Sowing the State: Nationalism, Sovereignty and Agrarian Politics in Venezuela

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Abstract

Sowing the State is an ethnographic account of the remaking of the Venezuelan nation-state at the start of the twenty-first century, which underscores the centrality of agriculture to the re-envisioning of sovereignty. The narrative explores the recent efforts of the Venezuelan government to transform the rural areas of the nation into a model of agriculture capable of feeding its mostly urban population as well as the logics and rationales for this particular reform project. The dissertation explores the subjects, livelihoods, and discourses conceived as the proper basis of sovereignty as well as the intersection of agrarian politics with statecraft. In a nation heavily dependent on the export of oil and the import of food, the politics of land and its various uses is central to statecraft and the rural becomes a contested field for a variety of social groups. Based on extended fieldwork in El Centro Técnico Productivo Socialista Florentino, a state enterprise in the western plains of Venezuela, the narrative analyses the challenges faced by would-be nation builders after decades of neoliberal policy designed to integrate the nation into the global market as well as the activities of the enterprise directed at
transcending this legacy. Not merely a restoration of the status quo or reassertion of a prior independence, I argue, the Venezuelan nation-state is being reinvented in this drive for sovereignty and that the tensions between peasants, workers and technical experts in the Florentino enterprise reflect the cleavages of an emerging state form.
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Introduction

Outside the headquarters a group of students had gathered for a tour of the enterprise touted as a model of socialist agriculture and the vanguard of the new social economy. The pride of the new government, the farm received frequent visits from various delegations and guests. As one of many such delegations, the group of students had gathered outside the headquarters with their instructor and the general manager of the project, a career officer in the Venezuelan armed forces. While waiting for the tour to start, the group of students began to grow restless and noticing their growing impatience, the instructor turned to the general manager and said “a few words comandante?” Somewhat caught off guard and unprepared for the task of giving a speech, the manager turned to the assembled group and asked to which institution the students belonged. One of the youngsters in the group responded, “Semillero de la Patria” or Soil of the Nation, one of the youth organizations which had cropped up in the years since the start of the revolution.¹

Now armed with the bit of information, the general manager took a few moments to compose himself and search for the right thing to say, amidst the growing look of anticipation on the faces of the students.

He began by giving a brief description of the farm and its activities in light of the history of Venezuela in an effort to convey what he regarded as the social significance of the project. “Historically, Venezuela was a country with a great deal of land, but we didn’t use it. Instead, we had a petroleum economy that made us dependent.” Frankly he acknowledged, he did not know why this had been the case, but he avowed the Florentino enterprise was working to change that, as part of a larger, integral plan. “In Florentino, we are working to produce the foodstuffs necessary to feed the country so that it never goes hungry again.” It was that word ‘again’ which seemed to strike a chord with the audience and caused the students to nod, giving their ready
assent. Having heard the descriptions of the hardships endured by Venezuelans in past decades from their instructors, the students were already part of the wider field constituted by the new leadership, and the veracity of the claims of the general manager were self-evident.

Wrapping up this speech, the general manager exhorted the students to study hard and contribute to the building of a new Venezuela. He stated that he hoped the students would benefit from the activities of the center and work in agriculture. He wished them success and by way of parting, suggested they might one day work in an enterprise like Florentino. But just when it appeared that the general manager had played his part and his speech had drawn to a close, he added one last rhetorical flourish. As he sought to explain just what was at stake in Florentino, the scale of ambitions for agriculture in Venezuela became clear. “In Florentino, we are sowing the land. We are sowing the patria—we are sowing a new generation of Venezuelans—and you are our seeds.”

The ethnographic account provided here seeks to grasp the role of agriculture in the re-envisioning of the Venezuelan nation and its reinvesting with sovereign power. It investigates the discursive and material practices which enliven Venezuela’s quest for sovereignty at the start of the twenty-first century and how the Florentino enterprise, a state agriculture project in the western plains of Barinas, intersects this wider struggle. It takes as its leitmotif the “blood and soil nationalism” espoused by the project general manager when he describes Florentino as a project which seeks to unify the nation, its subjects and territory by way of the agency of the state. I take his words as an effort to describe the role of agriculture in restoring a sovereignty putatively destroyed by the social and economic crisis of the late twentieth century.

His metaphor of ‘sowing,’ I suggest, is more than incidental and can only be grasped in the light of a long series of nation-building projects which drew upon such images (Coronil
1997: 134, Baptista and Mommer 1987, Prashad 2007: 176). His metaphor echoes the language used by a series of Venezuelan leaderships in the twentieth century to describe the use of the revenue of the oil industry to diversify the economy and ensure stability (Uslar Pietri 1936, DiJohn 2000, Derham 2014). In the mid-twentieth century, the leaders of Venezuela sought to create a welfare state modeled on the nations of the global north. Taking Europe and North America as their examples, leaders sought to deal with the surplus labor population created by the rise of petroleum and the restructuring of agriculture by establishing a state form which could provide its citizens with livelihood until such time as the transition to industry could be effected (Ewell 1984, Lombardi 1982, Petras et al 1977: xv).

Securing the interests of social elites as much as the welfare of the surplus population, this form of state indexed the growing wealth and prosperity of the nation as well as its forecast ascendance in the global system (Allen 1976: 3 et passim). Earning consent by way of an “expansive form of hegemony” in which the political bureaucratic apparatus provided benefits to broad sectors of society eschewing regional and ethnic differences (Smith 2011), this compact forged the type of consensus which Gramsci (1971) referred to as “the national-popular.” This type of consensus, capable of integrating multiple classes in spite of differential access to social surplus, bound subalterns to elites in relations of dependence, which could ensure stability until Venezuela arrived at first world status. Yet unlike the welfare states of the global north, the benefits of the Venezuelan welfare state were drawn from the revenue of natural resources, rather than taxes on capital or the wages of workers. Instead of a classic Fordist arrangement in which the state, labor and capital formed a stable triad (Jessop 2006, Harvey 1990, Burawoy 1985), the critical tension, which held Venezuelan society together, was the dialectic of the state with the nation.
This tension, grasped by the average Venezuelan as a reciprocal relationship between *el pueblo* (‘the people’) and *el gobierno* (‘the government’) in which the former gave consent to the latter in exchange for rising standards of living and security, meant leaders always had to ensure growth or risk instability. In this configuration, *el gobierno* embodied both labor and capital as the organizer of the public sector labor force and the owner of the petroleum industry, and it was tasked with awarding benefits irrespective of whether Venezuelans participated in the labor market or increased productivity. The Venezuelan welfare state thus was always less “workerist” than its European and North American counterparts, and the key criterion for the receipt of benefits was not labor *per se*, but rather membership in *la patria* or the nation (cf. Ferguson 2013, Standing 2010, Glassman 2006). In this system, the actors staffing the ranks of the political bureaucratic apparatus were regarded as having a specific set of obligations based on the idea that they were the trustees of social wealth (Li 2007, Cowen and Shenton 1996). These actors were only legitimate in so far as they used this wealth to increase standards of living or ‘build the nation,’ and any deviation from these goals threatened their legitimacy. The routine exclusion of sectors of Venezuelan society from this largesse meant marginalized groups frequently adopted tactics designed to force integration into these systems, invoking the idea that failure to provide benefits was evidence of elite defiance of popular sovereignty and distance of *el gobierno* from *el pueblo* (Coronil and Skurski 1991; Skurski 2015). These ideas were incredibly powerful in Venezuela and they did not disappear at the end of the twentieth century.ii

Since the start of the Bolivarian Revolution in 1998, the restoration of sovereignty has been the objective of virtually every official policy. From the highest to the lowest ranks of Venezuelan society, the word ‘sovereignty’ has been used to convey the hopes, fears and desires of the nation. It is regarded as a cure for social ills and a status which, if acquired can create an ideal state—*un estado communal* or communal state. Yet it is also used as a description of the
type of power the elected leadership seeks to use in order to achieve this end. Thus sovereignty is both a critique of the status quo and a return to a status which Venezuela is imagined to have held in the past. Moreover, in Venezuela it is also used a description of a specific balance between the state and civil society and global forces mediated by a mass constituency (for a history of this usage of the term in the scholarly literature and popular politics, see Jennings 2011). The various senses attributed to the word sovereignty thus suggest it is useful to have a degree of analytical separation between the use of the terms by social scientists and the use of the term by social actors in Venezuela. The uses of the terms are not always synonymous, and this fact suggests the need for an approach to the study of nations, states, and sovereignty which is less dependent on ideal types or the formalism of liberal political theory.

Taking sovereignty as a site for investigation, rather than a term whose meaning is clear from the outset, this dissertation seeks to grasp the role of agriculture in the vision of the nation [la patria] held by the current Venezuelan leadership and its role in reinvesting it with sovereign power. Figuring centrally in the plans of the new leadership, the successful recovery of land for agricultural uses has been regarded as crucial to the overall success of its sovereignty project. Converting a part of the territory long regarded as a backwater into a source of modernity and progress, the Florentino enterprise in Barinas and others like it have sought to revive ties between el pueblo and el gobierno weakened by decades of neoliberal economic policy and to create a form of development that can ensure the nation’s independence. Yet as much as present efforts seek to restore such bonds, I argue they also diverge from historical precedents in crucial ways, as they seek to create a model of growth adequate for the twenty-first century.

I conceive of this dissertation as an investigation of Florentino as a space which is reflective of the state the Venezuelan leadership seeks to create as well as the ways in which the
space reflects its central tensions. The investigation asks how the productive relations, systems of exchange, discourses, and practices of Florentino articulate with the culture, identity and aspirations of rural actors and how the project contributes to, or actually interferes with, the creation of a sovereign nation-state. Centering on one of the concrete spaces in which social resources have been invested, the analysis treats the observed interactions as evidence of the types of relations the leadership seeks to embed in society and how these relations are conceived to bring about an ideal state. While paying attention to the wider context in which the center is integrated, it asks how Florentino is conceived to bring the nation [el pueblo], state [el gobierno] and territory [la tierra/el territorio] together into a seamless totality which erases social contradiction. This form of statecraft, based on the idea of ‘the rule of the people,’ is central to Florentino and its logics. But this form of statecraft is also rife with tensions which are central to this account. Yet before I can describe the specific aspects of this investigation, I have to explain in greater detail why the lack of sovereignty is regarded as such an issue in Venezuela at the start of the twenty-first century and why its leaders should feel so strongly driven to ‘recover’ it.

Students receive demonstration of a seeding machine in Florentino. Photo by author.
Contested Sovereignty

The classic conception of sovereignty derived from the sociology of Max Weber (1919, 1934) centers on the monopoly of violence in a given territory and the consent required to exercise it. In his schema, this power is held by a political-bureaucratic apparatus with the ability to regulate its population by way of the various benefits and protections it provides as well as control its territory with various coercive sanctions. In this system, territory and population form the natural objects of governance, and the global system is in turn composed of a series of such states, which defend the interests of their respective nations. The political bureaucratic apparatus embodies the will of the majority of the population and by virtue of this fact it precludes the existence of other sovereigns. Although Weber recognized that bureaucracies have their own logics and that these logics often interfere with the supposedly rational and consensual nature of modern power, the basic model still seemed to hold for a variety of societies around the world.iv

In the twentieth century, nation-states in the global north held a degree of power over their territories, borders and populations—and to a certain extent, even their cultures—which gave rise to the idea of the nation-state as a bounded whole or natural container for social relations (Krohn-Hansen and Nustad 2005, Abu-Lughod 2000, Steinmetz 1999, Nagengast 1996, Appadurai 1996, Evans et al 1985). The nation-state was also imagined as a container for economic relations, providing the basis for prosperity. The role of the political-bureaucratic apparatus as regulator of the labor market and growth (e.g. establishing minimum wage laws, setting monetary policy, using public spending to stimulate demand) aligned with the interests of capital, generating an image of stability and a relatively sealed social formation. But the forms of regulatory power this political economy supported hid the reality of gaps in the authority of the governmental apparatus, especially for outside observers.
The degree of integration of the global north was in fact illusory as it hid many gaps and fissures. But from the perspective of observers in Venezuela and other parts of the global south, nation-states of the global north seemed to have achieved completeness. One aspect of this completeness was the apparent ability of these nations to furnish the needs of their populations while exporting goods to the south. In the twentieth century, Venezuela was subject to a constant barrage of commodities from the global north, giving rise to the idea that these nations were largely self-sufficient entities. The relations between Venezuela which chiefly exported oil and unprocessed agricultural products and these nations which exported consumer goods and industrial products supported an image of the latter as having a fixed sovereign and developed status.

Set against this image, Venezuela—like other nations in the global south—fell short. The integral and bounded nature of its territory was far from given in light of the poor quality of its infrastructure and the great distances it traversed. The political-bureaucratic apparatus did not exercise effective control over its territory, and at several key points in history, regional strong men, insurgents, and powerful groups were accused of forming “states within the state.” Histories of violence inscribed in the ethno-racial composition of the population, which includes indigenous peoples, Hispanic settlers, descendants of African slaves, and more recent European immigrants invited to colonize “empty” land, also troubled sovereignty. Likewise, the uneven distribution of wealth from the oil industry served as a near constant source of friction in the modern era, as various groups fought for control of the central government, the owner of this wealth (see Lieuwen 1967, Lombardi 1982, Ewell 1984). This internal disorder of Venezuela was counterposed to the order attributed to the regulated states in the north. The purported difference was part of the work of inventing ‘the third world’ as essentially deficient (Escobar 1995; Lomnitz 2012). The fact that Venezuela was sending a single resource to the US gave rise
to a widely held view that Venezuela, should be grateful for the tight relations of dependency
with its neighbor and perhaps even give up its sovereignty to formally integrate with the US (a
move Roseberry (1989) refers to as “Puertoricanization.”)

Further challenges to the Weberian image of sovereignty emerged in the neoliberal era as
forces of globalization opened up the nation-state to foreign investment and weakened the
authority of national governments (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2000a, Trouillot 2001).vi In
Venezuela, heavy dependence on petroleum revenue and investments required to finance
national budgets and pay for food imports made the nation’s capacity to support the population
from year to year vulnerable to price swings. The onerous debt burden placed on Venezuela as a
result of capital-intensive industrialization efforts in the 1960s and 70s and the relative absence
of domestic food production, made this situation especially precarious (Briceño-Leon 1991).
Whereas nation-states in the global north had food systems that directly articulated with their
domestic agriculture sectors or were able to cushion price swings with relatively stable trading
arrangements, the food system in Venezuela was ruled by a class of compradors who derived the
bulk of their profits from charging higher prices on imports and who paid for them with foreign
currency flows highly dependent on the exigencies of the petroleum trade (Gutierrez 1992,
1995). The threat of this flow of imports suddenly being cut off due to balance of payment
problems or sudden increases in the price of food on global markets menaced the food security of
the nation and its stability. In 1989, a massive anti-austerity riot known as El Caracazo swept
Venezuela, instigating a social crisis. Sparked by the insecurity of broad sectors of society, amid
a sudden and severe reduction in the price of oil, efforts to liberalize the Venezuelan economy
increased the price of food and public transportation, bringing violence to all the major cities.
On February 26th 1989, Venezuelan legislators met in a secret late night session of Congress to pass a structural adjustment package sponsored by the IMF/World Bank. The package, approved without the presence of a vocal opposition, was designed to address slow growth and chronic inflation as well as shortfalls in public revenue. The package abolished many of the social benefits which had protected marginal sectors of society, entailing a significant increase in the cost of living for the average person. While Venezuelans slept, elected officials were working to change the way in which their society operated, and when Venezuelans awoke next morning to learn what happened, the capital and other cities erupted in violence. The brutal military crackdown which followed left hundreds, some say thousands dead. The crisis lasting nearly two weeks also revealed the long feared rift between el pueblo and el gobierno (Coronil and Skurski 1991).

Characteristic of peripheral capitalist social formations in times of crisis, the riots were an example of what Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1990) called “state against nation.” In such instances, the political bureaucratic apparatus deploys mass violence against its ostensible base to prevent the rise of alternative sources of power. The violence in the peri-urban areas of Venezuela where the bulk of the surplus labor population was located exposed the fragility of the peace founded on the flow of wealth from the oil industry and the emptiness of rhetorical appeals to the unity of the state with the nation without this specific social content. This mass violence further discredited the political system, and the loss of hegemonic consent was not limited to the average citizen. The loss of support for officials extended to sectors of the political bureaucratic apparatus itself, as the riots were followed by a series of military coups.
On February 4th 1992, a group of military officers led by a previously unknown army colonel, Hugo Chávez, tried to overturn the Venezuelan government. Faulting elected officials for the chaos and instability of the Caracazo, the Bolivarian-200 Movement, as it was known, called for the restoration of the sovereignty of the Venezuelan people (*la soberania del pueblo*). Efforts to privatize state assets and transform Venezuela into an adjunct of the wider global market entailed the loss of the autonomy of the nation in the global system and the social safety net, which had ensured the relative absence of class conflict. This caused these actors to take action to overturn a government, which they regarded as having betrayed *la patria*.

As the Venezuelan anthropologist Paula Vasquez (2013) has argued, the coup was an example of the state of exception in which a section of the military refused to be bound by the rule of law and acted in the name of a sovereignty which was conceived to be deeper than formal juridical principle. The rejection of austerity by large sections of Venezuelan society alerted part of the military to the threat posed by the loss of social contract and what they viewed as an
existential threat. Effectively suspending the laws, which had restructured the state and economy, the coup blurred the lines between ‘law-making’ and ‘law-preserving’ violence, which Benjamin (1985) notes is a key feature of sovereignty, as part of the repressive apparatus asserted itself as capable of restoring order (Althusser 1971). The coup failed. But the convulsions it unleashed eventually paved the way for the electoral success of its leader, who after spending nearly two years in prison, was elected President in 1998.

In February 1999, Hugo Chávez assumed office and set about convening a constituent assembly to rewrite the constitution. Attended by members of his political party and the various social movements around the country, the constituent assembly drafted a new guiding document which made “overall human development” its central goal and included a number of progressive measures, including protections for women and minorities, subsidies for small farmers, living wages for workers and a variety of social entitlements including the right to clean water, food, housing, education, job training and healthcare. One of the most radical constitutions in the world, the new document laid the basis for a series of misiónes or “social missions” designed to ensure these new rights were respected. Sectors of the nation marginalized by neoliberal attacks on the social state formed a natural constituency for the new government and these groups readily supported its reforms. Diverting a large portion of the budget and the profits of the oil industry, these misiónes were extremely popular with the sectors of society who faced chronic unemployment and low standards of living. But the misiónes were notably unpopular with elites who felt threatened by the priorities of the new leadership and worried their traditional privilege was under siege.

In 2002, a coup staged by media and social elites against the Venezuelan government brought about a decisive shift in the orientation of the leadership, causing the revolution to take a
more radical turn. After his election in December 1998, Hugo Chávez had pledged to restore the
dignity of the Venezuelan people in keeping with the ideals of Simon Bolivar, the 19th century
leader of Latin American independence. Yet after the coup, Chávez began to draw closer to Cuba
and the left social movements in Latin America, declaring at the World Social Forum in 2004
that the goal of the Venezuelan Revolution was “a socialism for the twenty-first century.” What
this was to mean in practice was not entirely clear, but what was clear was his new agenda would
entail greater conflict with the elites which ruled the nation’s oil industry and trade system. Not
merely content to redistribute rent from the oil industry, the Venezuelan leadership began to
challenge existing property relations and invest in infrastructure and enterprises in a bid to gain
the support of layers of society whose labor had not been drawn into modern industry. The
leadership also began to invest resources to meet key security concerns and put the nation on a
more stable footing. In 2004, the state oil company had been used as a weapon against the
government when unions aligned with the opposition went on strike. After the defeat of the strike
and the at least partial wresting of the oil industry away from its opponents (see García 2003),
the leaders began to use revenue of the industry to build state enterprises in key sectors to
provide employment and protect the economy from disruptions in the flow of oil. The Florentino
enterprise, started in 2005, was one such project, which aspired to deal with a variety of
problems associated with the petroleum economy.

Among the concerns Florentino was intended to address were the dependency of the
nation on export revenue and a lack of internal production. The enterprise was also to designed
to revive hopes for sowing the oil into a self-sufficient, industrial economy which could create
the bulk of what the nation consumed, an image of sovereignty derived from the history of
integrated, self-sufficient and highly productive nations attributed to the global north. In this
imagined sovereign state, Venezuela would be more secure and no longer be subject to the
whims of external forces. Yet the elusive character of this form of sovereignty and the very real barriers to its achievement means the efforts of government officials in Venezuela often yield less than projected results. Hence this dissertation approaches the making of sovereignty and state formation from a stance, which eschews this twentieth century image of the nation-state as a complete product or seamless totality.

**Nation, State and Sovereignty**

Under the influence of critical social theory, the recent anthropology of the state has increasingly recognized that sovereignty is always contested and there is critical tension in the heart of statecraft. Ethnographic approaches to sovereignty have centered on the diverse nature of the forms of power that shape and regulate subjects, territories and populations as well as the ways in which certain groups either challenge or compete with the state (Monsutti 2012, Krupa 2010, Hansen and Stepputat 2006, Ong 2006, Krohn-Hansen and Nustad 2005, Das and Poole 2004, Humphrey 2004, Aretxaga, 2003). The recognition of the existence of multiple claims to sovereignty has caused scholars to re-envision sovereignty as a *process of legitimation*, rather than an end, and to seek to theorize how such claims are contested and legitimated. From the perspective of these scholars, any analysis which starts with a coherent center of power and then attempts to explain its effects on society by drawing a series of outwardly radiating circles, enveloping its subjects, will have a necessarily mystifying effect. The image of the state as a center of power is, in reality, an effect of boundary policing practices which divide the ruling apparatus from civil society and non-state actors (Mitchell 1999, Allen 2003). The image is belied by the actual operation of state, which regularly makes use of non-state actors and a host of agencies in rule.
Recent anthropological work has pointed out that many more actors and agents may be carriers of sovereignty than previously imagined and that social relations frequently excluded from analysis of the state may in fact be central to the exercise of sovereign power. Investigation of the origins of state sovereignty, this literature suggests, requires an investigation of social relationships beyond the purview of the formal state apparatus and recognition of the fact that the putative sovereign may have effective challengers. The state may not exercise perfect control over territory and state actors may seek to subcontract rule to other actors who are more effective at protecting elite interests or able to perform key functions (Smith 2006, Trouillot 2001). This subcontracted form of rule enlisting non-state elites often takes place in “unruly areas,” where the capacity of the central bureaucracy is weak or contested. But the unruly nature of governance also extends to the political-bureaucracy apparatus itself. As Veena Das and Deborah Poole (2004) suggest, the character of the state is defined as much by relations in the margins as the centers of power. It is not merely the formal bureaucracy which reflects the character of state sovereignty, but also those areas that seem to fall outside its sway (see also Donnan and Wilson 1999). Yet in their view, the margins of the state are not always literal territory, but also zones of incoherence within state institutions, such as gaps in bureaucratic optics, inter-agency disputes or conflictive social relations that prove difficult to regulate. From this perspective, the state (i.e. the political-bureaucratic apparatus] which appears as a unified entity, is in fact a non-unitary articulation whose power cannot be grasped solely with reference to the formal bureaucracy (see Humphrey 2004, Bourdieu 1999, cf. Abrams 1988). Instead, they argue, analysts should not view the sovereignty of the state as an a priori status, but rather as the result of the intersection of multiple fields of power, which may integrate subaltern actors.

