolivians to apply for a permit to collect rainwater from their roofs. Before the law was passed it was common for Bolivians to collect rainwater for various purposes on the roofs of their house, but the privatization of water prohibited Bolivians from utilizing what was previously common property for anyone to use. The process of accumulation by dispossession in Bolivia transferred property from public ownership to private property, Bolivians have been effectively dispossessed from what used to be a commonly owned resource.

The instances where communes control the means of production stand in stark contrast to the relations of production that are promoted and facilitated by powerful states and international financial institutions like the IMF and the World Bank. The first level of popular power, the communal council, was originally formed to manage budgets and work on infrastructural projects like water, electricity, health, education, media, parks and community centers. This was also the original function of the communes. Like the communal councils, the communes initially focused primarily on infrastructural projects like water, electricity, roads and parks among others. Within the last year many communes began to produce. Though most of communal production is done in rural communes, production is also taking place in urban areas. As I discussed in chapter four, many communes have shifted their focus to production in the last year. In 2015 alone
Communes produced over 60,000 hectares of agricultural production including corn, rice, beans, coffee cereals etc. Sixty thousand hectares amounts to about one twelfth of agricultural products that Venezuelans consume per year, and this number is expected to increase. The ministry of communes estimates that communal agricultural production will exceed 100,000 hectares in 2016.

Communes have taken over production through various different channels. Some have taken over abandoned buildings like the small textile factory in the case of Comuna El Sur Existe and Brahma, the abandoned beer factory in Comuna Pío Tamayo. Communes also use communal funds to start production from scratch.

At the Pío Tamayo commune for example funds that are earned from the beer factory are used for the buying of selling of pigs. The pig farm is used mostly for meat production for members of the community. In El Sur Existe communal funds were used to start a both a grocery store and a paper store. In some cases, the production in a commune is completely self-sufficient. In still other cases production is heavily reliant on funds that come directly from the government of different government ministries. In other cases production is financed through a mixed system in which some of the money used in production comes from the government while the rest comes from earnings generated from that production. One example of this is in Comuna Socialista Agroecoturistica el Aranero Latinamericano (CSAAL), a mixed commune (composed of both urban and rural communal councils) located in the state of Portuguesa. CSAAL controls both a series of coffee plantations and plant that processes bananas in order to produce baby food. The finances for this project comes from funds that communal
councils receive from the government and from profits earned from selling the coffee and baby food produced in the commune.

Comuna El Maizal, a rural commune in the state of Lara, controls 2,000 hectares of land 800 of which is used for production while the remaining 1,200 is a national reserve protected by the commune. The land controlled by the commune was expropriated from the wealthy Alvarado family in 2009. But this was not simply a gift from the government, the expropriation was a result of years of struggle from community members in that area to retain collective control of the community on grounds that the land originally belonged to the people in the area until a group of wealthy families took the land from them.

Lara state has a rich history of struggle and that this particular community was well organized prior to the passage of the Law of Communes benefited them in their struggle for expropriation. That not all communities do not have the same rich history of popular organization and struggle explains part of the reason why the development of communes has been an uneven process, a topic to which we will return.

The Communal Market

Neoliberalism and by extension neoliberal globalization is rooted in the notion that unfettered free markets are the most efficient way to produce the greatest social, political and economic good. The free market is to determine prices of products, wages of employees, what is produced, how it is produced and how it is exchanged. Any obstruction to this formula is seen as government overreach and a hindrance to the market's ability to function properly. International financial institutions like the IMF,
World Bank and powerful states push national and local governments to deregulate the market (this may include labor, trade or environmental regulations) liberalize trade; and reduce tariffs, barriers and import controls in order to liberate the market from any government interference. Structural adjustment programs promoted by the IMF and World bank require nations to push through many of these reforms as conditions to receive loans.