As David Nugent (1997) has suggested, the image of the state as a center of power imposing itself on social actors who are already conceived as part of its territory, without
reference to the ways these actors come to be imagined as part of the nation, belies the history of subaltern participation in politics and their role in the crafting of the state. In Latin America, he argues subalterns have frequently sought the aid of state elites to overthrow aristocratic sovereignty and they have, thereby, brought the nation-state into being in these rural areas. As Aretxaga (2003) suggests in a related point, the political bureaucratic apparatus is invested with a “metacapital” which allows it to bring diverse agencies under its aegis without restricting the power of social actors. This “metacapital” exists in part due to the fact that the political bureaucratic apparatus controls “real capital” which can be used to create sites and networks which bolster its claim to rule over territory and mediate among competing social interests. These networks and sites are not always direct exercisers of sovereign violence or the right of life and death (Foucault 1975). But they are often based upon “prior acts of violence” which ground the state in mythicized figures or quasi-historical events (Gordillo 2004, 2002) that serve to legitimate such power. These sites invest the bureaucracy with the legitimacy required to win consent from critical social groups, while marginalizing others. This effect can occur in a variety of ways, which are not obviously or immediately related to the deploying of violence. As Foucault (1978) suggested, sovereignty is as much about securing “proper order” among the subjects of the soil and the flows of wealth within a territory, as deploying violence (29). Once the nexus of security, territory, population emerges a whole series of logics come into view which become the basis of practices of governance.\textsuperscript{xiiii}

Founded on a myth drawn from culture of the plains with a particular history and an act of forcible dislocation, the Florentino enterprise, dedicated to the production of cattle and crops, I argue, is one such saturated site in which these critical observations about the state sovereignty can be revealed. Situated in a territory far from the coastal centers where the bulk of the Venezuelan population lives, the Florentino project is marginal to the established bases of power.
The project is directed by relative elites, but it also depends on the labor and support of historically subaltern actors in the area who have an interest displacing traditional elites. While Florentino fails to directly exercise the claim to monopoly of violence characteristic of the Weberian ideal, it is concerned with growing the wealth of the nation and offering benefits to justify the power of sector of state elites. The seizure of land is about territorial mastery and the production for protecting the population. Not surprisingly, ideas of “proper order” for the subjects of the soil played a critical role in the fight for agrarian reform in Venezuela and this fight involving the coercive aspects of the state was often referred to in the language of war.

**The War for the Countryside**

Nearly a decade old when I arrived in 2007, the Bolivarian Revolution was just starting to tackle the question of agrarian reform. The day I arrived local news media were reporting on a speech by the President in which Chávez declared, “the war for the countryside has begun.” Elected on a platform of land redistribution, the President would now make good on his pledge to attack *latifundios*, the largely inefficient estates which characterized agriculture in parts of the nation, and to “revindicate” land from foreign corporations. I recall saying to myself how lucky I was to have arrived at just the right time and how I would get to see this war unfold. The address was a formal declaration of war, but the first salvos of the conflict had been fired years earlier in the state of Cojedes.

In January 2000, *campesinos* invaded El Charcote, an estate owned by the British Vestey Corporation, maker of *Spam*, and refused to leave. The large ranching operation in turn became a focal point of the struggle for land rights and a rallying cry for the *campesino* movement. In the late seventies and eighties, foreign agribusiness acquired vast tracts in Venezuela in preferential land deals that transferred large portions of the territory to private owners. It was the golden age
of the land grab and foreign enterprises were able to establish large operations without paying taxes. The creation of such units was rationalized as a path to the modernization of agriculture, but the farms were extensive, rather than intensive operations, and in most cases, they operated far below their potential (Delahaye 2001, 2003). xv

Using the language of right to land and dignity for the campesino, the occupiers called upon the newly elected government to support their takeover of the estate. As if in dutiful response, the following year the National Assembly approved the Ley de Tierras y Desarrollo Agrario which enabled the Venezuelan government to tax or expropriate underproductive lands. The law stated that the goal of policy was food sovereignty and efforts at reform would be directed at the conversion of land to “social use.” A specific unit type was identified as the source of the weakness of the sector. The law stated:

“The latifundista regime is contrary to the social interest and the law ordains and establishes with material force the necessary means for the recuperation and transformation of underutilized lands into productive economic units, recovering these lands for agricultural usage” (my translation, 2001).

These mostly Venezuelan owned estates, regarded by many as a holdover from the colonial era, frequently contained many more acres of land than were actually cultivated and were generally inefficient (Lovera 2009). Some of the estates had been converted into modern capitalist enterprises with technicized production systems staffed by wage labor, but most of these units were still capital poor enterprises that derived the bulk of their profits from tenant rent and/or labor. Owners were discouraged from investing in increased productivity due to low market prices, driven down by foreign competition, and state efforts to modernize agriculture had fallen short of their goal.
Successive leaderships had tried to transform these units into an agriculture system capable of meeting the needs of the nation. But these farms in most cases failed to compete with foreign imports. In the 1950s, the Venezuelan military built large industrial enterprises on public lands and in a few instances converted *latifundios* into more technically sophisticated operations. But these projects were largely failures and they came to a halt with its overturn in 1958. Experimental farms were part of agricultural policy in succeeding decades, but by the start of the twenty-first century, Venezuela’s rural areas were littered with half-finished project sites and the sector was still composed of multiple, inefficient, forms of landownership. Both Venezuelan *latifundios* and foreign owned enterprises used arable lands for grazing and most of the food was imported from the United States, Colombia and Brazil. Such estates would come under increasing scrutiny with the precedent set at El Charcote, however.

After a lengthy process of evaluation and legal wrangling that lasted some five years, *campesinos* at El Charcote were awarded titles making them some of the first beneficiaries of the new law. In a ceremony presided over by the Minister of Agriculture and officials from the National Institute of Lands (INTI), an agency devoted to regulation of land tenure, the new holders were presented with titles to inalienable parcels of land of 15-20 hectares. *Campesinos* were also pledged credit and the aid of the various state agencies and the audience responded with a vigorous display of support. Conforming to the classic image of agrarian reform, the *campesinos* cheered with machetes held high in the air. The scene of rural people with tools in hand, converted into weapons in the minds of fearful elites, signaled a shift in official policy with regard to land.

To many observers it appeared as if a new era in the history of agriculture policy had begun and elites who had enjoyed the support of the state could no longer rely upon it. Owners
were no longer impervious to the threat of invasion and indeed the new leaders seemed to support it. The neoliberal agriculture policies of the 1980s and 90s, which had supported free trade and the rights of private property, were now reversed in favor of an obligation of “social use.” The rights of owners were now tempered by the duty to engage in activities in step with the agrarian law and the state was now policing land use more stringently. Land tenure would now be evaluated in terms of its benefit to society and foreign entities’ claims were now regarded with increasing suspicion.

The invasion and subsequent nationalization of El Charcote also seemed to augur a revival of the campesino movement in Venezuela. Yet the revival of peasant agriculture was a project out of step with the demographic revolution the society had undergone in the mid-twentieth century. The campesino movement was hardly representative of the nation, and peasants were a tiny fraction of the Venezuelan population. If the agriculture sector were to be revived in accordance with social use, land tenure would have to be restructured in a fashion that encouraged cultivation for the rest of society. The war for the campo thus would have to enlist more support than campesinos could provide and the Venezuelan leadership would turn to other actors to achieve its aims.

Even before the Venezuelan President acknowledged the socialist character of the revolution, it was clear agriculture would be a top priority. In interviews with foreign journalists, Chávez spread out maps of the interior, touting his plans for resettling these areas (Gott 2005). The agricultural projects for new residents would not only sustain the nation, but also purportedly remedy the gross regional, social and economic disparities of the petrostate. The new leadership sought to rebalance the pattern of settlement which had left the interior virtually empty by “re-founding the republic from the countryside” and “altering the geometry of political
power” (Estaba 2007, Banko 2008). By refocusing energies on a part of the nation which had long been neglected, the leadership hoped to transform Venezuela into a more independent state. But first they would have to recruit the labor force.

One of the earliest campaigns was *La Vuelta Al Campo* or return to the countryside. It envisioned the return of urban Venezuelans to the interior, offering free land to anyone who desired it. But the plan soon ran into a variety of issues. When I interviewed state officials in 2007, they were keen to dispel any criticisms I might have regarding the reform process they were leading. Troubled by negative portrayals in the media, officials were eager to disclaim any previous historical failures and they stressed that the reform program was voluntary, and they did not force anyone to participate. As one official told me, “We do not force anyone to move. We don’t collectivize. This is not Russia.” INTI officials instead framed the return to the land in the language of *derecho primordial* or “fundamental right,” a right that, as it turned out, few urbanites seemed interested in exercising. Few urbanites were ready for the rigors of rural life and many of them lacked the skills to succeed in agriculture. In a few years, it became clear the plan would not achieve its lofty goals (cf. Page 2012). Taking the leadership seriously, many envisioned a massive relocation program with all the potential for abuses it could entail.

Frightened by the rhetoric, the media conjured the specter of the killing fields, suggesting the official policy was a potential genocide in the making. Yet Venezuela was not Cambodia, and although the plans of the leadership may have been high modernist, they were not authoritarian (cf. Scott 1999). I saw no evidence of the types of abuse one might associate with forced relocation and it was clear the government was not willing to use force to effect a total reversal of the nation’s demographics. It soon became clear other strategies would have to be
developed to deal with the dearth of labor in the campo. Urbanites may have had a right to land, but it did not mean they were eager to exercise it.

At about the same time as campesinos at El Charcote were receiving land titles, a radically different project was taking shape in western Venezuela. The state of Barinas was the home of the President and referred to as “the cradle of the revolution.” Barinas also had a long history of agrarian battles stretching back to the 19th century (Brito Figueroa 1975, Cartay 2003, Delahaye 2003). Colonial accounts of Venezuela stress the fertility of its soils and belief that the nation could be fed only on the lands south of Lake Maracaibo (Lovera 2009). Yet the population of Venezuela in the 17th century was only a few hundred thousand and its steady growth since has made the task of feeding it a trickier proposition. In spite of edenic depictions, only a fraction of the land is arable. Large portions of the territory are desert, scrubland and rainforest, and the western Andean zone allows few crops. With nearly eighty percent of the best arable land (Virigay and Ribas 2009), Barinas has been highly contested. One farm in the central part of the state taken over in 2005 is the site for this study.
Wedged between the Masparro and Bocono rivers, the *La Marquesena* estate has borne witness to some of the central events of Venezuelan history. Home to such notable figures as Marquez del Toro, the father-in-law of Simon Bolivar, and Pedro Pérez Delgado, the great grandfather of Hugo Chávez, the nearly 10,000 hectare estate has been fought over since the war for independence. Invaded by liberal armies during the Federal War (1859-1863) the farm was a site of violent struggles in the early twentieth century before it fell into the hands of the aristocratic Azpurura family.

One of the most powerful families in the state of Barinas, the Azpuruaas boasted a former Minister of Agriculture and Don Carlos the owner of the farm was the son-in-law of former President Carlos Andres Pérez. During fieldwork, I heard a variety of stories about the Azpuruaas, nearly all of which indexed social distance. Florentino workers referred to Don Carlos as “the Spaniard,” a reference to his racial origins and the extent to which his status placed him outside
the nation. In one story, which may or may not have been apocryphal, agents of the Ministry of Agriculture had arrived in the 1960s to survey a portion of the estate for expropriation. The well-placed owner, however, refused to give up any land and he called “a friend” in Congress to prevent the survey. After the call, the agents were allegedly told by their superiors to leave the farm and the surveyors left without taking any measurements. The story conveyed the degree of power wielded by rural elites in Barinas and the near total liberty with which they operated. It also suggested awareness of landowners’ direct ties to the state. The rural workers who told the story underlined the confidence with which Azpurua acted and the extent to which the central government backed him. He was in their words, “untouchable.” Previous attempts at reform had met with limited success due to elite desires to avoid paying the costs of efforts to alleviate rural poverty. Now this had all changed.

The Setting

I was one of, if not the first, North Americans in Florentino. I visited the center in 2007 with representatives of the National Institute of Lands and received a tour not wholly unlike the one recounted at the start of this introduction. We drove from the capital Barinas and at the entrance gate to the farm we were met by national guardsmen with automatic weapons. Their stern faces glaring at us as they questioned our credentials, the guardsmen searched the vehicle and the contents of our bags and my friend Jose, somewhat sheepishly held up his identification tag saying, “I’m a functionary of INTI.” Having reassured the skeptical guardsmen that he and the gringo accompanying him were legitimate, somewhat reluctantly, the guardsmen waved us through with an abrupt motion and inside we saw the work underway. The workers were busy clearing brush and undergrowth from the wooded areas of the farm, driving fence posts and marking the boundaries of the farm, dividing it from the other half of the estate still in the hands
of the *latifundista*. There was not much infrastructure as yet and earthmovers and other heavy equipment could be seen cutting roads and draining fields to recuperate pasture.

Up the road from the gate was the headquarters. Inside, the new office building with its brand new furniture, the employees had computer screens open to spreadsheets with data on crop output. Everything in headquarters was so new that when I sat down for an interview with the head of crop production he couldn’t find a pen in his desk. Distracted by a cellphone call and desperately searching for a pen to write with, I handed the crop manager one and took out another for the interview. When the interview began, I asked him if he could provide a basic description of the farm and its mission. At the end of a rather long technical description of the various tasks, the crops to be raised, an account of the organizational structure of the center, the division of labor, etc. he added thoughtfully, “if a country can’t feed itself, it isn’t really a country.” Noting the rather conspicuous lack of ideology in the discussion, I asked somewhat offhandedly about the significance of socialism saying, “Guevara said socialism was a question of consciousness.” What did the enterprise plan to do to change mentalities? Having seen images of the Argentine-Cuban revolutionary icon adorning the offices, including the manager’s own, I had imagined he might have some ideas about what the center would do with respect to consciousness. Yet plainly, he had no idea who I was talking about, and the manager, befuddled, responded: “Guevara who?” Standing up, I thanked him for his time and as I left the office, pledged I would return to see the results.
When I returned to Florentino in April 2009, I returned to what, to all appearances, was a far more peaceful site. The National Guard had left and all the major construction was done. The center was up and running, and it had the feel of a neat and well-run site. Everything was planned down to the last detail, including the regularly whitewashed tree trunks and fence posts. When one arrived at the center, security guards stepped forward to open the gate and check credentials before the vehicle of the visitor was allowed to proceed. The guards, having served in the military, continued to observe its norms and when they were finished checking a vehicle they frequently ‘snapped’ to attention, saluting its occupants as they drove away. Inside the center, visitors could see it was a site bustling with activity. The center was teeming with workers moving to and fro, trucks delivering cargo, and tractors left the depot headed for a field, all indications of a disciplined industrial site. Up the road from the entrance, there was a driveway leading to the headquarters with newly planted palm trees, a prediction of the center’s permanence. The headquarters was painted in bright pastel colors and surrounded by shrubbery,
flowers and neatly manicured lawns, with signs saying “Don’t step on the grass.”

Once inside the headquarters, one of the first things visitors saw was a large photo display showcasing the activities of the center. The display depicted the transition of the land from bare earth and parched soil to green pastures and fields teeming with cattle and tall stands of corn. The pastures of the estate had been badly degraded by the erosion of acidic mineral deposits from the nearby sierra and large portions of the farm were devoid of cover. Now the land had been recuperated from cracked ground to lush fields. Later when I asked employees how the farm had looked before, most said it was “ugly,” but they had significantly improved the landscape from their first days of work.

Leaving the display, visitors were ushered into a waiting area, which apart from its suggestive red furniture, was more or less like any other corporate office. The area was staffed by a receptionist with flawless makeup, and visitors were able to read a selection of pro-government periodicals and newspapers or watch televisions tuned to state channels. Before leaving the waiting area, visitors were given identification tags with the full name of the enterprise and a stalk of corn on them. In spite of the socialist trappings, the rhetorical construction of the farm was fairly conservative. The farm was never referred to as “a state farm.” Instead the word empresa or enterprise was used. The word had a corporate ring and it said a great deal about how staff saw the project. I later learned a few employees preferred unidad de producción or unit of production because it had a more neutral connotation. But the enterprise label mostly stuck.

My first day in the center, a few of the staff took me to the office of the general manager to arrange the details of my stay. Referred to as el comandante, the general manager was a career officer in the Venezuelan armed forces and a rather imposing figure. I explained to him what I
wanted to do: the length of time I wanted to stay, the nature of my study, and the lodging I required. He listened to me and when I had finished granted my request matter-of-factly. Wrapping up the meeting, he joked to the staff that they had better let everyone know they had “a Canadian” in the farm or people would think, “Bush [the US President] had sent a CIA agent.” The rumors that I was in fact CIA began to circulate immediately and lasted for months. Yet I was welcomed into *la familia Florentino*. I was given a tour of the offices and placed under the supervision of the social development manager, which staff thought was logical, since I was “a sociologist.”

I told the *comandante* that my housing “did not have to be a palace”—and it wasn’t. Located at the gate of the farm in an area called *El Inicio*, or “the beginning,” I found my house was in a state of moderate disrepair. The house had a leaky roof and water came in through the ceiling during the torrential rains in the *llanos*. I shared my quarters with lizards—and I had an unpleasant encounter with a poisonous snake attracted by my “roommates.” I later found out that the house had had a more illustrious history. When the enterprise first opened, the house had served as the headquarters and office of the President. Yet it was not the first such structure.

The first headquarters had been little more than a modest hut of timbers wrapped in black plastic, its thatched roof resembling the dwellings of the indigenous. This similarity led one of the workers to remark with racially tinged disparagement that they had “spent two years under the palms like Indians.” Now it was being used as a storage shed, and the new headquarters up the road had added improvements such as full-size basketball courts, baseball and soccer fields, exercise facilities, a library and a theatre. This added to the image of Florentino as an ideal working community and employees showed no nostalgia for the old headquarters, when it was torn down unceremoniously 6 months into my fieldwork. Signs on the nearby Jose Antonio
Paez highway aided in receiving deliveries, but they also extolled the activities of the center to the passerby. The managers hoped to convey the idea this was a place where exciting things were happening—and it was an impressive landscape.

Second Florentino Headquarters, later home to ranch hands and the author.

Florentino was a showpiece of rural development. A great deal of attention was paid to its aesthetic details. The center showcased the technical competency of the ruling party and its ability to exert sway over rural areas. Every effort was made to create a utopia-in-miniature which would serve as an example of the ideal society they hoped to create (Scott 1999). Yet the center was also a space where multiple tensions came together.

No matter how much its leaders tried to present an image of order and control in the center, just outside its fences violent social conflicts were taking place, and these conflicts tended to seep into the enterprise. This created a radical disjuncture for the actors. The laborers called Florentino “a fantasy” because of the divergence of its environs from life in the campo. The aspects of the farm which seemed surreal to the laborers were the absence of trash, its neat lawns and idealistic slogans, all of which seemed to clash with a society beset with poverty. Yet I
would argue this was not evidence of a penchant for illusion on the part of Florentino’s architects.

Florentino was a space of hope in the sense that David Harvey (2000) has given to the term, i.e. a space in which strivings for more egalitarian futures run up against the constraints of the present. Part socialist, part capitalist, the Florentino enterprise was a blend of competing logics. This meant the enterprise was in a constant state of flux. Heavily supported by petroleum revenue, but aspiring to be free of the resource, the center took a profit from the open market. Yet the project was also driven by social logics which supposedly reflected the desires of the rural poor. The center engaged in outreach programs designed to bring these actors into the affairs of the enterprise. But the experts who supervised the project bristled at “intrusions” and quashed any challenges to their authority. The experts were most concerned with labor discipline and the use of efficient means to achieve productive goals. But these nearly 50 agronomists and agricultural engineers were supposed to work in concert with the nearly 250 manual laborers as part of a co-management scheme. Yet department managers at the apex of the enterprise effectively proscribed these “socialist labor committees.” The office staff in the various departments in the headquarters meanwhile were caught somewhere in between the two camps, vacillating between laborers and managers. This raises a question: how does one make sense of Florentino as an enterprise inclusive of such diverse groups and guided by conflicting logics?
Populism and Productivism

This dissertation takes the form of a sustained, if at times indirect conversation with the theoretical work of Ernesto Laclau on populism. In his recent study *On Populist Reason* (2002), Laclau argues that populism, rather than a kind of politics, is a *political logic* or way of formulating the social. The logic of populism he suggests is the creation of a subject capable of exercising historical agency by way of integrating otherwise diverse or disparate groups into a constituency. This process of unification, Laclau writes, rests upon the category of ‘the people’ and the extension of its relations of solidarity to ever-wider circles of the nation. The formation of this subject from disunited, heterogeneous elements is the critical task for the populist project and the preservation of this unity in the face of countervailing forces is the major criterion for its success. The categorical identity is formed by various “articulating practices” and “logics of difference and equivalence” which separate the groups in society into mutually hostile camps. This identity creates a space from which demands can be articulated, and these demands form...
“chains of signification” which give the subject coherence. Yet Laclau argues the category of the people is “an empty signifier” and it has no proper referent.

The fact that the existing political order cannot meet the demands of the people does not give the category an intrinsic social or ideological content. Instead the subject is formed by its tension with an antagonist that is regarded as parasitic on society. Populist demands take place both from within and against the existing order. In this interpellation, the *populus* or plebian segment of society stands in for the nation as a whole and it is tasked with exorcising this caste from the social body. Populist reason can take a variety of actors as referents, e.g. peasants, workers, merchants, landowners, bankers, politicians (Brass 2000, Laclau 1974, Ellner 1999, Malavé Mata 1987). Yet these identity categories, Laclau suggests, are coalesced into two groups, which become the axis of struggle.

The central categories of populism appear in their archetypal forms in Latin America in appeals to the will of *el pueblo* against *la oligarchía*. These rhetorical devices figure centrally in the language of the Venezuelan leadership with leaders directing invective against the caste of elites associated with the petroleum industry and the rentier economy. Notable for its anti-elitist edge, this discourse is directed at magnifying the breach between the actors, which form the base of the populist movement and the actors arrayed against it. Appealing to the leveling desires of the *populus*, such rhetoric is targeted at harnessing groups who feel the state depends on their consent, but whose agents fail to accept their will.

The idea that sovereignty rests with *el pueblo* is very strong in Latin America, and the idea that this subject can express its will, as part of protests or outpourings of popular anger is a regular feature of the political culture of the region. In this sense, Latin America is more populist than its Anglo-American counterparts, and it has different conditions of possibility. The
history of Latin America is rife with examples of hated regimes overturned by unrest or Presidents leaving office before the end of their elected terms. Much of what transpires in Venezuela is driven by this populist logic (see Laclau 1977, Ellner 1999, Hawkins 2010, Samet 2013, Schiller 2013). But I would argue there are also other logics in operation.

Against caricatures of recent events in Venezuela as driven by an irrational populism, I agree with Laclau’s assertion that populism is its own form of reason. Yet my research also reveals that populism is not the sole logic in play. With its antipathy to hierarchy, populist reason is tempered by a countervailing logic which is task oriented and privileges technical expertise and efficiency over equality. Following Henri Lefebvre (2000), I call this logic productivism and suggest that these two logics form the intervention of Florentino in rural areas. These logics, moreover, are also reflected in the images of sovereignty deployed by its actors, one of which features in the opening scene.

In addition to its status as a local metaphor with a particular historical valence in Venezuela, the title of the dissertation draws attention to the uncertain nature of statecraft, which like sowing crops, is an activity with projected outcomes, but whose yields can never be known ahead of time. Actions can exceed their intentions and the results of statecraft may appear mystifying even to actors directly engaged in it. Thus, there is often a degree of mystery associated with the state. By investigating statecraft—or at least one critical aspect of it—I hope to dispel part of the magic associated with the state in Venezuela. I conceive of this dissertation as an extension of the project of the demystification of the petrostate started by Fernando Coronil (1997).

A recurring theme in Venezuelan history, Coronil argues, is the representation of the state as an agency standing above society and its actors (cf. Abrams 1988, Mitchell 1999, Jessop
1990). This image of the state is generated, he argues, by the fact that its wealth is derived from oil rent and that political actors are able to use this revenue to contain social tensions. It follows then that this imaginary could be destabilized by the transition to more a productivist economy based on non-extractive industries.\textsuperscript{xx} The model of national development adopted by the current leadership, I argue, has created new sets of tensions which reveal the sectional character of the claim to sovereignty against populist discourse.\textsuperscript{xxi} It is this tension, I argue, which is critical to the process of state formation in Venezuela at the start of the twenty-first century.

Unlike the image of revolution from the twentieth century, the Venezuelan revolution has not dissolved the existing state apparatus or created a clearly delineated counter-power standing against the existing structure (cf. Ciccariello-Maher 2013).\textsuperscript{xxii} Instead, its leaders have taken advantage of an organic crisis, which discredited the political system, to restructure the state. These efforts have been far from perfect, however. The leadership has succeeded in staffing the state with supporters, but it has not supplanted all the inherited structures. As a result, the leadership has struggled to turn its vision of society into reality and the capture of the state has not exhausted its tasks.\textsuperscript{xxiii}

Constructing sovereignty was more difficult than winning elections and the success of its agenda relied on bureaucrats who were held over from the previous regime. As Joseph and Nugent (1995) suggest, we should be skeptical of the notion that revolution lead to a total rupture with the \textit{ancien regime} and recognize that social groups calling for restoration of certain rights may be as radical in practice as actors calling for a complete break with the past (see also Hobsbawm 1986, Thomassen 2012). This observation was certainly borne out by my experience in Venezuela, where at times I was not sure whether I was witnessing a revolution or a restoration.\textsuperscript{xxiv} The vision of the leadership was filtered through the layers of a state that was not
entirely its own and leaders were forced to create new institutions (Enriquez 2013, Enriquez and Page forthcoming). This created a significant gap between ‘the face of the revolution designed to win electoral support and the spaces where this bureaucratic struggle was taking place. This marked divergence was one of the aspects of research which I found most interesting, and it was a source of the insights which suffuse this analysis. This in turn affected my relationship to the discursive production of the leadership.

Revolutions generate lots of paper, and if there is one thing socialists like it is meetings. Education manuals, policy documents, transcripts of speeches and pamphlets provide valuable information and insights into the ideology of the leadership. But these sources are limited in terms of what they can tell us about the operation of power. What these sources offer is an official account of the revolution and strategies for gaining consent. The one-sided focus on the rationality of rule to the exclusion of sociologies of rule endemic to studies inspired by the Foucaultian concept of governmentality (Rose 1999, Dean, 1999, Hindess 2001) runs the risk of converting an investigative practice into an ontology unless it is augmented with an ethnographic sensitivity (Li 2007).

Such an approach works in the critical gaps between what people say, what people say they do, and what they actually do. Instead of basing my analysis solely on interviews with high profile figures or data provided in official documents, my analysis seeks to grasp the role of average actors in Florentino and the ways in which these actors’ views often clashed with the official version of the revolution. As any anthropologist can tell you, predictably, some of the most interesting insights I gained were offered to me while riding in a truck or in a secluded setting where people felt safe to divulge secrets, or discuss aspects of life that might prove controversial. From these statements, I gleaned a somewhat different picture of the revolution
Venezuelan society is extremely polarized making it difficult to conduct sober analysis. Supporters of the government are intransigent with regard to criticism and opponents are likewise incapable of recognizing the achievements of officials. This tends to stifle efforts at nuanced analysis and the logic of “you are with the revolution or against it” is ever present (see Hale 1995, Lancaster 1992). Yet instead of adopting the defensive posture favored by certain writers (Woods 2009, Ali 2010, Gollinger 2007, Lebowitz 2012, Rangel 2010, Harnecker 2010, Wilpert 2003), I have tried to adopt a gaze which is sympathetic to the goals of the Bolivarian Revolution, but also critical with regard to their potential for success. This in turn has led me to a certain method of presentation.

Outline of the Dissertation

The driving force of this investigation is the desire to make sense of the divergence of the productivist goals of the project from the leveling impulses of its social base and the ways in which this tension reflects an emerging state. By addressing this tension, I hope the analysis will have purchase for debates on the status of peripheral nations in the global system at the start of the twenty-first century and the problem of constructing what are deemed to be ‘sovereign’ economies. Yet in spite of the aspirations for wider relevance, I should underscore the fact that the analysis is temporally and geographically bounded, depending upon my situated position as a participant-observer in the events described.

This dissertation is a snapshot in time, part of the incongruous and often confusing process that is revolution. One of the many words that appeared in my mind to describe the things I was seeing in fieldwork (and that I wasn’t) was contradiction. The agrarian reform has
sought to come to terms with an economy which does not always provide its agents with the means to bring about a total refashioning of society. Defining itself against an image of the present which is regarded as undesirable and a vision of the future which is incomplete, the struggle for sovereignty has sought to transcend the past. Yet there were aspects of the struggle for sovereignty which did not make sense or which were less than coherent. It often seemed state actors worked at cross-purposes and that one ‘hand of the state’ undid the work of another. This was as much a product of the forces these state actors faced as the logic of their institutions. Thus the account here frames its analysis in terms of these structural forms of power or limiting factors.

This dissertation is organized around a set of tensions which cannot be easily reconciled or stay in their present configuration. These tensions are the basis of its narrative structure and description of a specific historic conjuncture. The tensions I explore are vivid in the sense that they were forces my informants dealt with on a routine basis and of which they were often aware. But awareness of these tensions did not mean they were able to overcome them. More often than not, struggle with such tensions led to a process of negotiation and hopes they would be transcended later, creating new strains.

In addition to this introduction, the dissertation contains five chapters, divided into two sections. The first section entitled “Problems” deals with the challenges faced by the Venezuelan leadership as it seeks to regain control of land, territory and markets. The chapters underscore the legacy of hundreds of years of dependency as well as decades of neoliberal policy, representing the terrain upon which the struggle for sovereignty is waged. The second section called “Fixes” deals with the concrete proposals put forward by the Venezuelan leadership and the measures taken to reconcile the position of the nation-state in the global system with its radical agenda for
growth and development. The chapters address the renegotiation of the international division of labor and market anticipated by the current reforms as well as the ideal state efforts seek to create.

Because the revolution in Venezuela is ongoing, I cannot arrive at any definitive conclusions with regard to the success or failures of these reforms. Instead, I explain the tensions the reforms seek to negotiate and the terms upon which they are enacted. The first chapter deals with the history of agriculture and the rentier economy in Venezuela as well as the role played by peasants and petroleum in the formation of national identity. The chapter explores the rise of the modern nation-state through the lens of an awkward figure, the campesino, and the resource which has been recurrently imagined as the source of its wealth and progress. The chapter describes the efforts of the Venezuelan leadership to revive peasant agriculture and establish agrarian cooperatives in the interior as part of a new rural economy. Yet the pro-peasant policy of the leadership, I argue, is as much about the precarity associated with rentier capitalism and petroleum dependency as agriculture. The Venezuelan leadership has challenged the historicist reading of the peasantry as slated for disappearance with a discourse valorizing the campesino and reforms designed to recover these subjects. Yet the agriculture system created by the leadership also deviates significantly from the vision of agrarian populists and the role played by peasants in the system is rather different from that imagined in official rhetoric.

The second chapter investigates the origins of the name of the Florentino enterprise in a legend from the central plains and the ways in which the legend has been reinterpreted as a critique of petroleum dependency. Part of the oral tradition of the llanos, the tale centers on a battle between a rancher and the devil in which the former is drawn into a test of wits. The leadership has deployed this popular culture as part of making sense of its reforms and the story
of the virtuous llanero who is able to defeat the devil is retold as a battle for the soul of the nation. The narrative justifies the official agenda of a return to agriculture and the tensions associated with the transition from rentier capitalism to a more productivist economy. The story also symbolizes the efforts of the Florentino enterprise to bring about the salvation of Venezuela and deliver it from the forces that mediate the petroleum economy. In the chapter, I offer a critique of the theory of the resource curse and the role of this fetish in the consciousness of Florentino workers.

The third chapter delves into the division of labor in Florentino. It presents the mission and vision of the center and the way its various work types intersect the status roles in society. It focuses on the enterprise’s interactions with local producers and the privileging of technical expertise in such interactions as well as the superiority of expert knowledge over metis or practical knowledge. At the end of the twentieth century, neoliberals suggested we had reached the end of the social, but I suggest there has been a return of the social in Venezuela and that these logics are reflected in the structure of the enterprise. Within the enterprise a strong division of labor existed in the technical/social expertise and the former was frequently deployed to tamp down challenges to managerial authority. Nevertheless, recipients of government aid and technical assistance as well as experts frequently made criticisms of a political-economic nature, which challenged this division and questioned the objectives of reforms.

The fourth chapter troubles populist notions of food sovereignty and the isomorphism between the goal of feeding the nation and redistributing land to the peasantry. The leadership in Venezuela has declared its allegiance to the concept of food sovereignty derived from the social movement La Vía Campesina. But instead of pursuing an exclusively redistributive agrarian reform, it has built large agro-enterprises in the interior to supply food to consumers. Yet the
leadership has also retained food imports to guarantee food security for the most vulnerable people as part of a strategy to offset the negative impact of its reforms. The chapter explores these special distribution programs and efforts to deliver cheap food, but it suggests these plans effectively undercut the building of food sovereignty. I explore how this tension is negotiated by social and technical experts and what it reveals about agrarian actors’ relation to the state.

The final chapter interrogates one of the key concepts of the twentieth century and its survival well into the twenty-first. The chapter investigates the intricate relationship between the broader agenda of development, i.e. raising standards of living, reducing poverty, building infrastructure, etc. and the specific development program put forward by the Venezuelan leadership which seeks to intervene in society to create an economy compatible with a sovereign state. The chapter explores the Florentino cattle-breeding project, as a case study of endogenous development, asking how efforts to improve the genetics of animals and create a new race of cow intersected the logic of capital. It asks how the selective breeding practices of experts intervened in ecology using raciological logics and how the project embodied a series of conflicting logics assuming the territorial integrity and unity of the nation, and the cow as a literal embodiment of its sovereignty.

In the conclusion, I offer analysis of the agrarian reform in Venezuela to date as well as a few ideas about the trajectory of the project in light of the death of Hugo Chávez. There are still forces in play that may affect its course and the analysis reflects this uncertain character. But by way of foreshadowing this conclusion, let me say a few words about what this dissertation is not. This is not an ethnography about Hugo Chávez. It is an ethnography about the people who support him and his vision for Venezuela. It is an ethnography about the challenges Venezuelans faced at the start of the twenty-first century and the ostensible path to their overcoming. It is a
study about the actors involved in realizing this vision and the ways in which taking up this vision, not only reshaped the state, but also to a certain extent, themselves.

Hailing the broadest sectors of Venezuelan society, the project offered by the current leadership has succeeded in rallying a variety of actors to the cause of sovereignty. The narrative touches upon each of these groups (workers, peasants, professionals, unemployed). Yet the account focuses on a set of actors known as técnicos de campo who served in a critical mediating role. These average experts held much of the power in Florentino, and they were the ones, who, in their words, were “driving the process [motorizando el proceso].” The interactions of técnicos with other groups decisively shaped the character of the reforms where I worked, and the tensions between such experts and other groups reflected cleavages in el pueblo, which even leaders like Chávez could not contain. No doubt the project in Venezuela has lost much of its luster for those observers who were first drawn to the project by the image of the caudillo. But the forces driving social change in Venezuela are much greater than one man and the subject the late Venezuelan President helped to coalesce has endured beyond his life. It the agency of this subject which is the focus of this study, and it is this subject which I argue will shape the Venezuelan nation-state in the twenty-first century.
Part I

Problems
Chapter 1 Peasants and Petroleum

It is impossible to write about Venezuela without referencing petroleum or the central place it occupies in the social and political life of the nation. Petroleum is the starting point of most analysis of this peripheral capitalist society and its position in the world system, and indeed petroleum has become a sort of national fetish, which stands in for and makes sense of the society as a whole (Coronil 1997: 35-36). If the average observer knows anything about Venezuela, it is that the nation is a petrostate and heavily dependent on the export of oil. Yet in spite of a long series of agrarian struggles in the 19th and 20th centuries, and the centrality of those struggles to the formation of the modern nation-state, the peasant is something of a forgotten figure (Roseberry 1989: 62). This first chapter seeks to make sense of the silence which surrounds the Venezuelan peasantry and the structures of feeling which make this silence a plausible reading of the history of modernity, both for members of this imagined community as well as its outside observers (Anderson 1983).

For much of the rest of the world, Venezuela is a nation whose only real relevance is the natural resource it exports. In popular and scholarly treatments of the society and its history, it is common for writers to substitute a description of the features of the petroleum economy and its evolution for an analysis of its wider political economy and subjects (e.g. Norden 2012, Wilpert 2003, Tinker Salas 2009, Quintero 1968, Karl 1997, di John 2009, McBeth 1983, Salazar-Carillo and West 2004). There is a near perfect identification of the society with the resource and petroleum-based development is portrayed as the natural or logical outgrowth of the process of the unfolding of national history. Struggling for a greater share of the wealth derived from oil and against its subordinate position in the world system, over the course of the twentieth century,
Venezuelans developed “a resource nationalism,” which explicitly linked petroleum and national identity, and in the process, came to view themselves in much the same terms.

An overwhelmingly urban society, Venezuela owes much of its current progress and development to petroleum. Not surprisingly, Venezuelans have spent a great deal of time and energy trying to forget their rural past. In the early twentieth century, Venezuela’s modernizers envisioned the total disappearance of the peasantry with the spread of the benefits of the resource and treated petroleum as an explicit claim to modernity. The new urban lifestyles of the Venezuelan population were regarded as the inevitable future of the nation and the rural lifestyles of small-scale agriculturalists as belonging to the past. For the better part of the twentieth century, this urban-based vision of modernity founded on the revenue of the petroleum industry ruled the nation, shaping the material and social aspirations of its population. Yet recent years have witnessed an unexpected return of the peasant in the form of official rhetoric valorizing the campesino and state programs designed to revive smallholder agriculture.

This chapter explores the recent efforts of the Venezuelan government to revive peasant agriculture and the cultural image of the campesino as part of a return to the countryside. It tries to make sense of the forms of identity supported by the current agrarian reform project as well as the forms of rhetoric deployed by the leadership. These efforts to remedy the silence around the peasantry, I argue, are reflective of a desire to explain the place of this formerly peasant nation in a world system largely based upon oil and the role of the resource in the decline of its sovereignty, which attended the decline of these actors. Yet this revival or resurrection, I argue, has as much to do with high modernist concerns of ordering and developing the campo as the actual role played by peasants in the agriculture system.
The agrarian reform led by the current Venezuelan leadership is as much a revival of the cultural image of the campesino and the nation before the disorders of the petrostate, as it is a revival of smallholder agriculture. The campesino, I suggest, provides the ideological basis for agrarian reform efforts and a model for the exercise of sovereign power, rather than its precondition. A tiny fraction of the total population, the peasantry is perhaps a few hundred thousand in Venezuela and not sufficiently strong in demographic terms to restructure society. Yet the image of the campesino has served as a powerful signifier of independence when juxtaposed with petroleum industry, which is regarded as having stripped away the sovereignty of the nation.

This chapter analyses the decisive forces which have shaped key historical conjunctures in Venezuela as well the images attached to those forces. It explores the factors which have allowed the peasant to turn from a forgotten anachronism to a bearer of sovereignty and oil to turn from the source of an economic miracle to a cause of social degradation. The interaction of peasants and petroleum in various regimes of growth in the 19th and 20th centuries, and the subsequent displacement of these regimes, I argue, has allowed the peasant to appear to be a backward subject and oil to be a fount of progress, and later for these roles to be reversed with the crisis of the late twentieth century.

This reading of history—like all such readings—is necessarily selective and draws upon only a portion of the available grist. As Raymond Williams (1977) suggested, the hegemonic culture of a society is only one reading of its history and the prevailing account has to be grasped as a product of the intersection of this grist with the feelings of the subjects of the nation. Straddling the gap between the objective forces at work in society and what social actors can articulate about these forces, structures of feeling are the basis of the cultural images used by
actors to evaluate progress and make sense of the world. Exploring the articulation of peasants and petroleum in the historical political economy of Venezuela, I argue we can grasp the recent efforts of the leadership to reconstitute the rural and its subjects as the latest iteration of a program of “sowing the oil,” which seeks to parlay revenue from petroleum into an alternative model of growth. Yet the model enacted by the leadership is somewhat unexpected in light of the widespread relegation of the peasantry to the past and it embodies a reversal of the trajectory of development in the twentieth century.

The creation of peasant settlements in the interior of the nation is one of the aspects of the current agrarian reform with historical precedent (see Powell 1971: 79 et passim, Delahaye 2001, García Müller 2001: ), but the creation of state enterprises alongside peasant settlements reflects a distinct logic. Based on the contradictory image of the peasant as egalitarian, self-sufficient, and productive, the contemporary strategy of peasantization qua modernization leads to a unique set of tensions in the campo, including tensions between state enterprises and populist forms of land tenancy. Yet regardless of these tensions, this form of ‘socialist’ agriculture represents a significant departure from the twentieth century models in which the peasantry played an increasingly trivial role and the campesino was slated for disappearance.

The chapter concludes with a description of a settlement cooperative in the vicinity of the Florentino enterprise and the place of the cooperative in the new agro-food system. There I explore the probable fate of “new peasants” as the Venezuelan leadership strives to transform the rural poor into more sophisticated producers, or to put it another way, to sow petroleum into peasants. This settlement, I argue, is illustrative of a basic tension of the recent agrarian reform, i.e. improvement of the cultivation techniques of peasant actors, introduction of inputs required to raise yields and creation of stable markets, means the loss of the egalitarian character as
subsistence producers, but that the failure of the state to create such markets and systems likely means they cannot help but fall back on the rent circulating in society and abandon agriculture.

The status of these rural actors as stable middle holders is dependent on a system lubricated by the revenue of the petroleum industry and rather than a model of agrarian sovereignty, the settlement reflects an iteration of resource dependency. But before we can grasp the future of the system the Venezuelan leadership seeks to create, we first have to grasp the society that disappeared in the mid-twentieth century and see if there is any resemblance between the image of the past upon which the present system is predicated and what came before.

The Coffee Republic

The historian and anthropologist of Venezuela William Roseberry (1989: ) once wrote that the cultural history of Venezuela is a history of its peasantry and the history of much of its peasantry is a history of the cultivation of coffee for export. Lacking the indigenous peasantry of much of the rest of the continent, the population of Venezuela was relatively small at the time of the conquest and composed mostly of hunter-gatherers (Sanoja 1997, Vargas-Arenas 2006). The Venezuelan peasantry thus arose with the relations of production introduced by the colonial regime and varied widely across regions, encapsulating the diversity of the nation as well as the intricacies of its historical development.

The history of the Venezuelan peasantry begins in earnest with the rise of the *encomienda* system in the 16th century. Based on the cultivation of tobacco and cacao for export (Lovera 2009), the system laid the basis for the colonial state and its wealth. Enduring more or less until the end of the eighteenth century, this system of labor and tribute obligations provided the foundation for the territorial integrity of the colony and its economic growth. Yet the demand for
labor in the system soon outstripped what the indigenous population could provide and colonial officials turned to the importation of African slaves to augment the labor force. The introduction of new forms of labor control and subsequent evolution of the cultivation system led to the growth of the haciendas in the eighteenth century as slave labor increasingly gave agricultural activity a mercantile character. But this trajectory of agrarian mercantile development was briefly interrupted by the war for independence in the early 19th century (see Figuera 1975, Cartay 2003).

Led by a coalition of landowners and merchants who derived more wealth from their trade with other colonies than with Spain, the war for independence had as its major goal the creation of an independent republic based on free trade relations. Instigating a revolt against the Spanish in 1810, Venezuelan elites sought to install an economic system which would give them a larger percentage of the total wealth generated by the export of agricultural products, and a political system based on limited suffrage, which would give them a free hand to run society.

Founding the First Venezuelan Republic with the aid and support of the lower sectors of the colonial society, Bolivar and other republicans effectively appealed to the desires for land and rights on the part of mestizos and Afro-Venezuelans. Yet these aspirations were often cynically utilized and pledges during the war were seldom honored. In 1829, Bolivar nationalized all the mines in Venezuela (Betancourt 1979). But he failed to carry out an agrarian reform, leading to one of the major tensions which underpins Venezuelan history: the wealth of the subsoil was the property of the state, but the wealth derived from the soil was the property of the large private owners and the landless majority was caught somewhere in-between.

In the Republican Wars of Succession (1830-1845), which followed, the lieutenants of Bolivar enriched themselves as the expense of the nation as a whole, taking over vast swaths of
the territory. These ill-gotten lands, often taken over directly from Spanish colonial elites, laid the basis for the *latifundio-minifundio* complex, which has endured more or less to present-day in Venezuela. This pattern of landholding encouraged the formation of social relations of an essentially feudal character, exemplified by the vile practice of *primera noche* in which estate owners had sexual rights to the daughters of tenants on the night of their weddings (a practice which persisted in some parts of Venezuela until the 1950s) and the ability of owners to pass debts from one generation to another. Not surprisingly, peasants were prone to rebellion and joined with other social groups in insurrection.

In the mid-19th century, rural subalterns were brought into coalition with the Liberal Party in the Federal War (1859-1863). Over the course of the war, slavery and tenant debts were abolished as the Liberal Party extended its sway over the interior and rural areas. But the more radical aspects of this agrarian reform were defeated in a series of elite compromises and the agrarian communes formed during the course of the war were dismantled and the lands seized returned to their former owners (Brito Figueroa 1975). The central plains were devastated by the war and entered a phase of decline as the hacienda system fell apart. The interior of the nation took a backseat to the Andes. Former tenants and newly emancipated slaves now migrated to the open frontier of the Andes where land was plentiful and they could establish themselves as a free peasantry. Mixing with new European immigrants, the peasantry rapidly created agrarian enterprises with “new forests” cropping up in the area as the nation was transformed into a coffee republic (Roseberry 2001).

The coffee economies of 19th century Latin America varied widely in terms of their labor and tenure patterns. With few strict requirements, the crop could be grown in virtually any allotment size and be worked by slaves, freeholders or proletarian wage laborers. In Venezuela,
the crop was mostly cultivated by peasant freeholders created with the breakup of the hacienda system in the central plains. While peasants in other parts of Venezuela languished in absolute poverty, the Andean peasantry was able to enjoy a relatively prosperous existence based on the expansion of foreign export markets and trade relations cultivated by urban merchants.

Unlike their less fortunate counterparts who had few if any opportunities to market surpluses and were thus largely confined to subsistence production, the Andean peasantry was able to take advantage of the growth of foreign markets for coffee and mercantile capital flowing into the sector, turning themselves into a burgeoning capitalist class. The mercantile capital associated with the trade altered the structure of society and its territorial organization, integrating citizens into new forms of social and economic intercourse. Coffee was largely responsible for the growth of port cities like Maracaibo and Puerto Cabello and it was a spur for investment in infrastructure, such as modern bridges, highways, toll roads and rail systems. The mercantile trading houses run by foreign elites involved the coffee trade were also the foundation of the modern banking system in Venezuela (see Machado et al 2001) and these lenders progressively bent society to their will magnetizing the economy around the trade.

By the end of the 19th century, coffee accounted for more than half of Venezuela’s exports and the crop was also a major source of political power (Roseberry 1985: 71-72). The credit extended to coffee growers by merchant elites enabled the planting process to take place and the cultivation of the crop and the marketing of the harvest depended upon them. This form of dependency in turn gave merchants leverage over the key actors in society and they were able to control the rate of return on investment based on the price and rates of interest charged.