In the midst of the economic crisis in Venezuela, communes decided to break from the free market model of production, prices and exchange. Communes created mercados comunales, or communal markets in the second half of 2015 as an alternative to the traditional distribution and exchange of goods dictated by the market. As goods and services struggled to make it to the supermarkets - whether that be because of hoarding, contraband, corruption related to the abuse of preferential exchange rates for imports, or simply the vicissitudes of the market - communal markets were created as a strategy to break with the dependence of the market for the distribution of goods. The government and the communes established an alliance for the creation of communal markets which integrates communal production with state national distribution.

The call for communal markets came out of a February 2014 national communal economy conference in the state of Barinas. The conference was attended by 567 delegates representing 225 different communes. By early 2016 there were already over 1,000 communal markets throughout the country and according to various representatives from the Ministry of the Communes (Suarez, 2015; Vargas, 2015), the number is expected to expand. Communal markets are spaces for direct distribution, from producer
to consumer, without intermediation. This is a space where the communes are bypassing the free market and private or state intermediaries to distribute products produced by the communes directly to the consumers. Circumventing the private sector middlemen has another advantage in that it avoids the expensive speculative rates and fees associated with private distribution services, which tend to drive up food prices and cut into producers' incomes.

Each weekend in several localities in the country, communal products are transported directly to communal markets. This is a space where different communal producers can bring their products to distribute, and the transportation of the goods to the market is also owned by the communes. The majority of products distributed in the communal markets today are agricultural but textiles can also be found in these markets. The dates and times of where the food will be distributed is announced beforehand and anyone is welcome to come buy the products that are sold at regulated prices.

As I mentioned in chapter four, production for the free market can create a number of problems. First, when global commodity prices oscillate according to the needs of the market, as we have seen with the fluctuation of oil prices, it can create crises which often leading to limited access to basic goods. Also producing for the free market, even if produced in a commune, can reproduce the same patterns of accumulation and can reproduce the same patterns of exploitation as production in the state or private sphere. Producing for the communal market, as a system of direct distribution of goods based on need, in theory is supposed to avoid some of the limitations of the free market. Since the creation of the communal market, much of the production from the communes
is still bought and sold by private companies and the state but the percent that is being distributed through the communal markets has increased significantly (Vargas 2015).

**Cooperation with other Transnational Movements**

In addition to the ways in which the communal movement offers an alternative to the top-down neoliberal model of globalization and development, the communes also cooperate and coordinate with other transnational movements in an effort to construct new democratic spaces for a more just globalization.

One council I observed, Communal Council El Socuy, collaborated and shared ideas and strategies with the Zapatistas in Chiapas Mexico. Located in the northern Venezuelan state Zulia, Socuy is one of the many indigenous communal councils in the country. The council is in the community *Wayuu Mana*, which means the place of the *Wayuu* people. The Wayuu are an indigenous group mostly located in the Guajira Peninsula in northern Colombia and northwest Venezuela.

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) took up arms on January 1st 1994, symbolically on the day when the North American Free Trade Agreement came into effect, and declared war on the Mexican state. The mostly indigenous EZLN began to seize towns and cities in the southern Mexican state Chiapas. After years of negotiations, refusals from the Mexican government to abide by San Andres Accords (which were to grant autonomy, recognition and rights to the indigenous population of Mexico), and an increased military presence, the Zapatistas decided to unilaterally enact in their own communities the principles of the San Andres Accords, that the government refused to acknowledge. The Zapatistas created "liberated areas" where the population
would gain "the right to freely and democratically elect their own administrative authorities". These liberated areas, or what were later called Rebel Zapatista Autonomous Municipalities (MAREZ), were created all throughout Chiapas.