Yet whereas in other parts of the world peasants acted defensively against the exactions of mercantile elites, in Venezuela, the coffee growers existed by virtue of their relations with
these entrepreneurs and coffee growers were able to feel like entrepreneurs themselves (Rangel 1969, Roseberry 1985). Unlike the peasantry depicted in the moral economy literature (e.g. Scott 1976, cf. Adas 1980), the Andean peasantry had arisen with the world market and thus did not view capitalist markets as a threat to their livelihood (Roseberry 1985). Instead, they actively sought out cooperation with merchant elites. The coffee growers were able to enjoy the prestige associated with ties to these merchant elites and were able to affect regional and national politics (Yarrington 1997). The source of the profit for the merchant was the rent generated by peasants and the surplus was taken through a combination of the sale of the crop on the market and debt. The two groups appeared to have a beneficial relationship while the trade lasted and markets were expanding.

A center of capital accumulation, the Andes was also the scene of political violence, as internecine conflicts between liberals and conservatives wracked the region for most of the 19th century. The weak central state scarcely governed the territory and amidst the struggle of the parties, the nation was ruled instead by caudillos or regional strongmen with their own private armies. One of these caudillos, Juan Vicente Gomez, was eventually able to capture the central government in 1899 and establish his rule in the name of the Liberal Party.

Although ostensibly a democrat, Gomez was paternalistic in his attitudes and he brought this approach to governance. A coffee planter from the state of Táchira, Gomez famously described Venezuela as his “hacienda” and the ruler established a regime commensurate with this view. Gomez amassed an immense personal fortune and acquired vast estates (which anecdotal accounts suggested required days to ride across). The dictator had a taste for money and power and the regime was renowned for its profligate wealth and arbitrary abuses of power.
But he lacked many of the skills required to run a modern state (Coronil 1997: 85-86, MacBeth 1983: 17).

Gomez was responsible for signing the first oil exploration contracts with foreign corporations, inaugurating the petroleum era in Venezuela. But the foundation he laid for modernity in Venezuela was rather shaky and the purportedly illiterate dictator was not a strong negotiator. In exchange for extraordinary concessions, including complete control of the process of exploration, extraction, refining and marketing, Venezuela received a tiny rent. This rent would later become the basis of national development projects and social progress, but the growth of the petroleum industry in Venezuela did not displace agriculture or the peasantry as the major forces of social and economic life, nor did it threaten the dictatorship. The peasantry remained one of the most critical actors in society and the coffee trade even expanded in the intervening years.

In the late twenties a dip in world market prices caused coffee growers to extend their cultivation to more marginal lands, leading to a restructuring of the trade. Extensive cultivation and the year-round demand for workers it implied, encouraged the formation of a labor market, which justifies characterization of the coffee economy as agrarian capitalist (Roseberry 1985). But the coffee boom was short-lived and lasted only three generations. The fate of the coffee growers closely mirrored the export market and the fate of the nation was closely tied to the trade. With the two subject to the whim of external market forces, both growers and the nation soon found themselves heavily in debt.

The First World War severely hampered market access and the Great Depression reduced demand and the prices for the crop. Heavily indebted and facing a cycle of foreclosure, the Andean peasantry and the nation were both in search of new sources of revenue and the
petroleum trade seemed to provide an answer to this problem. Roseberry (1989) notes that in many ways petroleum simply replaced coffee in the rentier structure of the Venezuelan economy and that the extraction of oil by foreign companies was not remarkably different from the coffee trade ruled by mercantile elites. Yet in other ways, the extraction of petroleum heightened or exacerbated the tensions of rentier capitalism and its tendency to privilege the capture of value over its creation with living labor. This form of exploitation, based on the extraction of surplus value from primary producers through debt and credit arrangements was briefly transformed into productive capitalism with the growth of a labor market and wage work in larger coffee plantations. But this form of productive capital, which briefly existed alongside oil, was subordinated to the exigencies of the petroleum industry over the course of the twentieth century. As the century wore on, Venezuela opted in favor of resource extraction and revalued the national currency to facilitate the importation of capital goods and capture of ground rent, thereby sealing the fate of coffee.

Thereafter, the Andes entered a phase of decline as focus shifted to the urban coastal centers and extraction zones where the bulk of the profitable activity was taking place. A fraction of the Andean peasantry successfully transitioned form coffee to urban wage work or labor in the petroleum industry. Yet the vast majority of these actors formed a relative surplus population residing in the ranchos or slums clustered on the outskirts of the major cities.

Capturing part of the rent circulating in society or laboring in public works projects, these newly urban actors survived on the edge of social and geographical marginality in the haphazard barrios that climbed the ridges and slopes of the coastal region. Yet in spite of the relatively shallow history of these residents in the area and their recent exodus from the campo, these actors have been the subjects of a radical historical amnesia. The term for these slums indexes
the rural origins of these residents. Yet in spite of this inscription, Roseberry (1989: 62) points to what he calls “the remarkable disappearance of this peasantry from political consciousness.” How could the history of actors who had played such a critical role in the formation of the modern nation and who stubbornly refused to be swept away by the earthquakes and mudslides that plagued these slopes, simply be forgotten?

A Hundred Years of Oil

The twentieth century was a century of petroleum, and as one of the largest exporters of petroleum in the world, Venezuela played a central role in the unfolding of this history. A cofounder of the OPEC cartel, Venezuela mastered the politics of petroleum and provided an example to other developing nations. Figuring centrally in the distributional conflicts between producer and consumer states (Huber 2010, 2011, Petras et al 1977), Venezuela was able to take advantage of the material addiction of the nations of the global north to energy imports to bargain for higher prices on its major resource. Venezuela thus became a leader of the developing states and a force for the reshaping of the world system.

Indeed, a case can be made that the founding of the cartel was the inception of the realignment of the world system along its north-south axis and that the boycotts of the cartel were the first effective means for developing nations to gain leverage over the global north using the strategic resource that undergirded the world economy. The price fluctuations brought about by the strikes of energy states sparked periodic crises, converting petroleum, a previously guaranteed resource, into a political weapon and these states into a major factor in global geopolitics. Venezuela has factored into the geopolitical calculations of the United States at least since the 1973 oil crisis when the nation was used to offset the boycott of the Arab states (Rabe 1982). Historically, this relationship between has been one of pragmatic cooperation and relative
stability (Ewell 1984). But the twentieth century was also a century of peasant wars (Wolf 1969, Hobsbawm 1959).

The twentieth century witnessed unprecedented unrest and rural rebellion, as peasants became protagonists in national liberation struggles on three continents. These revolutions built modern states in their name, if not always in their image, and added as much or more to the remaking of the world system as the petroleum trade. Through the mid-twentieth century rebellions, the peasant actors relegated to the premodern past suddenly turned into the makers of history, but having played what they deemed to be their last hand, modernizers reassured themselves peasants could now safely disappear.

At the end of last century, the facts and much of the scholarly analysis seemed to confirm the diagnosis. With the world’s urban population surpassing the rural for the first time and peasants and family farmers disappearing in record numbers, a variety of writers announced ‘the death of the peasantry’ (e.g. Hobsbawm 1994, Kearney 1996, Davis 2006, Brass 2006). The more nuanced writers highlighted that the decline of the peasantry was relative, rather than absolute, and that millions of peasants in the global survived much as they had for centuries (Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2009), but others were less sophisticated in their analysis. At the most extreme, some writers denied that peasants had ever existed or that the category was even useful. It is not coincidental that at the same time as peasants seemed to be disappearing, discourses of globalization also suggested that nation-states would be replaced and the future lay with the urban (cf. Bryceson et al 2000). In many ways, this declaration was premature and scholars have argued that in fact there has been a major resurgence of these actors and the social movements built in their name and image are the great political hope of the twenty-first century (e.g. Rosset 2009, Patel 2010, van der Ploeg 2010).
From the futurist vantage of modernization theory, the peasant was an historical anachronism destined to take its place on the scrapheap of history. With a subsistence-based livelihood grounded in traditional agriculture and small scale landholding, the peasant was the affective opposite of the high modern, technologically driven societies founded on petroleum. This livelihood based on opportunistic market relations and simple reproduction techniques allegedly gave the peasant a parochial worldview, which centered on land claims and a politics that never quite made it to the cities. Peasants blocked the advance of modern society and various practices of modernization were devised to force the peasantry to adopt its advantages. Venezuelans imbibed these discourses as successive governments tried to convert peasants into modern subjects or when they refused, to force them aside. Just as modernizing discourses suggested these actors would be swept away by the tide of history, in Venezuela peasants were cleared from public lands to make way for extraction fields. Yet as often as the dislocation was effected by forced removal, the decline of the peasantry was also underwritten by the exigencies of the petrostate, a major impetus for the peasant war that gripped the Venezuelan countryside in the 1960s and 70s, following the tide of rebellion in other parts of the world. But this rural insurgency would not stop the tide of change.

From the vantage of the last decades of the twentieth century, it would have been hard to imagine a higher profile place for petroleum in the global economy. The fight for the world’s last oil reserves and palpable anxiety over peak oil production has reignited talk of overpopulation and finite resources, leading scholars to argue fossil fuels are at the center of capitalism and capitalism is a “fossil mode of production” (Huber 2008, Mitchell 2011). What might have been still more difficult to predict especially from the vantage of modernization theory was the flood of attention directed at the global food system and growing awareness that modern agriculture has not lived up to its pledges.
Induced in part by the flood of speculative capital into futures markets after the burst of the real estate bubble in 2007-08, the global food crisis raised critical awareness of the vulnerability of developing nations to starvation and induced a serious reevaluation of global agriculture. Residents of developing nations could scarcely afford the higher import prices and the local food systems that had survived the neoliberal onslaught of the 1990s were ill equipped to deal with the increased demand for cheap food. In Latin America, farmers who had trouble competing with the subsidized production of the global north and the economies of scale of foreign agribusiness, had turned to supplemental cultivation designed to augment cash incomes earned elsewhere, while urbanites were often living off imports paid for with the profits from natural resource extraction and mineral wealth.

Blessed and cursed with an abundance of petroleum, Venezuela is a society that feels topsy-turvy to the average North American, where the price of a bottle of Coca-Cola exceeds the price of a tank of gasoline and where the average food costs in relative terms can exceed prices in New York City. Yet Venezuela is somewhat unique among the energy producing nations of the world for having had a long history of agriculture and sufficient arable land to support its population. In spite of this available base, the Venezuelan agro-food system has failed to meet these needs and it has been repeatedly diagnosed and treated to remedy its perceived deficiencies. The global food crisis at the start of the twenty-first century appears to have spurred another round of efforts to treat and diagnose the system.

**Flight and Right to the City**

At the start of the twentieth century, Venezuela was an enclave society, which lacked central features of the modern state. With salient regional divisions, weakly defined territorial borders and a weak civil society, any movement for social change was suppressed and the dictatorship
sought to radically limit the influence of petroleum exploitation on society. Under the obscurantist dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gomez, Venezuela underwent a halting transition to modernity with the central features of the modern state appearing only gradually and unevenly.

As Fernando Coronil (1997) has argued, the narrative of progress which suggests Venezuela was suddenly catapulted into the light of modernity by the fall of the dictatorship belies the extent to which the modern state was in fact built by Gomez and the extent to which subsequent leaderships followed in his footsteps (68-75). Treating the rise of petroleum and the fall of the ancien regime as part of a unitary process, the narrative suggests democratic conquests by liberals set the stage for the development of modern Venezuela after a dark period of stagnation. Yet the exploitation of petroleum began before the fall of the dictatorship and in fact the income from the industry propped up the regime in the last years of his rule. The revenue greatly increased institutional capacity of the state, leading to the installation of “a commercial-bureaucratic regime” which began with the dictator and carried over after his death in 1935 (Lombardi 1982).

The death of the dictator unleashed pent up social tensions, leading to a general reform of the society which had been in a state of suspended animation for decades. Yet without land reform the plight of the rural poor and peasantry was basically unchanged. Unable or unwilling to pay wages, large landowners often substituted a system of tenancy for bonded labor or debt peonage with their former tenants becoming sharecroppers on the larger estates. The dictatorship’s opponents, concentrated in the urban areas, thus were faced with the problem of how to break these bonds and earn the support of the rural majority. Accion Democratica, the party in which these activists were organized, sought to establish ties with the campesino
movement and develop a program which accorded with their aspirations. As the campesino leader Ramon Quijada (1960) wrote,

“[t]he Venezuelan peasant was always at the margins of the good land, his heart desiring to someday possess it, but he waited with patience and humility until the advent of justice, for the hour when an agrarian law would proclaim the principle: ‘the land belongs to those who work it.’”

Vowing to enact such a law if ushered into power, AD earned popular support of the rural areas and came to power in a brief three-year period known as El Trienio (1945-1948).

Under the Presidency of Romulo Gallegos, the Venezuelan government adopted a number of progressive measures, including the abolition of tenant debts and reduction of rent, but the agrarian policies of AD were marked by a pronounced timidity and reluctance to pursue more radical reform. Previously ignored in favor of larger commercial interests, the Venezuelan peasantry was able to forge new ties with the state through government aid and development programs (Ellner 1999). Yet instead of breaking up large estates and distributing the land to campesinos, as AD had pledged, the Venezuelan leadership pursued the less controversial strategy of colonización or land settlement.

Founding the Instituto de Immigración y Colonización, the Venezuelan government spread the influence of the ruling party to the interior by extending credit to a newly enfranchised class of plot farmers known as conuqueros. These slash and burn farmers were tasked with carving out parcels from public lands to convert themselves into a stable peasantry. Half of the national territory was ‘empty’ and AD offered settlement in the lands of Oriente and Guyana as a less radical solution to the agrarian question. But the lack of infrastructure in these areas and remote locations often made it difficult for settlements to market surpluses and they failed frequently as a result. These measures did not constitute a true agrarian reform, as they did not
challenge the structure of landholding or alter the *latifundio* (Ellner 1999). Yet in spite of the modest scale of these efforts, the close relationship of AD to the peasant leagues raised the ire of the conservative military and the civilian administration was deposed in a coup on November 24th 1948.

Suggesting AD had created “a state within a state,” the military espoused a virulent anti-communism, which attacked the peasantry as supporters of the nominally left-wing government. Suppressing the national peasant federation and severely curtailing credit programs, the military established a junta, which evicted *campesinos* from national lands and distributed the lands to regime supporters. The junta, characterized by Venezuelan historians as “the soft dictatorship” (Avendaño-Lugo 1982, Rodriguez 1984), would eventually “harden” into the even more brutal dictatorship of its leader, Marcos Pérez Jimenez.

Promoting his *Nuevo Ideal Nacional* or New National Ideal, Pérez Jimenez sought to transform the image of Venezuelan from one of a backward, impoverished nation into a high modern urban nation with a clear direction for the future. Cultivating what Fernando Coronil (1997) has called “the myth of progress,” the military embarked on a nation building program designed to lift the nation out of stagnation and bring society into the light of modernity without threatening its traditional organization. The military opposed uncontrolled progress and sought to reshape certain aspects of society while leaving traditional hierarchies intact. The regime was especially prejudiced against *campesinos* as supporters of their opponents and modernization efforts were targeted at their sudden and violent erasure.

In a reactionary modernization project designed to break the back of the *campesino* movement, the Venezuelan military began to establish large commercial monopolies in agriculture in the belief that such enterprises would streamline the sector and increase
productivity. Embodying a national capitalist form of development (Rodriguez 1984, Avendaño Lugo 1982), the enterprises were designed to inculcate the peasantry with the norms of wage labor and obedience to managerial authority, remolding it into a pliable workforce. The program strove to harness the labor of the rural populus by transforming it into modern subjects as the basis of its vision of technical progress without the restructuring of unequal property relations. But this modernization project, ironically, had the effect of erasing the need for large quantities of labor in the sector.

The residual labor pool created by the reform was thus forced to migrate to the urban areas. AD eventually opposed this modernization drive and began to organize the affected actors, but the initial reluctance of the party to pursue an agrarian populist line reveals the extent to which AD shared in the basic values of the military and embraced its vision of progress. In the discourse of AD leaders, the Venezuelan countryside was essentially feudal, with its landowners and rural workers described as “barons” and “peons.” While relations of a feudal character certainly persisted in parts of the nation, these relations no longer typified the campo as a whole and there were already major changes in progress. The party leadership regarded the reform of agriculture as the extirpation of a feudal legacy, but by accepting this notion of progress, AD implicitly conceded the terrain of modernization to the military, giving rise to a split in the party. The aptly named AD leader Esteban Campos described the split as follows:

“The urban social classes of this nation have never even glanced [echado un vistazo] at the countryside and they do not know the campesino class exists. They have not realized the immense human capital—the majority of the Venezuelan population—that are the campesinos. This is the pure class that has never been corrupted” (quoted in Quijada 1960: 9).

Operating alongside rural idylls in which campesinos were viewed as intrinsically egalitarian and distinct from the urban social classes, a faction of AD regarded the middle class in urban areas as
having been corrupted by the influence of the dictatorship and desires linked to the neocolonial status of the nation. These classes were part of an urban culture that was not national and they were not ‘national subjects’ in the true sense of the word. This faction of the populist party looked upon the peasantry, by contrast, as the incarnation of the nation and the campo as fertile ground for the sowing of a new vision of the nation. But Pérez Jimenez also thought the campo was fertile ground.

In the early 1950s, the Venezuelan military began to make efforts to attract immigrants from Europe in the belief that the additional population would perform the double duty of improving ‘the racial stock’ of the nation and colonizing the interior. Steeped in the ideology of racial eugenics, the Venezuelan military linked the progress of the nation to its racial composition believing the introduction of white bodies would speed up the process of modernization. In the span of a decade, Venezuela received several hundred thousand European immigrants as part of the plan to colonize the interior. But the influx of population did not halt the decline of the campo as the exodus of residents continued as the cities grew unabated.

The growth of the urban areas was attended by notable gains for the AD linked labor movement. In 1950, the national labor confederation spearheaded a general strike in the petroleum sector, crippling production. The strike marked the first instance in which the petroleum workers, rather than the peasant leagues, were the decisive force in a battle against the dictatorship and it also signaled the arrival of labor on the national political stage. The campesino movement had not disappeared and would yet prove a potent force in the struggle against the military. But the two forces were coming into a new strategic balance that would shape the face of Venezuelan politics for the next few decades.
When developing its first party program, AD had ignored the rural areas, accepting the view that the future of the nation was ineluctably urban. There was no serious discussion of the agrarian question or clear presentation of the relationship of the party to the peasant leagues. Instead, the party cast its lot with the urban middle class from which it drew the bulk of its leadership, tacitly agreeing with the view of the campesinado held by the military. Yet as the party began to take a more balanced and pragmatic approach to the formation of coalitions, the party increasingly cast its lot with the actors affected by the modernization of agriculture, setting up the historic bloc that would eventually prove successful in defeating the dictatorship.

The modernization of agriculture by the military had created a flood of rural-out migrants and internally displaced persons that could not be easily policed and this surplus population had also accelerated the growth of an urban slum complex that was extremely difficult to control. The vision of modernization endorsed by the military thus would prove to be its undoing as the flood of rural migrants taxed the existing urban infrastructure and new residents grew increasingly discontent with the regime and contested the grip of the dictatorship.

Striving to gain a toehold on the city and access urban resources, these internal migrants constructed their shacks on the edges of the major cities and the regime responded by tearing down their dwellings and forcibly deporting the residents. The forced evictions and demolitions of the period, ironically juxtaposed with the massive state-funded construction projects by the regime in these same years, resulted in a period known as “the years of the bulldozer” (Castillo 1990). Yet the residents did not passively witness the destruction of their homes. Fighting back against the evictions, the residents of the ranchos turned a fight for ‘right to the city’ (Harvey 2012, Mitchell 2003, Lefebvre, 1968) into a fight for democracy when the regime refused to recognize the results of a plebiscite in which it was defeated.
The Great Venezuela

On January 23rd 1958, an uprising toppled the military and AD returned to power. The uprising marked the end of the dictatorship and the start of a decisive shift away from the peasantry as the major base of support for progressive politics. The peasant federations acting in the revolt were well linked with their urban allies. Yet the leadership of the two groups had disparate ideological orientations and the urban classes held the bulk of power in the creation of the new government. That same year, the parties to the revolt met in the port city of Punto Fijo where they signed an infamous political pact guaranteeing their monopoly on power. The pact, designed to prevent other political parties from entering the government, ushered in a period known as The Fourth Republic (1958-1998) and a new series of conflicts (Coronil 1997).

Although multiclass in composition, AD had always maintained a rhetorical allegiance to socialism. But the ostensibly socialist party quickly betrayed its ideological roots and aligned with the United States against the Cuban Revolution. Dissident factions of the party, in turn, joined with the now proscribed Communist Party and took up arms against the central government. Infiltrating the rural areas and establishing bases of support among the peasantry with calls for land to the tiller, the insurgents hoped to win the support of the campesinos and repeat the Cuban experience. The Venezuelan government responded with an agrarian reform of its own.

Fearing a second revolution, the Venezuelan government embarked on the first agrarian reform under intense pressure from below (Powell 1971). The military had fallen due in large part to its policy of evictions and the new leadership was not keen to repeat the experience. AD leaders were preoccupied with a strategy to stem the tide of rural out migration and reduce the influx of campesinos. Lacking a strong class of middle holders, it was decided the task of
agrarian reform was to create one. Leaders felt the creation of such a class would lessen the
growing unrest in rural areas and stem the tide of out migration, obviating the need for evictions,
which were by now helping insurgents to make inroads in the cities. The moderate character of
the reform closely aligned with foreign interests and US involvement in Venezuela increased in
this period.

Under the auspices of the Alliance for Progress and foreign aid programs, the technology
of the green revolution, first tested in Mexico, was introduced to Venezuela and offered as an
alternative to the spread of socialism. Foreign aid workers and officials in Venezuela were tasked
with spreading the technology designed to increase yields and touted as capable of increasing the
purchasing power of the rural population, with the goal of the project centering on higher
incomes to support domestic industry and internal markets increasing the pull for manufactures.
The increased competition and regulation of the agriculture sector by the market would
putatively help erase inefficiencies and make available a large pool of labor that could be
absorbed in other economic activities.

The Alliance for Progress reforms constructed agriculture systems with an internal
market orientation, not entirely unlike the reforms of their socialist competitors (Deere 2006).
But unlike their more radical counterparts, the reforms were discursively constructed as the latest
form of development and modernization, and the language of class struggle was entirely absent
(Kay 1995).

Whereas Cuba called for “land to the tiller” and support for revolution in Latin America,
the Alliance for Progress reforms were more rhetoric ally conservative and designed to eradicate
the conditions (and subjects) that gave rise to radicalism. In this vision of agricultural
modernization, a class of technically sophisticated farmers would replace campesinos and their
character would ostensibly allow them to transcend the backwardness that kept rural areas in poverty and destabilized society (Quijada 1960, Rodriguez Rojas 2011).

To aid in these modernization efforts, the Venezuelan government created the National Agrarian Institute (IAN), devoted to the organization of the sale of land, titling programs and providing technical assistance to farmers. But the strictures of the reform limited the scope of the redistribution and lands purchased were often of poor quality or in the Andes where coffee had declined and no profitable crops were available. The farmers lacked a replacement for coffee, which could bring them the revenue enjoyed in the past and the new holders could not become the market driven actors envisioned.

The law explicitly stated that land seizures would not be tolerated and the agency would not recognize the right to title on lands taken by force. In spite of these restrictions, however, the seizure of lands was widespread in rural areas as campesinos invaded former projects lands and reclaimed estates taken over by the military. But peasant federation leaders halted the invasions once the leading members of their organizations property claims were restored, leaving many campesinos landless (Powell 1971).

The first agrarian reform in 1960 effectively abolished rent for large portions of the rural population, erasing the last vestiges of feudal or bonded labor relations. Debt could no longer be passed from generation to generation and large landowners were forced to pay their workers a wage or risk losing them to urban areas or other estates (Duque 2009). But the reform conforming to Alliance for Progress strictures refused to endorse any action outside of its conservative legal framework, severely restricting its radical potential.
By 1964, less than five percent of the land had changed hands and a conflictive relationship between the campesinos and landowners had been replaced by a conflictive relationship between campesinos and the state (Erasmus 1967). The agrarian reform had opened a path for campesinos to carve inalienable parcels from state land. But the paltry aid to settlement projects frequently meant such projects failed. Although officially prohibited, the sale or trading of land titles frequently transpired through the sale of improvements or other surreptitious means as campesinos sought to exit the countryside (Losada 1976).

Composed mostly of squatters, day laborers and smallholders, the rural areas seldom withstood the pressures of modernization and the capitalization of markets disproportionately benefited already prosperous producers. With easy access to credit and land, wealthy landowners were able to control the process of cultivation and seize land from other rural groups (Margolies 1980). This pressure briefly fueled an insurgency in the late 1960s and 70s, but if as Mao had written, guerillas must operate among the peasants like fish in water (1937), the water in which the Venezuelan insurgents swam was rapidly drying up.

By 1970, three quarters of the Venezuelan population lived in urban areas whereas a generation earlier the figure had stood at under a third. In the next decade, more than one million Venezuelans would leave the countryside. With the pressures of modernization increasing, the peasantry entered a phase of absolute decline as migration became a major survival strategy and the percentage of the population employed in agriculture declined to a tiny figure (Crist 1984). The periurban regions of the nation meanwhile grew with the surplus population increasing the ranks of the working classes as well as the massive category of unemployed ‘others’ in the slums.
Agrarian populists in Venezuela and elsewhere have portrayed this rural-urban dislocation as the destruction of an egalitarian peasant economy (Rosset 2003, Quijada 1969). But in reality, many parts of Venezuela never had the kind of self-sufficient agriculture systems that matched the populist image of agrarian sovereignty or the rural idylls that imagined the campesinado as intrinsically “solidaristic” (Roseberry 1989).

Regionally diverse and differentiated, the Venezuelan peasantry did not have a unitary livelihood or clear status vis-a-vis the urban social classes. By the 1940s agriculture had already started to take a backseat to the economic activities in urban areas (Leon 1944). The petroleum economy did not just destroy the peasantry. The peasantry was also drawn to participation in the cash economy of urban centers, which offered opportunities for healthcare, education and social services that could not be found in rural areas. Thus various ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors led the peasantry away from the rural areas and livelihoods that radically limited their possibilities. Yet in spite of the ambivalent character of the transition, the historical rural-urban migration left an indelible imprint on the national psyche and it would be read as progress by subsequent generations.

Popular throughout Venezuela, the Juan Bimba stories are a national allegory, which serves to narrate the course of national history. A symbol of the transition, the stories center on the life of a campesino everyman, who leaves his shack or rancho in the campo for an uncertain life in the city. With his wife and children in tow, he constructs his shack on the outskirts of the capital and seeks work wherever he can find it. Over the years his humble shack improves with many subsequent additions as the dirt floor is replaced by boards and the temporary construction gives way to walls made of brick. He sends his children to public school and eventually learns to read and write himself, joining a political party. In short, he becomes a modern subject.
Looking back on his life and the time when he left the countryside, it seems incredible and he can hardly fathom all that has happened. The tale may seem incredible for the life of one person, but a single generation of Venezuelans could have seen such dramatic changes. Streaming out of the rural areas toward the cities, the campesinos, the majority of the Venezuelan population, were separated from their historical environs and integrated into the fabric of the new urban society. The campesinos, who had embodied the nation in their diversity, now met a shared fate with the rise of the petrostate as they came to be ruled by the caste of urban elites who controlled the petroleum industry, but they would still have a claim to the status as universal subjects of the nation.

**Sowing the Oil**

Since the late 1940s, the slogan of AD had been “we are sowing the oil.” The slogan was a pledge to use the revenue of the petroleum industry to diversify the economy and create a modern industrial society that could absorb the surplus labor created by the streamlining of agriculture and the exodus of the peasantry from the countryside. The Venezuelan government would use the profits from the petroleum industry to develop a manufacturing sector that could provide new livelihoods and set people to work increasing the wealth of the nation. This investment would translate into improved standards of living for the population as well as security for the nation. But this model of development entailed a particular relationship of trust between the state and nation.

Conceived as collective property, there was an implicit social contract in this form of development based on petroleum. Every member of the nation was entitled to a portion of the benefits of the wealth derived from its sale. But instead of giving every member of the nation a portion of the profits in direct cash payment, there was a kind of enforced savings mechanism.
Subsidy programs were put forward for certain social groups, but elite modernizers knew they could never improve the economy and infrastructure without investing capital. \textit{El gobierno} was thus responsible for the use of these resources and it was legitimate as long as it properly used them. The bond of trust between \textit{el gobierno} and \textit{el pueblo} would be reckoned with existing cultural terms.

In the organic nationalism of AD, oil was “blood” extracted from the body of the nation, the land, which would be returned to its citizens in the form of national development projects (Coronil 1997). If, in the organic metaphors of the past, the \textit{campesino} with his egalitarian subsistence ethic had been imagined as the paragon of the nation, its proverbial “soil,” now, petroleum, the \textit{subsoil} of the nation was increasingly imagined as the basis of sovereignty. Petroleum was the catalytic agent that could modernize society; it could be used to water agriculture and industry after sowing it into the soil of the nation. But the metaphor was significant for what it ignored.

The language of ‘sowing’ and ‘reaping’ in the metaphor drawn from agriculture applied the logic of the traditional sector to the resource economy and suggested the Venezuelan state was in complete control of the process of realizing value. The metaphor made it appear as if wealth came from the ground and the extraction process yielded an intrinsic value. The wealth derived from this process would be returned to the nation in the form of development projects sponsored by the state. In fact, the nation was far from independent and the grip of foreign energy firms on the sector imposed severe restrictions on the national budget and what could be achieved in terms of development. The factors governing the sector such as highly variable rents and the requirement of maintaining large capital reserves made it hard to plan for the future and escape the trap of dependency. In spite of its formal independence, Venezuela lacked many of
the features of sovereignty envisaged in modernist political discourse and this caused a great deal of stress for certain actors. Tending to integrate Venezuela with the market of its major purchaser, the US, the petroleum trade was not delivering the imagined independence. National sovereignty was illusory and indeed some Venezuelans questioned its utility.

Enjoying a rising standard of living increasingly compared with the US, coastal elites in Venezuela often articulated a desire for formal political union with the United States, which they believed would offer them special benefits (a desire that can still be heard in some sectors of Venezuelan society today). But the desire to forego sovereignty in favor of these advantages was tempered by the turn of historical events.

In 1976, the Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Pérez nationalized the energy sector valued at some 6 billion dollars and declared “a second national independence.” In the next few years, the income of the nation more than doubled and state expenditures also rose as Venezuela found itself awash in petrodollars. Making a massive investment in public infrastructure and development projects, AD pledged to ‘catch up’ with the nations of the global north and remake society into the type of liberal democracy desired by its cosmopolitan elites. But the benefits of petroleum-based development were never delivered to the nation as a whole and there was a marked disparity in the access to the revenue of the resource.

The rural areas lagged far behind the coastal centers and the bulk of the resources of the state were targeted at the urban areas. Official plans called for the establishment of “poles of rural development” in the interior with medical care facilities, schools, and technical support staff for agriculture (Ewell 1984). The program scored a few successes such as the construction of rural health clinics (a legacy which could be seen in the areas where I worked) and rural areas reaped some benefits of petropopulism as experts arrived in local areas with agricultural projects.
The state began to take on a new role in the process. Deriving its revenue from rent, rather than the taxation of the population, the Venezuelan state began to take on an aura of independence from the society it served. Fostering systems of patronage and clientelism, leaders of the nation allocated the rent as gifts using the wealth of the industry to introduce new political logics.

In the late seventies, Venezuela underwent what the historian Judith Ewell (1984: 193) has called a “petrolization of the national problems.” Whenever faced with a problem, the leadership invariably arrived at the conclusion that petroleum was the solution. Political leaders believed they could solve any problem by exploring for more oil and increasing the revenue of the state, effectively buying their way out of any hardship. If they required highways and bridges to appease supporters or meet the expectations of the nation, they extracted more oil to pay for it. The petroleum industry was at the center of the budget and thus led to the formation of a new center of power inside the state.

In the late 1940s, the Venezuelan military had deposed AD, arguing that the peasant federations were “a state within a state.” Now PDVSA, the state oil company, was increasingly regarded as the state within the state. The engine of social and economic progress, the state oil company was the agent of modernization and held nearly one third of the gross domestic product and more than eighty percent of the foreign earned revenue (Gutiérrez 1992). With its resources greatly increasing the power of the state, the petroleum industry shifted the bases of power in society and the place of the nation in the world system.

In the late seventies, Venezuela was rising in the region and the nation became a regional powerbroker. Lauded for its high rates of growth and functioning two-party democracy, Venezuela was regarded as a representative of responsible social democracy in a region plagued by military dictatorships and socialist revolution. Reflecting a widely held opinion, in 1976, the
American economist Robert Loring Allen wrote, “[t]he Venezuelan nation stands on the summit of success” (1976: 3). With its newfound affluence and growing influence in the region, it appeared Venezuela would achieve its lofty goals. The capital Caracas became home to the various political exile communities of the region and the President was viewed as a senior statesman who was called upon to mediate conflicts. Carlos Andres Pérez had campaigned as “the man with energy,” a reference to his own flamboyant personality and his plans for the petroleum industry. He had also pledged to build “a Great Venezuela.” After his election as President, the Venezuelan government launched an import substitution program linking private industry and the state with mixed enterprises. The state retained the majority share in the ventures so that it could preserve a supervisory role and control the development process while affording private capital a cut of the anticipated profits. But this program was largely unsuccessful in its objectives.

The petrostate seemed to enable and in turn disable progress and the activities associated with the circulation of rent and petroleum eventually came to represent Venezuela’s development and its backwardness (Roseberry 1989). The nation had all the hallmarks of a modern affluent society—movie theaters, shopping malls, cars and highways. But these assets were unevenly divided among the population at large and in the face of persistent inequalities, these signs of affluence were increasingly regarded as decadence by the average person.

The petroleum economy provided enough material progress for Venezuelans to dream of a future that they could never reach, and encouraged them to make risky speculative investments. As capital began to circulate through the urban areas, the revenue of petroleum was woven into the urban fabric and real estate turned into a means of absorbing the surplus. The speculative environment allowed the well connected to prosper in the construction sector, while other actors
were also incited to derive a portion of their income from rent, creating a tenuous structure of growth.

Like the military before it, the modernization program put forward by AD proved to be its undoing. Ironically, the social actors that had called forth these aspirations for progress were the source of the forces which them from being realized. As any peasant knows, it is hard to reap when it costs to sow and still harder to sow when it costs to reap. In the late twentieth century, the Venezuelan petrostate ran up against this basic tension and the nation was forced to face the reality that the model of development based on the investment of profits from the resource had been exhausted.

The capital-intensive nature of the petroleum industry meant the Venezuelan government always had to have substantial capital reserves on hand in order to keep the extraction process going. This placed an existential, albeit variable, limit on the investment that could be made in development projects. The ‘sowing of the oil’ or the use of revenue to pay for agriculture and industrial projects was taking away from the capital needed to extract or reap profits and the ensuing ‘capital squeeze’ caused the Venezuelan government to take out loans to finance its modernization efforts.

The critical flaw of this plan was the industries created were less than profitable and a subsidized agriculture sector was not generating harvests to feed the nation. As investment in agriculture declined in the late seventies and eighties, the already substantial imports became the major source of food for the nation (see Chapter 4) and the marginal sectors of the rural population increasingly turned to the state to meet their needs. Funding development and consumption from the same source of revenue, the state grants and basic income programs eased the suffering of the marginal sectors of the society in what was imagined as a transition to an
urban-industrial future. But neoliberal ideology would later disqualify the state from this role as provider of social welfare and the engine of development.

The state was the only agent capable of ensuring the basic standard of living for the rural population and marginal urban sectors. Dependent on the revenue of a single resource, the nation was vulnerable to balance of payment problems and variable rates of return from extraction. When prices dropped in the early eighties, the Venezuelan state experienced a drastic decline in public revenue and neoliberal reforms targeted public sector outlays and provision of social services. In one of history’s great ironies, the chief beneficiary of the petro-populism, President Carlos Andres Pérez, became the agent of its downfall and in the process eventually contributed to his own demise.

In his second term in office, President Carlos Andres Pérez introduced an austerity package sponsored by the World Bank/IMF designed to deal with the budgetary shortfall and debt. The austerity package increased the total cost of public transportation by three hundred percent and raised the price of other basic goods and services by similarly astronomical rates. The anger and despair caused by these price increases sparked violent outrage across the country, bringing rioting to the major cities in an event known as *El Caracazo*. Venezuela was likely the society in Latin America least appropriate for this kind of neoliberal ‘shock treatment.’ The brutal military crackdown against the rioters in the wake of the imposition of austerity led to the return of the structure of feeling of an impotent third world nation incapable of feeding its people, mired in starvation and turmoil. The dependency generated by the petroleum economy came to be viewed as a source of social and moral degradation and the call for development increasingly became a call for rights and sovereignty, which opened a space for the actors that had largely been forgotten to return.
The New Anti-Imperialism

In the twentieth century, socialism, at least in terms of doctrine, was a uniquely proletarian movement. The international working class, preferably located in a factory, was viewed as the subject capable of overturning capitalist society and its forms of exploitation, replacing it with a more just and equitable system. The central contradiction in capitalist society was between the owners of capital and the class of laborers who toiled for them. Ownership of the means of production allowed the capitalist to extract surplus from the worker in the form of value embodied in commodities that were sold on the market. The capitalist paid the worker wages in turn. But the relentless drive of competition forced the capitalist to reinvest in fixed capital and technological improvements. The constant ‘revolutionizing of the means of production’ threatened the livelihoods of workers and they faced poverty and immiseration (a position they shared with the peasantry). But the progressive socialization of the process of production it was believed would lead to a growing self-consciousness on the part of workers and awareness of shared conditions would eventually result in the expropriation of the expropriators (Marx 1867).

The twentieth century socialist states had an—at best—ambivalent relationship to peasants. As modernizing states, which sought to unleash the productive forces and transform society in a fashion that could increase the total surplus as the basis of an imagined future freedom, these states regarded the abolition of private property and outmoded systems of production as a major goal. The leaders of these states regarded peasants as allies in the struggle against capital and large property owners, but these same actors also regarded peasants as unreliable and even as potential antagonists when it came to “the final socialization of the means of production.” The eradication of the forms of “pigmy property” which had disappeared for the majority in capitalist society (Marx 1867: 928), but which had stayed in the hands of the
peasantry was a prerequisite for the victory of socialism. These actors would have to be remolded to meet the objectives of the leadership and the tools employed were often less than comradely. In many cases, the socialist state was responsible for the forced dispossession and collectivization of peasants, converting these erstwhile allies into enemies (Scott 1999, Wolf 1969). But in the twenty-first century, nationalist governments claiming the mantle of socialism have a somewhat different relationship to peasants.

At the end of the twentieth century, neoliberal reforms in Latin America led to the rise of a regime of growth which opened up the economies of the region to greater foreign investment, disrupting the state-market relations that had given local agriculture a competitive edge. Enacting policies favorable to foreign agribusiness such as the rewriting of laws restricting the amount of land foreign entities could own and the export of profits, the neoliberal governments of the region presided over one of the largest land grabs in Latin American history. Unlike the enclosures of the early twentieth century, which were as often led by the state as capital, campesinos and the nation were alienated from their territory by enclosures at the end of the twentieth century.

Social movements in the global south in the twenty-first century have targeted foreign agribusiness and the sectors of capital allied with it as their major antagonists and they have found allies within the state. The response of twenty-first century social movements in the global south has been to protect themselves from the vagaries of the world market and foreign competition by reclaiming sovereignty over land.

With its claim to an organic relation with the land, the peasant has fused with the nationalist claim to sovereignty in a shared political imaginary. In the twenty-first century, the peasant is portrayed as the actor most opposed to the ravages of neoliberal capitalism and its
tendency to generate profits from the non-productive activities of finance and markets driven by fictitious capital (Desmarais 2007, La Via Campesina 2009). An image of stability and fixity deployed against the circulation of financial capital, the peasant is a figure whose interests run counter to a regime of free trade and capitalist market growth fueled by the revenue of petroleum.

Even if the statement that petroleum is feeding off peasants is somewhat histrionic (for an example of this type of rhetoric see Shiva 2008), the conclusion that the present regime of global accumulation, predicated on a symbiotic relationship between extraction and finance, has been destructive of peasant agriculture seems undeniable (Teichman 2012). The widespread dislocation of peasants in the global south and the ongoing decline of family farming in the north as a result of the expansion of free trade and finance based production, has been a distinguishing feature of the current period, which added with the foreign intervention in the developing world to secure access to natural resources have led to a major reconceptualization of the world system (Harvey 2003, Wallerstein 2003, Moore 2003).

In his widely cited work, *The New Imperialism*, David Harvey (2003) suggests that the circulation of petrocapital from the global energy market since the seventies has contributed to the secular financialization of accumulation, or the predominance of interest bearing capital and speculative investment at the core of the system as well as new forms of dependency for the national economies of the global south. While this petrocapital has contributed to the financialization of the developed economies in the global north and the prevalence of non-productive activities and assets such as financial services, insurance, real estate, in the global south, petroleum has also thwarted the growth of productive systems based on living labor. The rising price of petroleum was supposed to free the nations of the global south from the grip of the
former colonial masters and permit them to exercise a new sovereignty (Mitchell 2011).
Ironically, however, the export of oil seemed to contribute to the proliferation of new forms of
instability and a resurgence of a set of actors once thought to have been destined to disappear.

Since the 1950s, global agriculture has depended upon cheap petroleum to run
mechanized systems of cultivation. The pressure of higher fuel prices in recent years has
increased the cost of industrial agriculture, making smaller, organic farming practices more
attractive and viable in many parts of the world (Woodhouse 2010). This has led to
repeasantization and resurgence of the potential of the actor to embody the nation (see Harris-
White 2012). Yet the more thorough penetration of capitalist market relations into agriculture
systems has also threatened the stability of peasant livelihoods, which require successful
This financialization of the conditions of production has been driven in part by the glut of
investment capital from the energy sector and the deregulation of markets, which allows
speculation in futures and sovereign wealth funds created by petrostates. This is evidence of a
general problem of overaccumulation (Harvey 2012). This has led to new forms of politics, new
slogans and new coalitions that distinguish present politics and anti-imperialism of the twentieth
century, which feature the resource at the center.

While the anti-imperialist movement in Europe and North America rallied around the
slogan, “No Blood for Oil” in the early 1990s in the lead up to the first Iraq war, a new anti-
imperialist movement in the global south began to mobilize around the set of actors affected by
the marketization of agro-food systems and to push for the re-vindication of their rights. The
global sweep of petrofinance is mirrored from below by an organization of peasants and family
farmers whose dedication to small-scale agriculture is regarded as creating a movement based on the actors long conceived as the natural basis of these nations.

In the early 1990s, La Vía Campesina emerged as one of the most articulate voices of the counter-globalization movement contesting the impact of neoliberal policies on the global south. Rejecting so-called ‘market-led’ agrarian reforms based on the ‘willing buyer, willing seller’ approach, this Latin American, now transnational, social movement, pursued a more militant strategy of direct action, adopting tactics of squatter sit-ins and protest to fight for land rights (Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010). The organization, whose name means “the peasant way,” is now the largest NGO in the world with member organizations on every continent, and its supporters argue the organization has preserved the best aspects of the agrarian social movements of the past, while staying attuned to the nature of agrarian politics in the twenty-first century. The NGO has portrayed itself as a defender of the actors displaced by the rise of neoliberal market systems and free trade and as alternative to global capitalism.

Yet whereas militant agrarian movements in the twentieth century sought to take the strategic heights of power to refashion society (Wolf 1969), this agrarian social movement has sought to restore the ostensibly natural economy of actors who are regarded as the organic base of the nation. Amid the retreat of the state from the rural areas of Latin America in the 1980s, this social movement filled in the critical space occupied by the political-bureaucratic apparatus and this new movement became one of the major advocates for agrarian reform and the interests of the nation against foreign capital. La Vía Campesina has suggested that restoring peasant sovereignty over land is the means to restore the sovereignty of the nation and the actors who had previously been treated as marginal to the nation should return to the central place. They
would receive a hearing for these proposals in Venezuela in the late 1990s as the crisis of neoliberal agriculture became acute.

**The Return to the Countryside**

To say that the Venezuelan peasantry does not exist would be an overstatement. But the degree of power exercised by the class today pales in comparison to the degree of leverage exercised by its organizations in the early twentieth century. A tiny percentage of the population, the class has waned steadily over the course of the last half-century. An even smaller percentage of the rural population is actively involved in the campesino movement (Rodriguez 2011). The Venezuelan leadership thus has relied on the residents of the ranchos—the large urban agglomerations surrounding the major cities, rather than campesinos, as its the major base of support. Yet somewhat paradoxically, the Venezuelan leadership has also claimed to be making “a peasant revolution.”

In the early 2000s, the high price of food and spikes on global energy markets gave the Venezuelan government a renewed impetus and ability to free the nation from petroleum dependency and in the words of its new leader, to “revolutionize agriculture.” One of the first pieces of legislation put forward by the new Venezuelan government in 2001 was an agrarian law that placed the social use of land above the rights of private property and provided the legal framework for the expropriation of underproductive and underutilized lands. Following the advice of experts from La Vía Campesina, the Venezuelan government pledged credit support and assistance to small farmers as well as the repartition of abandoned lands. The Venezuelan government also established a plan to raise tariffs and support internal markets, funding producer cooperatives through the Ministry of Agriculture, measures which brought the government into direct conflict with the latifundista class.
During the first years of the agrarian reform lasting from the passage of the agrarian law in 2001 to the start of more radical reform measures in 2005, the National Institute of Lands handed out more than 300,000 land titles, mostly on already occupied land (Wilpert 2005). The heightened expectations and desire for land on the part of the campesino movement resulted in an increase in invasions and conflict during the period as more than two hundred campesino leaders were killed in targeted assassinations, which added to the kidnapping and murder of rural elites, contributed to an atmosphere of violence and insecurity in the campo (Robertson 2014). The Venezuelan President faulted the landowning class for the violence and deployed the national guard to rural areas.

In 2005, the Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez declared, “…wherever there are latifundios, the hand of the state must arrive to give the land to those who work it.” The statement was remarkable for several reasons. Aside from the blatant personification of the state in the assertion, suggesting the agency of the state was bodily in form and that the state was absent from the campo and had to ‘arrive’ from a point of externality, the statement ignored the material reality on the ground and the demographic revolution the society had undergone. The Venezuelan peasantry had disappeared from many rural areas and the interior was sparsely populated, raising the question of just how the government would give “land to the tiller” when there were so few tillers? Extensive rather than intensive enterprises, latifundios generally had few workers and even those that exploited rent had relatively few tenants occupying the acreage. There were not enough numbers to handle the acreage effectively and it appeared there was a basic contradiction in official policy—where would the labor supply come from? This government was more willing than any previous government in history to advocate the interests of the campesinado, but the irony was there were likely fewer campesinos than at any other time in modern history.
By the standard of twentieth century Latin American agrarian reforms, the first phases of the agrarian reform in Venezuela were moderate in character. But the agrarian reform law was a major factor for the coup that briefly deposed the Venezuelan government in April 2002, and a factor leading to the escalation of the reform into a confrontation with large landowners (Delong 2005, Wilpert 2005). Whereas previous governments in the twentieth century had been afraid to challenge the power of the landed classes and carry out large-scale expropriation of estates (see Ellner 1999 for discussion of populist agrarian reforms), the Venezuelan Government now openly confronted these elites.