Currently there are thirty two autonomous municipalities in southern Mexico. These municipalities are self-governed and all decisions made in autonomous municipalities are made through various participatory mechanisms, one of which through general assemblies. These meet regularly and are open to everyone in the community. Each autonomous municipality has elected delegate that can be revoked at any time, and that serve on a rotation basis. The idea is that at some point every member of the community will be able to serve as a delegate. These delegates form an assembly called Juntas de Buen Gobierno or Councils of Good Government (JBG) which oversees programs on health, education, food and taxation. The autonomous municipalities are also organized in small groups called "caracoles". Caracoles are where collections of autonomous municipalities convenes, and it is also houses different social programs education programs, language schools, clinics among others.

On various occasions many of the Wayuu people, from the El Socuy communal council traveled to Chiapas to meet with and share ideas about the way they have organized their communities and how they have struggled for indigenous rights and representation. Perhaps because of the collaboration between the two movements, both the autonomous municipalities in Chiapas and the El Socuy communal council in Venezuela have various similarities. For example, they make decisions in assemblies open to the whole community, have their own systems of education, and grow their own
food. On the cooperation between the two groups, a Wayuu activist and organizer in the El Socuy communal council told me:

[We] got invited by Subcomandante Marcos to pass along the word of what is going on in Venezuela, what is the relationship with the government, what is going on with the coal mining struggle, what the Wayuu people are doing, what's going on in Venezuela and Colombia, and do we support Chavez. All these things were topics that they thought was interesting to share with the rest of the communities. And also to bring the lessons and discipline of the Zapatista people to have it as a reference there in the community. Solidarity between those really respected and admired. They are really present in terms of reference for our community (David, Interview 15).

Thus collaboration between the two movements is not just a mechanism to share how to organize their own respective communities but also a way to discuss each of their own particular struggles as well as their own political perspectives about different political questions that each group face. It is also important to highlight the two-way knowledge sharing, both movements learn from and gain perspectives from the other.

I was in a Caracol named Oventic, home to one of the five Juntas of Good Government, where they house a language school for both internationals and for indigenous people who are interested in learning Spanish or Tzotzil (an indigenous language native to southern Mexico), a school that trains teachers and a clinic that is open to the various autonomous municipalities in the area. The notion of solidarity and the idea that workers, peasants and indigenous people in all countries have similar interests and similar enemies, and how this idea drives the collaboration between Zapatistas and
other movements from below, like the communes in Venezuela, was highlighted in a
discussion I had with a Zapatista in Oventic during my field work in Chiapas.

Anderson: Does the Mexican Government still attack Zapatista Autonomous municipalities or the Caracoles?
Manuel: Yes, there was an attack on a Tzeltal [A Mayan ethnic group and the largest indigenous group in Chiapas] community just the other day.
Anderson: How frequent are the attacks.
Manuel: There is an attack on the Zapatistas and our communities almost every day.
Anderson: When was the last attack on Oventic?
Manuel: There hasn't been one in a long time.
Anderson: Is that because the government knows that the language school is here and there are likely to be foreigners here? Perhaps the government knows that attacking poor indigenous peasants may not garner the same domestic or international scandal and outcry as if the government where to attack or kill a U.S. Citizen or a European. Do the foreigners here in the language school then provide some kind of safety or security from attacks from the government?
Manuel: Anderson, you all are not foreigners, you are internationals, the Mexican Government, they are the ones who are the foreigners. (Manuel, Interview 25)

So before answering my question about whether the presence of "foreigners" provide some kind of safety from attacks from the state, Manuel wanted to make it clear that to the Zapatistas, other members of the working class and peasants who come to Zapatista municipalities and Caracoles on the basis of solidarity and cooperation, are not foreigners, are not alien to the land which belongs to the people. The Mexican government, who is not welcome and does not have legitimacy to the land and resources that belong to the people, are the ones who are viewed as foreign. This notion of solidarity, that workers and peasants of all countries are part of the same struggle that was
extended to myself and the other "internationals" that were at Oventic is the same principal that drives much of the cooperation and collaboration that the Zapatistas and the communes in Venezuela share with one another and with other international struggles. In other words, it is not us, workers from outside of Zapatista controlled lands or even from outside of the political boundaries of Mexico that are seen as "foreigners", but rather it is the Mexican Government themselves, who represent different material interests than workers and peasants internationally, that are seen as foreigners.