In 2009, in one the most hotly contested areas in the state, I rode with INTI officials on an extension trip and they gestured to lands occupied by squatters. The owner of the estate had confronted the squatters with a shotgun and killed three of them, but the occupiers had managed to hold on and they were eventually awarded the land. The owner of the farm was brought up on murder charges and was rumored to be somewhere in Colombia. The functionaries spoke of the campesinos having ‘paid for the land with blood.’ The metaphor of sacrifice and the blood of campesinos would appear in other contexts.

In the political education materials prepared for the cadre of the ruling party, there was an article explaining the history of petroleum in Venezuela and its effects on society. The article, extracted from the work of the Venezuelan economist Bernard Mommer (1988), explained the effects of resource dependency and rentier accumulation on the social composition of society and the need to transition from rent capture. On the first page of the article was a depiction of a campesino—readily spotted from his distinctive, wide hat—nailed to a cross, which was formed from a pick and a hoe. On the facing page was another drawing, this one of a rig spurting crude
oil, in a juxtaposition of images whose message could not have been more straightforward (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela 2009).

The message was clear—petroleum had destroyed the peasants and like Christ these martyrs were suffering for the sins of the nation. They had given their blood in sacrifice for the Venezuelan people, but the wealth of the nation for which they had perished was now the cause of the moral decay of society. Like the return of Christ, the return of the peasantry heralded the rebirth of the nation and the ushering in of a new sovereignty or “kingdom.

In his classic study of the culture of Latin American capitalism, Richard Adams (1970) argued Guatemala was “crucified by power.” Effectively operating as a secondary sector of a wider US capitalism, he argued Latin American nations could not be allowed to resolve their own internal problems and establish independent economies outside the orbit of the US, for fear of disrupting the hegemonic power and wealth of the nation at the center of the system. The apt metaphor of ‘crucifixion,’ drawn from Christian theology, conveys the ways in which the nations of Latin America are made to sacrifice their own interests for the interests of another higher rationality, how such states which appeared to be sovereign in their own right are in fact reflections of the sovereignty of the United States. Likewise the image of the crucified peasant in Venezuela bears witness to the destructive effects of this pattern of development on society and the ways in which petroleum export linked to US consumption forces the nation to bend to an unyielding and uncontrollable power beyond its borders. Paradoxically, petroleum was not only conceived as the resource, which had brought about the destruction of the peasantry; it was also the resource that could bring about the return of the actors that could ensure sovereignty. Petroleum had destroyed the peasantry, but the resource could also resurrect it. By sowing the
oil, Venezuela could recreate the agriculture system and its sovereignty. But such efforts were dependent upon the petroleum economy, even in the case of peasant cooperatives.

**The Road to La Marqueseña**

Everywhere I traveled in Venezuela, the pattern was the same. The fertile valleys of the interior were taken up with large estates. In the interstices of these estates, where the less fertile soils could be located, were pockets of misery. The _ranchos_ or settlements of the rural poor were a steady feature of the landscape and the settlements in the vicinity of _La Marqueseña_ were no exception. Occupying the valley between the Masparro and Boconó Rivers and the ridges of the Andes to the north, the roughly 10,000 hectare estate was adjacent to _poblados_ which had existed since the 16th and 17th centuries.

The _poblados_ were the scene of battles between the liberals and conservatives in the 19th century and the source of a claim on _La Marqueseña_ by the great grandfather of Hugo Chávez. During the Federal War, liberal forces captured the area and one of the liberal leaders, Pedro Perez Delgado, was awarded the farm. But his claims were usurped after the war (see Tapia 2004 for a history). More than 100 years later, his great-grandson Hugo Chavez treated the seizure of the land as a way of settling historical accounts and winning the support of _campesinos_ who had long been waiting at its margins.
Agricultural Development Unit: Commercial seed bank “Pedro Pérez Delgado” established by the Ministry of Agriculture. Slogan reads, “Cultivating the Agro-industrial Revolution!”

In 2007, campesino activists told me the residents of the ranchos were “people without names.” By this they meant the rural poor were insignificant to the urban elite who regarded them as lacking historicity and relevance. This assessment was given credence by the fact that the poblados in the area created during the first agrarian reform did not have names. Instead they had been given numbers.

In the early 1960s, state experts with high modernist visions of orderly transition arrived in Barinas to measure the acreage for seizure. They mapped the future site of the peasant settlements and recorded the areas for parcels. Yet the reform efforts met with limited success, and campesinos were more objects than subjects. In 2007, it was the conviction of agrarian activists that by extending the gains of ‘the revolution’ to the rural areas, campesinos would win recognition and be re-integrated into the nation. As part of fulfilling this promise of agrarian citizenship, the Venezuelan government allowed the residents of the new cooperative to give it a name—Punto Masparro.
In 2007, I met Jose, an agricultural economist and functionary of the National Institute of Lands. Jose was the supervisor of the project in the vicinity of Florentino. He offered to take me to the settlement where a group of campesinos were waiting patiently “at the margins of the good land.” One of the residents came up to our truck and started talking to Jose about the progress of the project and when he could expect to relocate to the new area. Jose told him that he still wasn’t sure and that he would check up on the progress of the project that day. I recall my first visit to Punto Masparro and the extreme conditions in which the project was realized. It was an incredibly hot day and workers contracted by the state were shoveling gravel and mixing cement in the midday sun to lay foundations for houses. The houses were nothing more than rows of metal rebar protruding from cement blocks and the site was far from complete, but after inspecting the site, Jose was pleased with the progress—at least they had a foundation. Two years later, when I returned to the settlement in 2009, the housing was nearly complete.

Workers laying the foundation for the settlement in 2007.

Although the settlement still lacked some of the basic amenities (residents did not have running water yet and were forced to shower with buckets in a concrete stall outside their
homes), the houses were a notable improvement over their previous situation and there was at least some excitement about the project. Most of the families had moved in and although a few of the residents were still using their conucos or garden plots in the former location, the project was starting to take shape and look like a real community. Working with Jose, I got to know several members of the settlement as we started to help with sowing crops and efforts to bring the community in the market.

The first day of my second trip to Punto Masparro, I met a young man named Enrique who became my key informant in the project. Enrique was a heavy set and visibly Afro-Venezuelan had come out of the shower stall to greet us in flip-flop. He occupied a position of leadership. He was happy to have our help, irregular as it might be, and expressed his gratitude for our effort.

Over the next several weeks, we sweated a great deal to sow row after row of yams and corn. Later we uprooted weeds from around the fresh shoots of the plants. One day as we were laboring in the field, Jose picked up a clod of dirt and stated, “You see how black it is? How fertile it is? In Venezuela, we are ugly and black like the dirt,” he said. Made within earshot of
the members of the settlement, the remark was an attempt to flatter me and my racial origins, reifying the racial hierarchy he imagined I might accept or endorse and echoing the mestizo nationalism, which has played a central role in the Venezuelan national imagination and helped to establish social cohesion in the face of fierce material inequalities. The remark pointed up my racial difference as a means of closing social distance. Jose hoped to close the social distance between himself as the technical expert and the darker, more visibly Afro-descended, campesinos with whom he worked. Taking on the language of blackness, he distanced himself from my whiteness and in a form of self-deprecating humor tried to ingratiate himself to me and affirm our bond of friendship while and the residents. The targets of his message did not seem to notice, however, as they were more preoccupied with the work.

A few seconds later, Enrique seemed poised to repeat the performance when he held up what appeared to me to be a clod of dirt. Yet upon closer inspection, it became clear what he held between his fingers was a rather large insect and he cried out in the idiosyncratic Spanish of the llano, “It’s a bachaco!” A large, ruddy colored, insect shaped like an ant, the bachaco has a reputation for its voracious appetite and ability to destroy entire crops. Living in colonies underground, the bachacho would secretly eat the root systems of plants from below and the campesino, having sown row upon row of crops, would come up with nothing. Cracking open the insect at its abdomen and exposing the partially digested white material inside. “He’s been eating” Smiling briefly at his act of revenge and then fading as he pondered the ramifications. These might have been the most fertile soils in the state, but that did not make agriculture easy.

In the time we spent working in Punto Masparro, Enrique would say many things about his life and the struggles associated with this model of agriculture. He told me stories about his youth spent in the shadows of the great estate and the obvious disparity in his status and the
owner’s, which he had noticed from an early age. This was a disparity which he felt could not be justified. Enrique was aware of the inequality in the landscape and from a young age he sought to make sense of it. “I asked my father why the *latifundista* had so much land when we had so little and he told me it was because he had *un platero* [i.e. a large sum of money, literally ‘silver’].” Enrique did not offer much critique of his father’s explanation, but plainly the answer did not satisfy him and Enrique said he felt it unfair that one man should have so much land when so many others wanted just to have a tiny parcel of their own. Wealth alone did not justify the right of property in his eyes. He contested the right of ownership by those who failed to invest their labor or who failed to put the land to use entirely.

Although he was not entirely explicit and I later learned that Enrique was illiterate, his conception of property rights was straightforwardly Lockean (see Li 2014, Hetherington 2009). What he offered in effect was his own description of the idea of “sweat equity” and the notion that just property relations were based in labor. He was not explicitly echoing the official discourse of the social use of land deployed by technical experts, but rather a much older conception of right that coincided with the objectives of the current leadership. It was the age-old call of “land to the tiller,” which in his eyes justified the negation of the property rights of the *latifundista* and the distribution of his land. It was this conception which brought Enrique and Jose together as allies. But what crucially separated the concept of social use from the *campesino* conception of use was the creation of a surplus. This was the work to which Jose was devoted and which we later discussed that afternoon after retreating under the cover of a shade tree.

Discussing the problem of agriculture in Venezuela, Jose faulted what he saw as “a lack of continuity” in official policy. In his view, one government would start a project and then its successor would head off in another direction, leaving the first project incomplete. This was the
reason why the nation never seemed to advance and it was this concern which shaped his
evaluation of the project. He was critical of the current leadership and its ideological pretensions,
saying, “If socialism means solidarity, equality, and collective work, then no, this is not
socialism.” But at the same time, he was forced to acknowledge that the present government had
followed through on its promises and in this regard, it was exceptional. It had made good on
pledges to complete the agrarian settlement and he had seen tangible results. His support for the
Venezuelan leadership was won, not so much with idealistic slogans and rhetoric as with visible
improvements.

While social solidarity might have been desirable, what was more important from Jose’s
perspective was the fact that the Venezuelan leadership was articulating was a conception of
development that allowed experts to utilize their skills and following their advice. The
Venezuelan leadership might not be transforming social relations in a fashion in step with
socialist ideals, but it was turning petroleum revenue into agriculture projects. In this
conversation, Jose would introduce me to a refrain that I heard throughout my fieldwork “At
least this government [este gobierno] has a vision.”

In contrast to the governments of the 1980s and 90s, which regarded the chaos of
austerity as a necessary evil, and at their most utopian, as a spur to creativity on the part of the
Venezuelan people, tecnico like Jose regarded the unregulated market as the source of their
woes. These experts were extremely reluctant to leave society to the whims of the market, and
opposed the deflation of the public sector. In their eyes, a vision of self-regulation was
essentially no vision at all. Unlike the previous leaderships, however, Jose felt the new
Venezuelan leadership had an analysis of where society had gone wrong and how to get it back
on track. The leadership was forging ahead on a road that could lead out of stagnation, and this road as it turned out was both figurative and literal.

Next to the settlement was a large sign which read, “We Are Constructing the Road from Boconó to La Marqueseña.” This sign erected by the Institute of Rural Development was evidence that the new leadership was working to make a vision of rural–urban integration a reality. For me the sign had strong historical resonances, referencing the site of the 19th century coffee boom in the Andes and a focal location of the current agrarian reform. The sign embodied a convergence of two different historical trajectories of Venezuelan agriculture. The two trajectories, one based on the export of coffee and the other based on the cattle ranching had merged together or met as part of the transition to an endogenous agriculture system that radically departed from both. Yet the sign had no such resonances for Jose, however.

When I tried to explain what I regarded as the significance of the sign, Jose and his colleagues looked at me with rather confused faces (likely because their knowledge of coffee was limited to aspects of cultivation and marketing strategies). Nevertheless, they explained to me that the road would be used to facilitate the transport of agricultural surplus out of the region to the centers in the coast. The infrastructure would make the projects in the area viable and provide an outlet for the harvests. It seemed to me far more likely that the road would be used by the large state enterprises in the area and that only the state enterprises could justify such an expenditure. Regardless of its intended use, the effects of petroleum could be felt as part of this road project. Jose told me the project had been halted for lack of funds and the price of petroleum had dropped well below the sixty-dollar-a-barrel yearly average required to maintain such projects. Even in their efforts to escape and free the nation from precarity, they were
dependent upon the use of the revenue of the resource for projects in a cycle that seemed to go on and on.

The *campe\-sino* actors the Venezuelan government valorized now had the resource at the heart of their operation and the settlement was embedded in an environment shaped by its exigencies. The scheme had carved off part of the acreage of La Marqueseña and converted revenue from the petroleum industry into more sophisticated producers. But it had not effected the modernization of agriculture in a fashion that I felt would guarantee the long-term success of the project, or the successful reproduction of peasants. Enrique and his comrades were certainly better equipped than before, and they were now in possession of a tractor and other tools that could lighten the burden of the work, but they were not integrated into the state marketing network. And when I asked the INTI functionaries why, they replied, “It’s because they are so small.” The settlement wasn’t large enough or didn’t produce on a scale that seemed to merit integration into the state run network, or so employees thought, and instead of selling to the state agrarian corporation, like the enterprises I will discuss shortly, they would instead sell on the open market and acquire cash from more entrepreneurial activities. The crops they were sowing
were already cultivated in the local area by larger well-established enterprises and they were not going to break into markets already ruled by these more efficient operations or likely fair well against foreign imports. The crops they were sowing were sufficient for their own needs, but they were unlikely to garner sufficient prices to turn a profit or generate a surplus large enough to make it worthwhile to transport the harvest out of the area. Jose was proposing a cattle project, since the price of meat was comparatively high and there was considerable pull in the area. But this required credit from the state bank and the project of course depended on his expertise.

The status of these campesinos as sturdy peasants depended on state aid and credit and I did not believe they could much endure without it. The only way they could be held in this ‘slot’ was with the resources of the state to raise productivity and access markets in the region. If these actors preserved the subsistence orientation that made them an image of sovereignty and self-sufficiency, they would likely fail to raise the yields required to feed the mostly urban society. If they increased their yields to feed other groups in society, it certainly entailed the loss of the egalitarian character that the leadership valorized and ironically, dependency.

In the absence of state subsidies, these actors likely could not help but fall back on other readily available sources of income and the oil rent circulating in society. These actors were caught or better, held in place by the credit of the state and as soon as these supports were removed, they would likely undergo a rapid transformation. I could already see a future for the settlement in the nearby area. The poblados founded as part of the first agrarian reform in the 1960s were no longer agricultural centers and residents were no longer engaged in agricultural activity (at least on any appreciable scale). They had retained their conucos or garden plots and this met part of the needs of the household. But virtually no one in the local area was living off their harvest. In most cases, residents had turned to work as taxi cab drivers or day laborers on
farms, which allowed them to more readily access the cash economy and a few of the residents were even working in the large agro-processing plants owned by the Venezuelan state. residents had also sold part of the acreage to people from the nearby towns, so they could construct houses on the land. The settlements originally numbered “1,” “2,” and “3” were now effectively small towns and this seemed a far cry from the objectives of the first agrarian reform and its vision of agricultural development, and I did not see why in a few decades or even less, the same scenario might not transpire at the settlement at Punto Masparro.

**Fordist Neo-Populism**

Across the road from the settlement, a radically different project was taking shape. In spite of all the rhetoric valorizing the campesino, the peasant was not at the center of the agrarian reform in Barinas and in spite of the money dedicated to projects like the one where Jose and I worked, the peasant projects were far outweighed by the money dedicated to large scale agro-industrial sites. The major focus of reform efforts in central Barinas was the construction of the Florentino enterprise on the grounds of La Marqueseña. The area allotted to the Punto Masparro settlement was only a tiny fraction of the land taken from La Marqueseña and a much larger portion of the estate was reserved for Florentino, which served as my fieldsite.

Conceived as the foundation of agrarian socialism in the area, Florentino was an unabashedly high modernist enterprise patterned after the factory-in-the field systems, which organized capitalist agriculture for most of the twentieth century. The enterprise was a massive project with a large fleet of tractors and heavy machinery to sow and harvest crops. The farm had a workforce of roughly four hundred employees to cultivate its extensive acreage. Florentino enterprise was also a ranching operation with large herds of cattle and a grazing scheme designed to maximize output per hectare (see Chapter 5).
Successive waves of modernization had attempted to implant this model of industrial agriculture in Venezuela. But the model had been a failure in virtually every instance where it was tried. Now ironically, this form of agriculture seemed poised to succeed, or at least take shape, in an era when global lending agencies had abandoned the idea of capital-intensive agriculture directed by the state as a development strategy. The model of agriculture favored by the Venezuelan leadership defied the neoliberal orthodoxy and drew upon the legacy of twentieth century agrarian reforms. Yet it was different in nature. It would be tempting to argue that Florentino followed the old socialist formula of state farms (see Verdery 2003, Humphrey 1983, Lewin 1991). But the Florentino enterprise was not a state farm in the classic sense of the term.

The farm operated according to a set of logics which were qualitatively different from the socialist farms of the twentieth century. Unlike the state farms of the past, Florentino was designed to earn a profit from the sale of its products and services, which would pay for its operating costs. The cost of cultivation, salaries, etc. would be paid for with this profit and any surplus generated would allow the project to expand. The project thus was an example of state supported capitalism, and in this regard it was not unlike the enterprises built by the Venezuelan military in the 1950s. Yet Florentino was more populist in terms of its rhetoric than its predecessor, and however incongruously, the logic of profit and socialism were brought together in an organic synthesis.

In describing the convergence of two formally opposed, ideological tendencies, Terry Byres (2004) has characterized the merger of the small-is-beautiful ethos favored by agrarian populists with the fetishism of the market by orthodox economics as “neoclassical neopopulism.” The populist belief in peasant agriculture as a radically egalitarian project, which
runs counter to the logics of modern capitalism (the tendency to separate producers from means of production, devalue their knowledges etc.), he argues, finds an unlikely ally in the neoclassical economist who shares the view that peasant agriculture is more efficient per acre than factory systems and that such operations are more flexible and able to adapt to changing conditions. This flexibility makes peasants the market subjects *par excellence* and the agents most likely to contribute to the expansion of capital in the rural areas. Yet because the livelihood of the peasant is allegedly more egalitarian (and we can now add, ecologically sustainable) than factory systems, the populist may find agreement with these sectors of capital on the need to restructure land tenure and displace certain rural elites.

Both perspectives are hostile to prescriptions which envision an end to peasant agriculture or systems based on the factory. One glosses the ideal agriculture model as “peasant socialism,” while the other glosses it as “capitalism-from-below.” Yet in spite of these terminological differences, the two converge on the right of producers to trade surplus on the open market and decide on the uses of land. The two only diverge with regard to the role of the state and how such a system should be promoted. While the populist sees the state as setting the terms for the commercialization of harvests and facilitating the process of cultivation, the neoclassical economist sees the state as more likely to hinder the operation of the market and threaten the rights of private property than promote the growth of agricultural surpluses. Similar logics of convergence were at work in the specific model of agriculture put forward by the Venezuelan leadership, although they embraced a different set of ideologies.

Writ large, the agrarian reform in Venezuela (or at least what I witnessed where I worked) could be described as “Fordist-neopopulism.” In this model of agriculture, the productive estates were to be left in the hands of private owners, while the property of foreign
corporations and unproductive *latifundios* would be subject to takeover. The Venezuelan leadership would use this land to set up state enterprises that served as control centers for the rest of the rural economy. As one such center, Florentino, in addition to its own productive activities, acted as a liaison for farming groups in the local area. The populist or neo-narodnik line, thus, was not entirely counter-posed to the large-scale, factory model favored by agrarian modernizers. Instead, the two models were conceived to work together.

The technical experts in the state enterprises would supervise the production of peasants in the local area and where possible, support efforts to expand cultivation and take advantage of economies of scale and higher yields that could come from wider cooperation and efficiency. The state would provide guaranteed markets to farmers in the larger projects that raised the right crops and followed guidelines laid out by experts. The enterprises would also provide the mechanization for the harvest as well as delivery to the processor. The units which were incapable of reaching the levels of productivity set by technical experts (such as the settlement at *Punto Masparro*) were still given aid, but they tended to stay a little above subsistence level only marketing surpluses episodically. These newly enfranchised holders could only survive as active surplus producers as long as they were in a stable relation to the state enterprise, which was responsible for buying, processing, and marketing the harvest. The large-scale farm where I worked was thus the anchor of the new system in the state and this farm, together with other state enterprises, were the centers of gravity for the agrarian reform, a status reflected in the workforce.

State enterprise workers were paid significantly higher wages than workers in the private sector and they were also given benefits associated with capital-intensive industries, such as healthcare, insurance, and medical leave. The state enterprises did not have unions as in the
classic Fordism (of course neither did Ford for much of its history) and the discipline imposed on
the labor force could be a source of friction in day-to-day operations. But the discipline was
directed, at least rhetorically, at aiding the small peasant producers in Barinas and feeding the
nation. The project was populist in the sense that the mass of rural people were regarded as part
of *el pueblo*, the subject of the struggle for sovereignty, and Florentino allegedly instantiated the
will of this subject. But the leadership was never entirely reliant upon the actors it claimed to
support.

Inserting the state into the land tenure structure in the area, the Florentino managers
effectively replaced the *latifundista* and many of his former functions. Leaders could argue they
were supporting *campesinos* and giving “land to the tiller,” while at the same time converting the
largest allotments into enterprises under the control of state experts. The leadership had retained
the redistributive aspect of populism, but yield was critical, and the food production of the state
enterprises served as a safety valve for the food security of the urban areas (see Chapter 4). They
were able to give land to *campesinos* which was not being used productively while keeping the
lion’s share. In this sense, the rhetorical construction of the *campesino* had changed and there
was no longer a silence around the Venezuelan peasantry. But the geometry of power in rural
areas was not radically altered.

**Conclusion**

This chapter uncovered the grist for the structures of feeling around the Venezuelan peasantry
and the cultural images which tied the figure of the *campesino* to Venezuela’s major natural
resource. It explored the social and economic factors which allowed certain motifs to articulate
the interrelationship between peasants and petroleum and the ideas Venezuelans had about them.
These structures of feeling shaped popular conceptions of modernity and progress as well as the narratives used by the political leadership in the twenty-first century.

The chapter made sense of the return of the peasant in the form of official rhetoric valorizing the *campesino* and projects designed to revive peasant agriculture. But the chapter also underscored the gap between the stated objectives of the agrarian reform and the reality of much of its work in the campo. The rhetorical devices and images used to justify the revival of the *campesino* were populist in nature, but they were also used to justify an agrarian reform, which was in part redistributive and in part concentrating land in the hands of the state. Lastly, the chapter explained the social factors which made petroleum a sign of dependency, and the *campesino* an image of sovereignty at the start of the twenty-first century.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the Venezuelan peasantry which had once symbolized sovereignty was displaced in favor of petroleum with the rise of the rentier state and the move from an agricultural economy based on the export of coffee to export of fossil fuels. The tension between peasants and landowners, which had typified social struggles in most parts of Venezuela, was displaced by the tension between the petrostate and the recipients of its benefits, leading to the rise of other actors as the engine for social change.