**Challenges and Limitations**

**Communes in A Capitalist State?**

On January 30th, 2005 in a speech to the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, Hugo Chavez announced that he supported the creation of socialism in Venezuela under the banner of "21st century socialism". Though the details of 21st century socialism were vague, it was clear that the goal of the Bolivarian Process was to follow down a socialist path, no matter how unclear this "socialism" may look. In the subsequent years, various changes were made in the country, many of which have been explored above, but despite the far reach of the communal movement in Venezuela, the shift in the communes to communal production and the creation of the communal market as an alternative to the free market, Venezuela remains a capitalist country, which comes with various limitations to the communal movement and could ultimately bring about its downfall. This section explores the relationship between the communal movement and the capitalist state and the limitations communes face existing in a capitalist economy.
As I showed in chapter three, the Bolivarian Process (particularly during the Chavez era) has committed itself to a discourse on political participation, opened up spaces for grassroots organization, nationalized various private industries, created social missions that focus on health and education among others and increased expenditures on social programs. But despite many of these important gains for working people (again mostly during the Chavez era) the overwhelming majority of the means of production have remained in the hands of private sphere and the capitalist class. And despite its progressive language on participatory democracy and human rights, the 1999 Chavista constitution gives significant protection to private property (article 15).

In a discussion on whether Venezuela has achieved a social or political revolution, sociologist Jeffrey R. Webber says that rather than achieving a revolution, much less socialism:

Venezuela has witnessed a series of rebellions from below with wide-scale popular participation, and other actions from above with lesser popular participation, which have forced significant concessions from factions of the ruling class, produced significant changes in the personnel of state management, led to the transformation of some old political organizations as well as the creation of new ones, and allowed for major social improvements through the distribution of a greater share of the oil-rent to the popular classes in a context of high oil prices on the world market (Webber 2015).

So again, despite some major changes within the country since the beginning of the Bolivarian Process, the control of the economy still remains in the hands of private capital. In fact, between 1999 and 2011 the private sector's share of economic activity actually increased from 65% to 71% (Hetland 2016). Production for private profit still
dominates the economy, the production and distribution of goods and services, including key industries like the major food import and processing operations, pharmaceuticals and auto-parts, are still controlled by the private sector, and the bourgeoisie state apparatus (though perhaps weakened) still endures. Even in instances where the state does own the means of production, for example in the state owned oil and natural gas company PDVSA and the concrete and asphalt industries, it is the state bureaucracy that controls and makes all decision in these industries, rather than the workers. And in the instances of state control of industry, in particular PDVSA, production and distribution are shaped by the logic of capital, capital accumulation and are produced for the market. The oil industry represents ninety five per cent of the country's total exports, which is to say sold on the world market. In other words, despite various examples of worker's control throughout the country whether control by workers' councils or by the communes, in neither the large extant private sector or in the majority of state owned industries do workers have control of the means of production.

According to Chavez, the transition to 21st century socialism rests on the expansion of the communes, and then later the expansion of communal cities and then eventually to the creation of the communal state which is to replace the bourgeois state. Chavez commented that "the ownership of the means of production should be in the hands of the commune" (Mills 2015). But even Chavez himself openly spoke about how the transition to socialism has yet to come to fruition, that Venezuela remains a capitalist country and socialism is not in the near future. Here is Chavez on his weekly radio and television show Alo Presidente:
Who would think to say that Venezuela is a socialist country? No, that would be to deceive ourselves. We are in a country that still lives in capitalism, we have only initiated a path; we are taking steps against the world current, including towards a socialist project; but this is for the medium or long term (Mills 2015).

So what challenges and limitations does the communal movement face as they operate in what continues to be a capitalist economy? The next section will look at three issues and how they present challenges to the communal movement: hoarding, speculation and production driven by the needs of the free market.