Believing oil or its nationalization would bring them prosperity, Venezuelans increasingly regarded the resource as the foundation of the nation and its sovereignty. Petroleum certainly brought material progress, but critical tensions in the petrostate destabilized the modernizing images associated with the resource, allowing the suppressed image of the *campesino* to return. In the early twentieth century, peasants and petroleum briefly existed alongside one another. Yet by the mid-twentieth century, the two were caught in a dialectic which prevented both from embodying the standard of progress and basis of capital.
accumulation. In the late twentieth century, the structures of feeling shifted again and the largely forgotten peasantry returned as the subject of the nation and the bearer of sovereignty in the twenty-first century.

For many urban Venezuelans, however, the return to a peasant lifestyle could only be grasped as historical regression or a return to the past. The inevitable decline of the peasantry posited by modernization theory and supported by cultural images in the twentieth century suggested any attempt to revive these actors was at best quixotic, and at worst, a policy which should actively be resisted. The fright infecting sectors of the urban elite at the prospect of “a return to the countryside” was palpable and dire predictions of forced relocation filled the Venezuelan media. But these elites failed to appreciate the role of the *campesino* in the architecture of official discourse.

The word *campesino* did not just mean ‘peasant’ in the rhetoric of the Venezuelan leadership. It was a claim to a past before the disorders of the petrostate and a future without dependency as much as the valorization of a particular lifestyle. It was an image of the fellaheen peoples and the fellaheen nations of the world, taking hold of the reins of history and altering their destiny. Yet while the Venezuelan leadership sought to use this image to justify its policies, leaders also knew they could not depend on these actors to achieve their productive objectives. Caught between its discursive necessity and its weak demographic status, the *campesino* was what we might call “a rhetorical reality.” It was “a contested image in the ideological construction of the present” (Roseberry 1989).

When juxtaposed with the rigid constraints of the petroleum economy, the *campesino* was an image of flexibility which served to ground a narrative of transition and redirection of capital to rural areas. But the resilience of this figure was not critical to the overall success of the
agrarian project. The goal of integrating the peasantry into a coalition capable of challenging the oligarchy was a key motivation for the provision of aid to these groups. But improving the technical capacity of campesino groups might entail the loss of the character which made these actors relatively egalitarian, and which substantiated the rhetoric of the leadership. xxxix

Yet in spite of these tensions, the Venezuelan leadership persisted with its narrative of return to the countryside and declarations that it was making a campesino revolution. The leadership was striving to reverse the historical trajectory embodied by the Juan Bimba stories, and the narrative of progress which had made an urban society based on oil the only conceivable future for the nation. Yet as it turned out, the leadership would have to rewrite another narrative to justify the restructuring of the petrostate and the formation of a subject capable of achieving its goals.
Chapter 2 The Devil and Florentino

In the fall of 2006, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez grabbed news headlines around the world with a now infamous speech to the United Nations. The speech was the culmination of a war of words between the US and his socialist government, which had brought the two nations to the brink of open strife, amid a more general breakdown of diplomatic relations. The row between the states had taken on an especially personal dimension in the form of an acrimonious fight between the two leaders, US President George W. Bush and Chávez. The two sides regularly traded accusations that one or the other was destabilizing the region. The US President accused Chávez of stifling democracy and supporting terrorism as evidenced by his choice of Middle Eastern allies, while Chávez accused Bush of flirting with dictatorship and masterminding the coup that sought to oust his democratically-elected government from power four years earlier. With each side faulting the other for the escalating rhetoric, the two leaders seemed to be headed for an inevitable clash and an actual war appeared increasingly likely.

In late September 2006, the two leaders were scheduled to speak at the same session in the United Nations General Assembly, bringing the row to a head. President Bush spoke of the American campaign for democracy in the Middle East and the prospects for political change in the region. Portraying the United States as the universal defender of human rights and civilization against what he called “the enemies of humanity,” the US President sent a clear warning. He suggested that while “freedom” could not be imposed from without, he was prepared to use force against opponents of the tide of democracy sweeping the region (CNN 2006). The controversial US invasion of Iraq three years earlier seemed to confirm the threat of military action and likely served to intimidate opponents of US plans. But any pretensions to
universal consent for Bush’s project were shattered the next day when the Venezuelan leader was given the opportunity to speak.

Speaking at the same podium where Bush had spoken the day before, the Venezuelan leader declared that the imperial ambitions of the United States were a threat to the survival of humanity and he professed pity for the American people because, in his words, “the devil is in their house.” Leaving no doubt as to the intended target of his remark, he elaborated further, saying “the devil was here yesterday,” and that he had left a lingering “smell of sulfur” (Stout 2006, Pilkington 2006). His remark garnered a mixture of laughter and applause from the audience, indicating a lack of consensus for the US project in the Middle East. Composed mostly of former colonies and dependent nations, some UN delegates seemed to tacitly agree with the charge that the US was an imperial power bent on pillaging and exploiting the world (Jackson 2006).

In the ensuing media frenzy, the reaction of many North American writers was to portray the Venezuelan leader’s “tirade” as the ravings of a madman. They interpreted Chávez’s reference to an odorous devil as evidence of his irrationality and the danger he posed to the world. Several newsmakers wondered aloud if the Venezuelan leader might be unstable and insinuated not so subtly that he should not have been allowed to speak. The media coverage around the event was highly charged and sensational, directing attention to the leader and his nation. But the broader message of the Venezuelan President against US intervention and the need for reform of the UN tended to be lost in the fixation on his words. The US establishment was quick to brand Chávez “a tyrant” and “a thug” and US Senator Tom Harkin declared Chávez’s speech “incendiary,” while former President Clinton called it an act of “personal
demonization” (MercoPress 2006). Yet these appraisals, while ironically accurate, nevertheless missed the point.

Even liberal commentators less than sympathetic to the Bush administration and its petro-adventures abroad were similarly unsure how to respond to the hyperbolic claim that he was in league with the devil, if not his direct incarnation. The few journalists who could acknowledge the democratic credentials of the Venezuelan President suggested that he could only have been elected by an equally irrational nation (e.g. Zuckerman 2006) and as if to defend the claim, television news reports flashed footage of Chávez speaking to throngs of supporters from a balcony in the capital Caracas, where delirious crowds showered him with adoration.

The readiness of North American media outlets to pathologize the Venezuelan leader and the nation he represented is indicative of a wider problem with the colonial gaze on the region. Subjected to a continual process of “othering,” the peoples, nations, and discourses of the developing world are routinely presented as the irrational opposites of the developed north/west. From the perspective of the US media, Chávez fit the template of ‘insane third world dictator,’ a stock trope more than sufficient to explain the strange speech. This was hardly the first time cultural particularity or idiosyncrasy was mistaken for insanity. As if reading from a prepared script, the US media generated caricatures that allowed for easy comparisons with the Ayatollah Khomeini and other obscurantist leaders who had satanized the United States, figures they judged were not ready for modernity or primetime for that matter (Schoen and Rowan 2009: 8-9 et passim, Sayre 2006, Luhnow and Cordoba 2005, Daily News 2006). Lacking any interpretive framework except madness or the irrationality of populism, the US media coverage left the underlying meaning of the speech obscure. No journalists paused to investigate what the appellation “devil” might actually mean in the cultural context of Venezuela or how the sign
related to the friction between the two leaders (for an analysis of the portrayals of Chávez in US media, see Boykoff 2009). To the extent the analysis was superficial and the grievances of developing nations were off stage, the speech was largely inscrutable to US audiences. But I suggest if they had bothered to dig a little deeper, they might have found the meaning.\footnote{xl}

In this chapter, I explore the use of the devil symbol in Venezuela to explain the negative effects of the resource sector on society and the fraught position of the nation-state in the global system. Long a part of Venezuelan culture, the devil is not only used to castigate foreign leaders, but also to articulate a widely perceived degradation of the society and its values. Yet while the sign is used to identify a disorder supposedly afflicting the society, it is also used to focus critiques of the petrostate and a caste of elites tied to the capture of rent. As the basis of a peripheral nationalist discourse which seeks to identify the actors responsible for the lack of sovereignty, the devil is an effective sign of the oligarchy for the populist leadership and a way of coalescing a subject capable of displacing this elite. This discourse recognizes the defects of the nation, but it also holds out hope for their eventual overcoming as part of a program of transition. It unifies the social groups most affected by the decline of the social state in the twentieth century, counter-posing the devil to a virtuous figure in a legend, as part of a battle of good versus evil. Yet for all its power, the devil symbol is not univocal.

To explore the multi-valence of this sign (Volosinov 1986) and the factors which allow it to mediate the destructive effects of the resource sector, I enter into dialog with the classic studies of the devil in Latin America (Nash 1979, Taussig 1980, Harris 1989, Crain 1991, Edelman 1994a, Nugent 1996) as well as more recent studies (e.g. Lizardo 2009, Cañizares-Esguerra 2006, Gregory 2006, McNeish 2013) to deconstruct the feelings of turpitude, which haunt the national psyche. Drawing on a series of interactions with Florentino workers and their
insights into the daily life of the enterprise, I evaluate social critiques that deploy the devil sign in ways that diverge from its use by political elites. It is a divergence, I argue, that offers critical insights into the character of subaltern consciousness, and is therefore worthy of sustained attention.

My interpretive stance is close to what Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1993) has called “critical relativism,” a stance which seeks not only to grasp the worldview of informants—the stance of cultural relativism—but also to expose the limits of cultural knowledge as a way of contesting inequality. It is a perspective which allows me to bring the ideas of Florentino workers into dialog with elite discourse to grasp the role of the fetish in Venezuelan culture. In the chapter, I first trace the history of the metaphor of the devil in relation to the rise of the petrostate; then I present the logics which ground the Florentino enterprise in a mythicized story whose spectral figures justify the seizure of the latifundio upon which it is built. I then suggest the story is redeployed as a narrative of the erasure of social conflict, but that the workers’ feelings about Florentino often clash with this ostensible transcendence. Last, I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the parallels between the global theory of the resource curse and the local Venezuelan iterations of the discourse to resituate the clash of President George W. Bush and Chávez at the UN.

The Smell of Sulfur

During my first few weeks in Florentino, I used my position as a foreigner to get to know the workers and ask questions about daily life. In an effort to grasp the ideals of the workers and allow them to present themselves in what I figured would be a favorable light, I asked what the typical Venezuelan was like. I was surprised by the reply that the typical Venezuelan was ‘a malandro’ or an anti-social criminal who cared only for his own interests, and who was willing
to harm others to secure them (see Ferrándiz 2003, Vargas-Arenas 2006, Samett 2013). As it turned out, crime and violence were frequent topics of discussion among the Florentino workforce and it was not unusual to hear the various ranks of the enterprise describe Venezuelans as “natural-born criminals” [delincuentes por naturaleza] or apply the language of street crime to government officials, with workers saying they had “a gangster government” or un gobierno de malandros.

Outside Florentino as well, I was struck by how often I heard disparaging and deprecating remarks about the nation and its people. Anywhere people gathered to talk, in places like neighborhood cafes, bars and bodegas, you could hear the aspersions cast: Venezuelans are malicious, Venezuelans are lazy, and este país es una mierda—“this country is a piece of shit.”xli

In contrast to the stark and unwavering patriotism I had grown up with in the United States, epitomized by slogans like “My country, right or wrong” and “If you don’t love it, leave it,” nationalist feeling in Venezuela seemed shot through with a deep ambivalence. Indisputably, Venezuelans had a strong sense of national pride and identity, but this feeling was accompanied by a great deal of negative sentiment. Disparaging and deprecating remarks were not just directed at particular individuals or a political system badly in need of reform. They were critiques of the society as a whole, and a corruption imagined to have penetrated to its very depths. These critiques of moral depravity and social degradation, I discovered, kept returning to two central motifs: sin—whether of original or more recent vintage—and excrement. These two motifs themselves seemed to allude to the geology of the nation.

In the early afternoons, a misty fog rose from the rivers and streams in Venezuela as the incredible heat of the tropical sun warmed the waters flowing over its ancient bedrock. Exposing layers of sediment long trapped beneath the surface, the evaporating water released an unpleasant
odor into the air and Venezuelans often remarked on the smell. At first I did not give these statements much thought. Treating them rather literally, I had not taken them as objects for cultural analysis. But I eventually realized allusions to the odor were evidence of a deeper disquiet. With high crime rates giving rise to a general feeling of insecurity glossed as la inseguridad (see Briceño-Leon et al 2009), it is not surprising the Florentino workers mobilized a discourse of the loss of values as the source of the instability. Workers professed the belief that you could no longer trust “the man on the street” and that the bonds of familiarity which had characterized the nation had been lost. Indeed, Venezuelans counted the breakdown of the traditional family and privations endured by the nation as a result of the economic crisis as potential causes of the insecurity. But workers also suspected that it was not just survival or broken families which drove the wave of crime.

Several months into my fieldwork the story of a local cab driver attacked by a group of toughs scandalized the local area. It was not the robbery itself which was so shocking, as such crimes had obviously happened in the past. Instead, it was the blatant disregard for the life of the driver that was viewed as so onerous. Not only had the youths robbed the driver, they had also used him as a shield in the ensuing altercation with police and both the robbers and victim were killed in the incident. It seemed the life of the driver mattered little and equally valueless was the life of the malandros in the eyes of those demanding law and order. As a friend of mine stated rather matter-of-factly in the wake of the incident and after viewing the latest photos of thieves shot down in a nearby town: “The life of the malandro in Venezuela is short.”

In spite of the high rate of attrition associated with the malandro lifestyle, the ranks of these deviant subjects seemed to growing as a wave of kidnappings, robberies and home invasions swept the nation, even reaching the rural areas long imagined as oases free from the
violent social problems of the city. Every few weeks a tragic incident occurred in the area near Florentino, often touching directly upon the lives of the people in the farm (as in the case of one young woman I knew whose brother was killed by police after a failed robbery). During my fieldwork, local newspapers also ran such grisly headlines as “Jilted Lover Stabs his Ex-Girlfriend to Death,” “Gang Members Involved in Shootout” and “Drug Traffickers Die in Hail of Police Bullets,” calling into question the widely stated notion that the campo was mas sáno—or “safer” [literally ‘healthier’] than the urban areas.

Given the frequency of such events, it was hard not to suspect something was wrong with Venezuelan society. It was even harder not to suspect something was wrong with the government when nearly every month a high ranking official was found to have been laundering money or charged with extortion. The more time I spent in Venezuela, the more I realized why so many people felt the nation was forsaken or why they used such harsh language to describe their society. But I had yet to put together all the signs as part of a semiotic system which could be used by leaders to gain consent for their agenda. This would come later as the result of one key incident.

One afternoon I was riding with one of the truck drivers in the Florentino enterprise, when we drove over a small stream. As we crossed the waterway, the driver turned to me and said, “Do you smell that?” I did not have to stick my head out of the window to catch the odor on the air. “It’s sulfur,” he said. “Our whole country smells of sulfur.” The slightly pained look on his face and the mix of guilt and shame it conveyed signaled to me his intended meaning. When taken in light of our previous conversations, it was clear to me this was an invocation of the idea of sin and an explicit linkage between the odor and the state of the nation. It was clear that he equated the moral decline of Venezuela with its geology, if not as a direct causal factor, at least
as evidence of a strong linkage between the two. It was then that I began to take more seriously the idea of a nexus between the various cultural motifs deployed by the people in Florentino and the effects of petroleum on Venezuelan society.

Stretching from the mouth of the Orinoco in the east to Lake Maracaibo in the west, the oil reserves of Venezuela are the remains of ancient, Paleozoic swamps that yield a heavy, sulfur-laden crude. This oil requires a great deal of refining to make it commercially viable and the refining process generates gases that have to be burned off to prevent explosions and fires. The rigs of PDVSA, the state oil company, can be seen working twenty-four hours a day, eternal flames, as they spew exhaust into the air.

It is easy to detect the smell of sulfur miles before arriving anywhere near the extraction zone and whenever one comes within a few meters of such sites the gases cause eyes to water and noses to burn. The chemicals used in the industry, including mercury and phosphorous, are also destroying local ecologies and creating massive dead zones in the waters of Lake Maracaibo. The destructive quality of the extraction process is not lost on locals and the smell of sulfur it releases has a tendency to trigger certain images.

In a nation of Catholic and Evangelical Christians, the smell of sulfur has strong religious connotations and a widely diffused knowledge of scripture means the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are never far from mind. References to the Bible make their way into descriptions of the troubles of the nation and the destructive effects of oil and its distinct odor has fueled speculation that there might be a relationship between the nation’s wealth and the undesirable behavior of its citizens. I learned over time that many Venezuelans believed the nation had made a deal with the devil and sold its soul for wealth. The social and economic forces that bedeviled the nation and the depravity into which it had descended could be traced to metaphysical forces
animated by petroleum, a fact made all the more clear in light of certain occult aspects of the energy sector and the caste of elites associated with it.

The rhetoric of the elected leadership in Venezuela was laden with sulfur and devil imagery, and oil was treated as a deleterious substance which had led to the moral decay of society. In the words of the Venezuelan president, “oil was a curse,” which made Venezuelans “used to easy money,” destroying the will of the population to labor. The resource was at the center of the critique the new leadership made of its predecessors and in the eyes of the average Venezuelan, it appeared, however paradoxically, to be both the cause of the nation’s greatest virtues and its greatest ills. It is not unreasonable to expect that a thick black liquid pumped from the bowels of the earth would conjure ready associations with the underworld. But more work is required to show why the resource that is largely responsible for the wealth of the nation and its relatively high standard of living is depicted as a malevolent force and why it should be regarded as a tool of absolute evil.

The Devil’s Excrement

A universal figure in the syncretic folklore of Latin America, the devil has played a variety of roles, as it has been deployed by a variety of social groups, such as tin miners, indigenous campesinos, plantation workers, and tourism agents to name just a few (see Handy 1984, Nash 1979, Taussig 1980, Gregory 2006, Gordillo 2004, 2002). Anthropological analyses of the devil have sought to explain how the sign comes to host certain affective associations and how the sign mediates social practice. One interpretation of the sign is that the devil mediates the destructive effects of capital accumulation and the dislocation which results from the emergence of capitalist relations of production and exchange (e.g. Nugent 1996, Taussig 1980, Nash 1979, Edelman 1994a).
Along these lines, Steven Gregory (2006) provides a deft analysis of the seductive allure of the commodity and the will to profit in his work, *The Devil Behind the Mirror*. Drawing on a local Dominican metaphor, Gregory argues that the pledge of foreign capital to deliver improved standards of living in the global south can be likened to narcissistic engagement with a mirror in which the nations of the developing world are transfixed by the image of wealth in the global north and these nations imagine their futures to be reflected in this mirror. The surface offers idealized visions of the future of the developing nation, which do not correspond with the reality of the market, and when the projects sponsored by foreign capital fail to deliver the anticipated results, the devil is found to be lurking under the surface.

While critically instructive, the analysis of Gregory and those of the other scholars cited above are nevertheless specific to their own ethnographic contexts, and should not be over-generalized. An analysis of the devil symbol in Venezuela has to be situated in its own social, geographical, and historical milieu, and it cannot be divorced from the specific set of relations to which it refers (Roseberry and O’Brien 1991, Nash 1993, Nugent 1996). Such a situated analysis in Venezuela not only affords insights into the dynamics of the petrostate, but also into points of friction in efforts to reshape it.

The history of modern Venezuela and what was arguably its most formative era, The Fourth Republic (1958-1998) were indelibly shaped by the rise of the petrostate. The start of commercial exploitation of oil in the early twentieth century had a deep impact on the mostly rural society, altering the culture of the nation. Prior to the start of exploitation of oil, the Venezuelan state had been chronically short of funds and unable to enact basic development programs (Coronil 1997). With the revenue of the resource, however, the Venezuelan state began to take on a new role in society, converting nation building into one of its major tasks.
 Previously availing itself of little foreign earned income, the Venezuelan state was able to increase its capacities with the rent and royalties paid by foreign oil companies, taking a leading role in society. Readjusting the value of the currency to facilitate the import of capital goods for the energy sector, the Venezuelan state expanded the public sector workforce with the revenue creating new livelihoods for its citizens. Instead of cultivating an industrial sector and creating a climate suitable for exports, however, Venezuelan leaders often used the value of the currency to raise the standard of living and purchasing power of the population and to create jobs in the service sector (for discussion, see Betancourt 1979, Randall 1987, Baptista and Mommer 1987).

The highly valued currency was a means of distributing rent in society, and other sectors of the economy tended to wither in the face of various currency manipulations undertaken to balance the energy sector with external market conditions. What industry existed was effectively crippled by foreign competition and efforts to preserve a viable agriculture sector faltered in the absence of tariffs and protectionist trade barriers. By the mid-twentieth century, Venezuela had become a massive rent redistribution scheme in which the average rate of return on investment in the non-energy sectors was far less than what could be obtained by investing in resource extraction (Coronil and Skurski 1982). The capital of society coalesced around petroleum, drawing other sectors of the economy into its logic.

As the Venezuelan anthropologist Fernando Coronil (1997) has argued, the petroleum industry created a regime of growth in which productive labor was not adequately remunerated and the circulation of capital absorbed the process of production as a mere phase of its motion. The regime of growth founded on the extraction of natural resources gave rise to an economy in which Venezuelans were able to attract cash with rent-seeking activities which yielded a greater return on investment than productive capital. This culture of “easy money,” to use the local
parlance, de-incentivized the use of land for agriculture. Its perverse incentive structures gave rise to a perceived indolence on the part of the nation. Yet the circulation of rent was uneven, and certain actors were better able to capture a portion of the surplus than others.

Facilitating the flow of capital and goods in and out of the country, a class of comprador elites derogatorily referred to as *escualidos* or “skinny whites” [literally skeletons] living in the urban coastal zones derived the bulk of its livelihood from this trade. Working on behalf of foreign corporations or importers, these elites held immense social prestige and enjoyed lavish lifestyles when set against the poverty of the rest of the nation. Often living abroad or traveling to cosmopolitan centers in Europe and North America, critics suggested these elites had set themselves apart from the rest of society, ignoring the inequality created by this growth model. As Arising alongside these elites was a group the protest singer Ali Primera termed *los millionarios de lombrices* or “the millionaires of worms,” a reference to the residents of the ranchos who lived in squalor and whose children died every year by the thousands from intestinal parasites for want of clean water.

The creation of the state oil company and the subsequent nationalization of the energy sector in 1976 gave renewed impulse to efforts to transition from resource extraction to a more stable model of economic growth. This model would putatively reduce stark inequalities in terms of access to the social surplus in the rentier state and create a more balanced economy. With the petroleum industry under national control, average Venezuelans hoped the state would ensure a more equitable distribution of the petroleum wealth and spread its benefits to society at large. Assuming a sense of moral duty or obligation to the nation would lead political leaders to act in accordance with the interests of the majority, Venezuelans anticipated a bright future (Coronil 1997, Calderón 1978, Coronel 1983: 169 et passim, Karl 1997: 161).
Released from their dependence on foreign technology and foreign expertise, Venezuelans would start to run the industry for themselves and strengthen sovereignty through investment in human capital (Boué 1993, Betancourt 1978, Randall 1984). A new generation of Venezuelans trained in geology and petroleum engineering would start to replace foreign experts in the sector and take control of production. Yet the ability of Venezuelans to replace foreign experts in the sector was often limited by the complexity of the operations and the time required to train professionals. It also became clear this caste of experts trained in European and North American universities was yet another caste inclined to take advantage of its structural position to take a cut of the social surplus.