**Production for the Market**

Production for the market produces a number of problems. When production is driven by the needs of the market, fluctuations in global prices of commodities can have strong negative consequences. In the case of Venezuela, the drop in global prices of oil had disastrous impacts on a country where ninety-five percent of total exports and about half of the government's revenue comes from the oil industry. In the summer of 2014 oil prices began to drop, and by the beginning of 2016 the price of a barrel of oil had dropped by more than 70%, the lowest rate in over thirteen years (Krauss 2016, Lopez 2016). The drop in oil prices resulted in high inflation rates and consequently high rates of capital flight. The problem of dropping oil prices is exacerbated by the government's failure to diversify its economy and its dependence on oil revenues. The drop of global oil prices, and consequently the drastic cutback in revenues, puts the government in a difficult situation to fund both its social programs and the communes.

Not only does the production for the market by state and private sectors create problems for the communes but communes who themselves control production face
challenges due to the logic of producing according to the needs of the market. Not all communes strictly produce for the market (as some produce for the communal market as I described above) but for those that do, production for the market can undermine the democratic elements of the commune itself. Decisions that in theory are made by the council are often influenced by the capitalist marketplace in which it operates. For example the market dictates what is to be produced and the prices for commodities, influencing decisions in the council.

**Hoardings**

As I mentioned in chapter four, Venezuela subsidizes basic goods to ensure that products that were unaffordable under previous administrations were accessible to the majority of Venezuelans. Hoarding by the business class has manifested itself in two ways. First, is the problem of contraband where much of the food and regulated goods are hoarded and then sold in the black market at exorbitant prices or across the border, particularly in Colombia, at often a 100 percent markup. A second strategy of the business class is hoarding not to resell on the black market or across the border but simply to manufacture shortages as an attempt to destabilize the economy and undermine the Maduro government. Government officials have on various occasions found warehouses full of basic goods, rotting because the private companies wanted to create the sensation that there are no products in the country and make the argument that it is the result of mismanagement of an incompetent government.

The cases of the Herrera C.A. factory where 1.5 million diapers and various other regulated goods were found in a warehouse in the state of Zulia and the warehouse in the
state of Aragua where the government found all sorts of medical equipment discussed in chapter four are but two examples of hoarding by private capital. And of course this is while supermarkets and hospitals have shortages and people are waiting in lines for hours for these same products.

Hoarding, corruption and capital speculation impact the communes in a variety of ways. First the activity of the private sector, and the government's inaction to confront these issues, undermines the whole Bolivarian process on which the communal movement relies. Secondly, hoarding and capital speculation impact all sectors of Venezuelan society including the communes. Shortages in basic goods for example, limits communes access to key materials needed for the normal functioning of the commune and waiting in queues at supermarkets for hours upon hours limits individuals' ability to participate in communal organizing. Also lost state revenue due to corruption and speculation can dry up much needed state funding that goes to the communes. Lastly, the more the opposition and private capitalist are able to make gains against the Bolivarian process, the more it can embolden the right wing and encourage violent attacks on the communes, like the attacks on Comuna El Maizal in the summer of 2015 (Dutka, 2015).

Capital Speculation

In the early years of the Bolivarian process a number economic measures were taken to defend the process against sabotage orchestrated by the capitalist class. The two most important of these measures were to implement foreign exchange controls and price controls on basic food products. The former was to prevent capital flight and the latter to
defend the purchasing power of the poor. Eventually the capitalists found a way to circumvent these measures.

First let's take a look at the ways that private capitalists have circumvented price controls. The Venezuelan government put in place various price controls to regulate the prices of basic goods including milk, black beans, chicken, pre-cooked flour, medicines, soaps, toilet paper among others. The idea behind these controls was to keep the prices low for key necessities so people can meet their most basic needs. But a large majority of private producers refused to produce products that are covered by the price controls. To circumvent regulated prices for rice, for example, businesses have produced flavored varieties, which are not covered by price controls (Martin 2016). It is also important to note that the private sector has a near monopoly of food production and distribution on many basic products in the country. Jorge Martin (2016) points out another way the private sector bypasses the price controls:

To this we have to add a thousand and one different ways in which the private sector breaks the price regulation regime. Maize flour is permanently scarce, but areperas are always well stocked [Maize is the key ingredient to arepas]. Chickens are almost impossible to purchase at regulated prices, but roast chicken joints never lack them. Wheat flour can't be bought at the official price, and the bakeries use lack of flour as an argument not to produce the normal loaf of bread (the price of which is regulated), but then they are mysteriously able to produce any other variety of bread, cakes and biscuits, which we have to assume are made with flour. What's behind this mystery? The fact that private wholesale producers do supply these establishments, but of course not at regulated prices.

In addition to circumventing price controls, private capitalists have also found a way around currency controls. But first it is important to take a quick look at Venezuela's
complex currency system which included three different exchange rates. The first, called DiPro, is the official exchange rate used for the import of food, medicine, and raw materials used for domestic production of goods and services. DiPro is also used for Venezuelan students studying abroad. The DiPro rate is now currently around 13 bolivares to the dollar. The second official exchange rate, DiCom is a floating exchange rate which is currently somewhere between 300 to 700 bolivares to the dollar and is used to cover all transactions not covered in DiPro. The third exchange rate is the black market rate that has reached 4,000 bolivares to the dollar (Hetland 2016).

The chasm between the black market rate and the DiPro exchange rates has opened the door for corruption and currency speculation. The government provides businesses dollars at the DiPro exchange rate in order to import goods and services. Many of these business end up selling these preferential dollars on the black market to make huge profits. If playing with exchange rates, if making money off speculation and corruption is more profitable than providing important services to the public like importing, selling, or manufacturing goods and services, then more and more businesses are going to focus on speculation than those more useful activities. Because so many of the dollars that businesses are getting at the DiPro rate that are supposed to be used for importing goods are instead being sold in the illegal black market, there has been serious scarcities in a number of key goods. In other words rather than importing goods those dollars are siphoned into the black market, creating scarcity of a variety of goods. One estimate of the total lost due to the manipulation of currency controls is $300 billion (Hetland 2016).
So while the currency system put in place in 2003 to prevent capital flight just after the 2002-2003 oil lockout, may have made since at the time, why has the Maduro government not changed these controls which would eliminate many of the incentives for corruption and speculation by the capitalist class. Part of this answer lies in the alliances that the government has made with certain sectors of the private sector who are benefitting handsomely from the status quo. A topic I will develop further in the following section.

**The State of the Bolivarian State and the Future of the Communes**

In addition to challenges that the communes face existing in a capitalist economy, the success of the communes is also contingent on the success of the Bolivarian process more generally. The future of the communes is very much connected to the future of the Bolivarian process. If the Bolivarian process fails, the communal movement will likely also fail. Opponents of the Bolivarian process are not only those who openly identify as part of the opposition but also opportunists who are nominally a part of the process but whose interests do not align with the interests of genuine popular power and a transition to socialism and the latter group often includes many in the government and the PSUV itself. Challenges to the success of the Bolivarian process, and by extension the communes, therefore do not just come from without, or from the right wing opposition but also from contradictions within the process itself. This a particularly important discussion as the Bolivarian process is currently going through one of its toughest periods to date, with an unprecedented inflation rate reaching to upwards of 200% in 2015 coupled with shortages of basic consumer goods and long queues outside of supermarkets.
where Venezuelans can be found waiting for hours to buy basic goods. The following section will explore these contradictions.

One such contradiction originates from the founding of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). The party was formed in 2007 to bring together all the existing organizations that supported Chavez and the Bolivarian process's goal for "socialism of the 21st century". It was to be an open mass democratic party of the left. After the first six weeks the party claimed six million members. One of the key components of the whole Bolivarian process is its emphasis on popular power and participatory democracy. This language is in the 1999 Chavista constitution, and these concepts have driven the creation of various participatory and popular power institutions including the social missions, participatory budget allocation, co-management of state-owned factories, community radio, communal councils, and of course the communes. But despite the importance of participatory democracy and popular power to the process, the PSUV leaves little room for popular participation in the party itself.

Though in the first years of the PSUV, hundreds of militants in the party participated in community assemblies and various currents within the party had representatives and could make proposals, the party was still a highly centralized party with Chavez at the top of the pyramid. The party always relied on the hyper-leadership of Chavez and it never developed a collective leadership outside of Chavez. This worked for some time because of his charisma and his ability to connect with people in the popular sectors, but after his death and with the election of Nicolas Maduro the limits of this model started to become more pronounced.
Under Maduro the extent to which popular participation is permitted in the party decreased further, as a new ruling bureaucracy within the party began to become more powerful. This new bureaucracy controls the large public sector budget and has made alliances with various parts of the private sector. This is not to say that Chavez had no alliances with any parts of the private sector but these alliances grew after the eruption of violent right wing protests called the guarimbas which began in February of 2014, and lasted until April of the same year. The anti-government protests were calling for "la salida" "the exit" of the elected government of Maduro. The protestors blocked of roads and communities, burnt trash in the streets, attacked state-run health clinics, destroyed billboards and burnt buses. There were some reports of anti-government protestors stringing wire across the road to decapitate motorcyclists (Pearson 2015). Maduro's method to resolve the guarimba violence was to negotiate with the business class.

In a strategy for reconciliation with sectors of the capitalist class and the political opposition Maduro called for what were called "peace" negotiations. Maduro met with business leaders and powerful private capitalists including the Venezuelan Federation of Chambers of Commerce (Fedecámaras), an organization that was instrumental in the failed 2002 coup d'etat which temporarily overthrew Chavez, and Lorenzo Mendoza, owner of the Polar Company, Venezuela's largest domestic food producer, and perhaps the most powerful private capitalist in Venezuela. But perhaps more important than those who were invited to these negotiations was those who were not invited. Gonzalo Gomez (2014), a member of Marea Socialista, a Trotskyist current that was in the PSUV from its inception until they left the party in February of 2014, wrote at the time:
Only representatives of the right wing, not those of the working class and popular sectors have been invited [to the peace negotiations]. So far, the negotiations have functioned as a way to push Maduro into making further concessions to the interests of the capitalists as a "pragmatic" way forward -- though the base of Chavismo favors a very different response.

While it may be true that the biggest challenges to the Bolivarian process and the communal movement more specifically may come from the right-wing political opposition (speculation, hoarding) and that the communes are operating in a capitalist economy (drops in oil prices, production for the market), the government has done very little to combat these issues. The reason why the government has done so little to solve these problems may very well be related to the internal contradictions in the Bolivarian process itself and maybe even more so with the alliances that the Maduro government made with the same sectors of private capital that are resisting a radical advancement of the Bolivarian process. And again, it is important to point out that these alliances were made without the involvement or participation of workers, the left and popular sectors of the Venezuelan society, or in other words without the radical base, the real motor force of the Bolivarian process.

In the age of Globalization, as corporations and the concentration of capital increase and rules of the market pervade more and more of our lives, workers, through networks of popular power created from struggles from below can exercise agency over their own development. The Venezuelan communes and communal councils are a glimpse of how workers both formal and informal can push for greater control of their lives, and can create alternative models of development to the neoliberal model promoted by international financial institutions and powerful nation states.
With the construction of networks of communes and communal councils more sectors of Venezuelan society have been incorporated into the political decision making process than at any other point in Venezuelan history. By restructuring how power is distributed and decisions are made, councils and communes have significantly increased popular participation. The constant participation of citizens in the political process has augmented citizens' self-determination in their own communities. The inclusion and participation of community members in decisions about how to allocate communal budgets, what to produce, how to produce and how to distribute goods demonstrates one important way that workers, through these networks of popular power can exercise agency over their own development.

The four primary characteristics of the communal movement all function to deepen direct democratic community control over the resources and development of local communities. Furthermore the networks between communes and communal councils deepens the direct democratic control of even larger geographic and political spaces. Participatory democracy in the communes enables citizens to be active participants in the process and decision making over the area in which they live or work. Member of the communes play a significant role in developing projects that benefit the entire community. Moreover, participatory democracy in the communes remedies some of the exclusionary aspects of representative democracy. This is apparent in the citizens assemblies where historically excluded sectors of society, the poor, indigenous, and other marginalized groups are prominent. Endogenous development in the communes enables
communes to make decisions internally based on the needs of the community, enhancing community control over

Communal control over production not only allows for community members themselves to decide what is produced, how it is produced and how it is distributed it also gives workers in these production sites the power to make decisions about their own working conditions, compensation, work hours and vacation time. The communal market gives workers further control over their own development in that it enables communes to produce directly based on the needs of the community rather than the market dictating what should be produced, how it is distributed and more or less the prices of those goods and services produced. Through these four components of the communes, workers have more self-determination and control over their own development.

The successes that the communes have achieved so far are impressive and would be difficult to dispute but they do confront a series of various serious obstacles. The obstacles are varied and come from both within and without the process. First is the limitations that come with communal production and distribution in the midst of a capitalist economy, both domestically and the global market economy. Second is the explicit challenges from the right wing opposition, whether that being hoarding, speculation or outright violence. And finally the verticalist structure of the PSUV and the hostility to some of the more radical currents of Chavismo that has at various key moments impeded the transfer of power to workers and the popular sectors of society. The survival and spread of the communes requires a confrontation with these three
obstacles and the further building of popular power from below, and a deepening of the Bolivarian process as a whole. When asked what concretely can be done to confront the very apparent obstacles to the success of the communal movement, Alex Alayo, a communal organizer at the El Maizal Commune responded:

We have to control the means of production. We need the resources, the land, everything that you need to produce, the means of production. We need a communization of power, and the communalization of the territories.... There is not another way out to liberate humans from capitalism, only with the construction of the power of the people and the changing of the relationships from the way they are now, the change the relationships of power. It has to be from below and horizontal. Right now there is a coexistence of power and a strong conflict between revolution and reform and revolution against counter-revolution. We have to push further against classic distributions of power. We have to build it from below. We don't want this to end in reformism against revolution, no we have to win. The revolution has to defeat the counter-revolution in the end. And this can't be done by reformism. The power has to change. So all the relationships in power have to change. The only way to win is to deepen the fight. If we don't deepen the fight, the commune will die or will simply become an appendix of the bureaucratic state (Alex Interview 7).

As I have illustrated in previous chapters, the Bolivarian masses have, on various occasions, both defeated the counter-revolutionary attempts by the opposition to end the process and also pushed those in the Bolivarian government, Chavez included, in a more radical direction. This was the case with the 2002 coup and the oil lockout of the same year and more generally with the widespread reforms that improved the living standards of the majority of Venezuelans and the various initiatives that transferred power to popular sectors of society through participatory democracy, communal councils, communes and participatory budgeting. It is as George Cicariello-Maher (2013) argued in his book We Created Chavez, that it was (and is) the masses, workers, peasants, the
organized left, social movement actors who created Chavez, Chavismo, the Bolivarian process and the communes, and it is now more than ever that these popular sectors must once again organize and deepen the process to press against those impeding or in opposition to the movement, which includes both the official right-wing opposition, but also those who may be nominally "Chavista" including the PSUV, Maduro and more conservative sectors of Chavismo.
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