The salaries garnered by experts and the status accorded to them distanced these actors from the rest of society in a fashion similar to the mercantile elites who derived income from rent, and rather than being drawn in, el pueblo was shut out of the state. The nationalization of petroleum wealth did not result in the democratization of its distribution to the extent envisioned, and the jobs created were not enough to absorb the surplus labor. To make matters worse, oil had even managed to corrupt the working class, the class leftists had long believed could deliver social change.

Closely allied with the ruling party, the trade unions in PDVSA, the state oil company formed a relatively privileged stratum that earned higher wages than the rest of society. This labor aristocracy jealously fought to preserve its benefits at the expense of the nation at large, serving as a brake on the growth of more radical social organizations. This bureaucracy also threw its support behind the nation-building project of the technocratic state and efforts to modernize society without restructuring property relations. In a drive comparable only to the dictatorship of the 1950s, the AD leaderships of the 1970s went on a construction spree as the
central state invested its ample resources in highways, bridges and other public infrastructure (Olivar 2004, Blanco-Muñoz 1983, Rodriguez 1984, Avendaño-Lugo 1982). The state also attended to the industrial base of the society, investing in mixed enterprises designed to elevate the level of national production. But in practice, the dependence on petroleum only grew.

The mixed enterprises were not terribly competitive in terms of their prices or efficient in terms of output, and in many cases the surpluses were disposed of in a fashion that served to sustain a caste of technicians and bureaucrats. Yet the inefficiencies of this form of modernization and the inability of the state to industrialize society were cloaked by the growth of an urban real estate and services sector tied to the circulation of rent. Overnight parts of Venezuela were converted into cosmopolitan centers as tall buildings and skyscrapers arose, seemingly from nowhere, in the capital and other major cities. The lifestyles of the new urban elites in these areas, sustained with little basis in productive labor or capital, excluded large sectors of the Venezuelan population who were the ostensible owners of the petroleum industry, but found themselves relegated to the social and geographic margins. The prosperity enjoyed by this sector suggested the model of growth based on resource extraction could be perpetuated indefinitely by recycling the surpluses of the sector into rent and interest-bearing investments. But not all Venezuelans were sure of the longevity of this model. Among the skeptics was the former Minister of Development, and architect of the petroleum industry, Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonzo.

In the late 1960s, Pérez Alfonzo had been one of the leading “prophets of petroleum,” extolling the virtues of oil and its potential to liberate Venezuela from underdevelopment (Coronil 1997). Yet by the mid-seventies, he had turned into one of its most vociferous critics.
and he coined a phrase that later became popular currency. In an interview given shortly before his death, he criticized the economic policy of Venezuela, declaring:

“Ten years from now, twenty years from now, you will see: oil will bring us ruin. It brings nothing but trouble. It hasn’t brought us any benefits. Look at all this waste, corruption, consumption, and public services falling apart—and debt—debt we shall have for many years. I call oil the devil’s excrement—we are sinking in the devil’s excrement” (quoted in Karl 1997: 5).

The unbalanced growth and debt upon which the economic model was founded were ultimately unsustainable and a decade later when prices dropped precipitously, his dire predictions came true.

At the height of the petroleum boom years from 1970-1980, oil had been called “a new religion” and social conservatives suggested it was worshipped like a false idol. Financing a fast paced, consumer society, oil had catapulted Venezuela into the fraternity of modern nations, turning the resource into a fetish of progress and development (Roseberry 1989). Petroleum was regarded as the blessing which had delivered Venezuela from its backwardness, and liberated the nation from poverty, ensuring its future prosperity. But the strange power of the resource and the path dependent form of development it engendered also led many Venezuelans to question whether they had power over oil or whether oil had power over them. As one observer wrote at the time, “petroleum has seeped into every pore and taken ownership of the nation” (Rangel 1969: 4).

As the debt with foreign lenders began to grow, Venezuelans started to question, who was in charge of the process of development and indeed who was the sovereign. Even as the nation was effectively mortgaged to foreign lenders and balance of payment problems grew to risky proportions, social elites in Venezuela no longer seemed concerned with the fate of the
average person. The wealth in their coffers grew, and the fact of growth was more critical than its structure or the type of wealth it created. The resource thus went from a blessing to a curse for Venezuelans, as society no longer seemed to be able to distinguish between wealth which advanced the cause of development, and wealth which retarded it.

In the aftermath of the social and economic crisis of the late eighties, the sign of the devil was increasingly used to describe the character of the petroleum industry, elites, and the nation they had left destitute. Having cast their lot with the resource, Venezuelans were viewed as having a deep seated, tragic flaw (Karl 1997) which made them susceptible to the lure of the trade. The oil industry had introduced the logic of gain into society at large and reordered its economy according to the logic of rent capture. Venezuelans in turn began to respond to its logics. Increasingly, Venezuelans equated the quest for this wealth with sin in everyday language and the ruin visited upon them was widely interpreted as the price for greed as Venezuelans began to refer to the nation and themselves as “shit” (Coronil 1997: 353-354).

After a drop in energy prices and declines in standards of living for the average citizen in the 1980s, Venezuela was regarded as having fallen from its pedestal and degraded itself for easy money. The devil’s excrement had unleashed a wave of instability and crime; the pride of the nation had indeed gone before the fall. By the early part of the next decade, citizens were searching for a savior and more than few Venezuelans viewed Hugo Chávez as a leader capable of extricating society from the morass of dependency in which it had been mired for several decades. He pledged to lead a revolution that had as its goal nothing less than the salvation of the nation, in every sense of the word.

**Populist Demagoguery**
At first glance, it may seem strange to argue that citizens who refer to their nation as “a piece of shit” are ardent nationalists. But the metaphor of the devil’s excrement and the character of nationalist discourse in Venezuela must be understood in light of the facets of peripheral capitalism and a nationalist imagination which is qualitatively different from the global north. Citizens of the global north are often accustomed to talk of the great achievements of the nation and pride based on a glorious past, which even if fictitious, foreshadows its present merits (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, Hobsbawm 1990, Gellner 1983). These merits in turn serve as evidence of the bright future of the nation and its status as a moral community (and its right, in some cases, to impose its vision on other nations). One can fault a portion of the imagined community for its defects, such as the specific government in power, certain social groups, etc. but the basic goodness of the nation is rarely if ever questioned (Anderson 1983).

Nationalism in peripheral states like Venezuela, while drawing on some of the same dynamics as nations in the global north, has a unique temporality. In contrast to the nations of the core, nationalist discourse in Venezuela compares the past and future potential of the nation with its present, which is less ideal. National-populist discourse frequently posits a period when the nation was pure before it fell from grace or was driven from the true path. Nationalists pledge to return the nation to this state and reaffirm its sacral imagery. This discourse operates on the basis of an existential conflict between the images of sovereignty from the history of the republic in the 19th century (e.g. the cult of Bolivar (see Coronil 1997)) and the status of the nation as an underdeveloped state whose present deficiencies stand in stark contrast with this legacy. The rhetoric used by the ruling party in Venezuela to coalesce a subject involved a delicate dance between affirming the moral nature of the nation and its sovereignty and the sign of its corruption and the inadequacy of the state. This tricky dialectic of being and becoming—the idea that the nation is debased, but could be otherwise—is the force that holds together the Bolivarian
political project in Venezuela and which suggests certain rhetorical forms.

In 1999, the Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez came to power swearing to reform the social policies that had generated instability and brought about the moral decay of society. Pledging to lift up the nation that many argued had descended into the depths of depravity, Chávez offered an account of the social-economic crisis of the 1980s which castigated the caste of elites associated with the petroleum economy, and held them responsible for leading the nation astray. One of the major themes of Chávez’s rhetoric was the failing of the state in relation to development and its relation to the rentier economy. The current state of affairs was a product of the lack of a clear path to sovereignty and a leadership willing to struggle for the unity of ‘the people’ against a segment of the society which embodied a foreign power.

He put forward the idea of founding a Fifth Republic that would represent a clean break with the past and the start of a new era. The idea of a new republic drew on long held ideas of secular time and the historical experience of four previous republics. The Fifth Republic would be distinguished from its predecessors—allegedly—by its fidelity to the ideals of democracy, popular sovereignty, and equality. But there were other, non-secular aspects to the ostensibly historical rupture.

During the first election campaign, Chávez targeted the graft and corruption endemic to the Fourth Republic, vowing to clean up the bureaucracy and rid the state of nepotism. But over time, it became clear his discourse of anti-corruption was more than just a promise of good governance or state neutrality. During subsequent election campaigns, it became clear his allusions to “curses” were not entirely secular. The project of establishing a new republic had religious overtones which emerged ever more clearly in the rhetoric of the leader as Chávez sought to establish a linkage between the resource economy and the ethico-moral state of the
nation. Indeed secular and non-secular aspects merged in his rhetoric as Chávez suggested oil incentivized logics which caused the decay of society and a devaluation of labor.

“…the oil was a curse because it made us used to easy money. Pérez Alfonzo said so in his way: ‘We are sinking in the devil’s excrement.’ We became used to easy money. Insert a tube—an oil well—and sell it. Almost all the income of the nation has come from this avenue...What does it cost to make oil? Nothing. Who makes oil? It is mother earth that makes oil. It is extracted with relative ease and after it is sold, we import everything—this oil-rent model was also imported. We have to put an end to this model…I will continue to call upon those true national business people, and it is the people that are entrepreneurial, “the people” are producers they are productive [el pueblo es productor, es productivo]…” (Noticias24 2010, my translation).

In addition to these satanic allusions, the President made no secret of his Christian faith and professed belief in God, making frequent references to the life of Jesus Christ in his weekly radio/television program. Listing Christ as a major inspiration for his ideology and “the first socialist,” Chávez’s millenarian message underscored “the redemptive power of the revolution” and described socialism as “God’s kingdom on earth.” Like the dialectic of redemption, in which the believer is afforded the chance for salvation through the acceptance of a sinful nature, Chávez suggested that the nation had sold itself to the oligarchy and by recognizing its failures the nation could be redeemed. However inadvertently, the message tended to cast Chávez in the role of savior and odes to the leader such as “Our Chávez who art in Miraflores [The Presidential Palace]” created by popular sectors provoked accusations that the President had a messianic complex. This rhetoric did not sit well with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, which historically supported the parties of the Fourth Republic and bristled at the President’s open courting of the forces of Liberation Theology.

In a highly publicized row, Catholic bishops castigated President Chávez for his policies, which they said ran counter to the teachings of the Church. The President responded that “providence” was on the side of “the revolution,” and also noted that Christ had been opposed by
the religious hierarchy of his day. The President, perhaps in retaliation, also later changed the 
official status of Venezuela from a Catholic nation to a secular one, making significant inroads 
with evangelical Christians (see Smilde 2007). Yet it is hard to argue that he was purely courting 
voters.

Venezuela has few of the Christian base areas found in Nicaragua and El Salvador and 
the influence of Liberation Theology in the country is far less than in neighboring Colombia. 
Thus it is unlikely the coalition with these groups would bring much in terms of support or offset 
the damage of standing up to the Church. The split, in other words, was more than an effort to 
garner the support of a specific sectarian tendency. Chávez was involved in a struggle with 
sectors of society who benefitted from the rentier state and its ideological supporters in the 
church. He was fighting to convert the territory of the nation to more productive and ostensibly 
virtuous, uses and Chávez described the recovery of land for agricultural usage as “a sacred 
duty” that would lead to the return of Christ’s kingdom *[el reino del verdadero soberano, 
nuestro señor]* a sovereignty which he suggested was “already in the people” (Noticias24 
2010).xlv Yet in spite of the inchoate nature of this sovereignty, there was still struggle and other 
interpretations of Venezuelan culture and history would come to the fore.

**The Battle of Santa Ines**

In 2004, the Venezuelan President faced a recall election led by the political parties of the 
opposition. According to a provision in the constitution, opponents of an elected official could 
petition for a recall of the leader from his or her office, if they obtained a sufficient number of 
signatures. In accordance with the provisions of this article, the Venezuelan opposition collected 
signatures and placed a recall measure on the ballot (see Hawkins 2010: 1-5, Riggio et al 2015). 
A period of intense campaigning began shortly thereafter. During the campaign for the special
election, the Venezuelan President described the battle of his party to stay in office as a “Second Battle of Santa Ines” (Rojas and Francisco Alonso 2004). The rhetoric was a reference to the historic battle of the Federal War (1859-1863) in which liberal party forces had defeated a much larger conservative army. Narrating the electoral contest through the lens of these historical events, President Chávez proposed that his political movement would defeat “the oligarchy” that had ruled Venezuela for most of the twentieth century and which had put the nation under the rule of evil forces. This oligarchy in league with foreign powers supported dependency. Hence, a vote for the opposition was a vote against the nation’s sovereignty and el pueblo. It was not difficult to demonize the opposition when they were associated with several coups. But efforts to obtain consent from the populus with appeals to the culture and history of Venezuela were not confined to the national level politics. These practices would shape the character of everyday life and indeed the very name of the Florentino enterprise.

A few days into my stay in Florentino, the devil began to make his first appearances. It was right before the federal elections in 2009 and the pro-government news media were busy demonizing the opposition, literally. News channels ran a series of television ads featuring pictures of opposition leaders who had tried to overthrow the elected Chávez government in 2002. The faces of the coup plotters were overlaid with images of blood in the streets and the caption of the last scene read, “The true face of fascism.” The faces of the coup plotters then morphed into a black bearded figure with an evil smile accompanied by the sound of devilish laughter, the classic image of Satan. The ad was very effective and sent a shudder through me. What better way to demonize the opposition, than to literally demonize them? At first I felt the television ads might have been cynical manipulation on the part of the ruling party, with ads inflected with Christian iconography designed to trigger an emotional response from a devout audience. Indeed, the ads might have been the work of savvy media experts. But there was more
to it than that. It was not just a cynical ploy on the part of the leadership: the ads were reflective of the logics of populism.

The word ‘demagogic’ has often been used in a pejorative fashion to describe populist discourse. Populism is frequently regarded as inherently divisive or giving rise to societal breakdown. Yet as Ernesto Laclau (2005) argues, however paradoxically, “…it is through *demonization* of a section of the population that a society reaches a sense of its own cohesion” (2005: 70, my emphasis). As I delved into the daily life of the Florentino enterprise, and the worldviews of the people who labored there, I began to realize that the rhetoric of the ruling party drew upon cultural signifiers that did indeed contribute to a growing sense of unity among its supporters. The use of the devil symbol was part of the work of forming a constituency for the new leadership and its populist sovereignty project as well as justifying the seizure of the land for the Florentino enterprise.

I had been waiting for some time to speak to Florentino’s social development manager, but he had been busy with his work. When I finally sat down with him, I still had some basic questions about the enterprise. One of the last questions I was able to ask in a long series of queries was about the significance of the name of the center. This was his hurried reply: “The enterprise is called Florentino because we are fighting the devil. Those devils—*Adecos* and *Copeyanos!*” *Adecos* and *Copeyanos* were partisans of the two parties of the previous regime which had coalesced into a formally unified, if fractious, opposition. Yet I did not grasp the linkage between the name of the center and the opponents of the leadership. As we walked to the door of his office, he could tell from the bewildered look on my face that I did not understand what he had meant and when I asked, “But who is Florentino?” He replied, “He’s a character from a legend. It’s a legend. You can go to the library and read about it.” He directed me to the
library of the enterprise where I found a copy of the legend in a small book on the shelves. My reading confirmed that more was going on with the devil than cynical politics.

Florentino and the Devil

The legend of Florentino y El Diablo appeared during the colonial period from the mixing of Catholic and indigenous cosmologies. Part of the oral tradition of the llanos, the legend was well-known by residents, but after countless retellings, the original author of the tale was obscure. The most celebrated version of the story was written by the poet Alfredo Arevelo Torrealba whose name graces the Casa de Cultura in the municipality where the Florentino enterprise is located. Known for his tales of magic and the supernatural, the work of Torrealba is said to evoke “the telluric soul of the llano” and the interaction of the allegedly enchanted landscape with its inhabitants (Acevedo 2007: iv). In this vein, Torrealba wrote two versions of the Florentino story in the form of a poem. The second and longer version of the poem was published in 1956 and has since become the standard version. Set to the traditional musical form, llanera, the tale is popular in the central plains and performed as part of competitions held in the region in which two singers battle against one another. Talented singers can secure fame and fortune for themselves with the greatest rewards reserved for those who can best improvise lyrics.

The legend recounts the story of a battle between Florentino, a llanero or rancher, who is also a coplero or singer of traditional music, and the devil. The tale is structured as a contrapunteo or duel between two singers in which one singer takes on the role of the devil and the other Florentino. The tale has a dialectical structure with each line building upon, or in some way negating, the previous line, until the tale eventually reaches its climatic resolution. The story opens with Florentino making his way home along a deserted path in the llanos. It is nearing
dusk and the sun is casting long shadows when Florentino stops to quench his thirst by drinking from a nearby spring. He casts his drinking horn into the water, but mysteriously draws back only sand. About this time, a dark stranger rides past on a horse saying, “Friend, if you dare, meet me in Santa Ines. I want to sing with you.” Florentino does not recognize the man as his face is hidden, but the stranger seems to know him and calls him by name. Since Florentino never shrinks from a challenge cannot refuse an invitation to sing, the duel seems fated and honor bound, Florentino walks to Santa Ines.

When he arrives in the pueblo, he sees the stranger standing in the doorway of a rancho, yet in spite of the recently fallen rain and the brush the man should have passed through, his clothes are clean and dry. It is then that Florentino realizes this is no ordinary man; it is none other than Satan and he has been challenged to a test of wits that may cost him his soul. The devil calls out to Florentino in the local creole greeting him as “catire,” meaning light skinned or fair-haired person. The devil, by contrast, is described in the poem as having “a black face” and “dark like an Indian,” reflecting the racialized terms of the colonial period and an encounter representing a battle of the metaphysical forces of good and evil. As the duel begins, the residents of the pueblo gather round to watch it unfold. In this test of wits, Florentino must answer a series of riddles offered by the devil without losing the rhyme scheme or beat of the music. The contest lasts all night until dawn, when with one last flourish, Florentino solves the devil’s final riddle and invokes the blessing of the holy trinity, offering a benediction to the saints and banishing the devil as the story comes to a close.

In Europe in the late Middle Ages, the devil was closely associated with nature and those who wandered too far from settled areas were thought to be subject to his influence. As Lizardo (2009) writes, “...those who left the protection of the primordial community and dared to wander
on their own were vulnerable to his influence” (615). In the colonial mind, indigenous people
were frequently associated with the forces of evil, and the occult properties of nature were linked
with the devil. In addition to the familiar identification of the devil with the underworld, the devil
was also thought to have an earthly kingdom (Pagels 1995) and the terrestrial realm was
conceived as a battlefield separating heaven and hell (Cañizares-Esguerra 2004). The devil
represented the inscrutable forces of disorder and chaos and those who rejected moral order were
thought to have fallen prey to his designs. Hispanic settlers in Venezuela likely brought these
ideas to the region and the struggle to Christianize the indigenous came to be viewed as a
struggle between civilization and savagery, as well as good and evil. Torrealba’s version of
Florentino y El Diablo more or less conforms to this interpretation and draws upon these motifs.

Florentino meets the devil along a deserted byway in the savanna, an area known to be
wild and untamed, but the devil brings him back to the pueblo, which we can infer is under his
sway. The devil appears as an indigenous person in the story, and the virtuous coplero (who is
light skinned) must vanquish the devil and banish him from the settled area. The story was a part
of the tradition of Barinas and it articulated many of the beliefs, values and fears of the
population. The story was a cautionary tale about wandering too far off the beaten path. It was a
story about the dangers of straying too far from the human community and it connected the
forces of nature with evil. Of course, the significance of the devil has changed throughout history
and the devil has taken on human motives such as lust, vanity and greed (Lizardo 2009).

The young Hugo Chávez who grew up in the area where the story was said to have taken
place was deeply impacted by the story and was said to have been able to recite the more than
350 lines of the poem. It was a story about the virtues of the less powerful and the ability of good
to overcome evil. The llanero was pure of heart and clever. Though far less powerful than his
opponent, he was able to defeat him. It was this aspect of the story that likely appealed to Chávez, and motivated him to name the center Florentino. But there was ambivalence here too.

The Venezuelan philosopher J.M. Briceño has suggested that the devil may actually represent the darker side of Florentino’s own nature and that the battle in the story rages inside him (2002). There is little in the poem to substantiate this view, but this interpretation fits nicely with the official reading of the story as well as the critiques offered by the workers of Florentino enterprise, where practices often seemed to be at odds with the center’s lofty goals. As Katherine Verdery (1991) has argued, socialist states have often mobilize ‘the folk traditions of the nations they represent as a way to win consent for their rule. The name Florentino in Venezuela became a metonym for the battle for the soul of the nation and the remolding of society, which the enterprise would help to secure. Naming the center Florentino referenced key social struggles and located the enterprise within them. It highlighted the role of agriculture and rural subjects in the redemption of the nation and made rural people virtuous agents in an historic bloc that could overcome the contradictions of underdevelopment. The use of the legend called upon a subject capable of overcoming petroleum dependency and contesting greed. Retelling the story was a way for the ruling party to win consent for its program and justify its battle with the social groups opposed to its policies.

In the legend Florentino, a rural Venezuelan, personifies the sovereign subject, pitched against a devil—a figure that menaces Venezuela from without and from within. Thus interpreted, the legend directed attention to the caste of elites holding the reins of power in society and to the petroleum industry that was responsible for its degradation. The state enterprises were spaces where both the soul of the nation and worker-subjects would be remade. The agrarian enterprises were recovering the land for more productive and virtuous uses, thereby
contributing to the battle against the evils of foreign dependency and the oligarchy. But from the standpoint of the subjects who labored there, the role of the state enterprise and the set of relations to which it gave rise were far more ambivalent, and this caused them to create a counter-narrative that deployed the devil symbol differently.

The Dancing Devils of Yare, Miranda Venezuela. UNESCO World Heritage Site. Source: http://venezuelanalysis.com

A Spiritual Plantation?

The year of my fieldwork at Florentino was one of the hottest on record in Venezuela. As one might expect of life on a farm, we spent a lot of time talking about the weather. The strange weather led workers to speculate about the cause. One of the truck drivers told me with apocalyptic flare that “God was burning the earth,” as prophesied in *The Book of Revelation* and that he believed this was the penalty for our sins. The conversion of the earth into a blazing inferno was the prelude to impending judgment. When I suggested that global climate change
and the burning of fossil fuels might have something to do with it, he dismissed my account out of hand, suggesting that my appraisal was correlative and superficial, rather than causal. Thus he could not take it seriously. It was merely the outward manifestation of a deeper wickedness on the part of humanity. In spite of our ontological differences, our conversations about the weather continued.

In addition to the general discomfort caused by the heat, there was also a growing concern that the state would have to start rationing water. In the center, workers circulated photographs of a church in the state of Táchira that had been submerged in an artificial lake. A dam constructed in the 1950s had flooded a small town, but the water level had receded so low that the formerly inundated town and its church were now revealed. Workers took this as an omen. The drought was also causing periodic blackouts in the local area since hydroelectric dams generated much of the electricity in the state. The blackouts and inability to guarantee power disgraced the ruling party, and frustrated all of us. I found writing fieldnotes at night was a fruitless exercise, as the lights would suddenly go out and leave me in the dark. With no real alternative, I would often walk out of my house and spend the night talking with the workers and security guards at the front gate. On many occasions, these conversations turned out to be a more productive use of my time.

Since I came from another country, Venezuelans were curious about my religious ideas. They wanted to know if it was true that people in my country did not believe in God or did not “have the same God.” Whenever I was asked such questions, I tried to avoid the issue of my atheism for fear of insulting them and losing access. I said I was from “a Catholic family.” But this ploy did not work well. One of the técnicos quickly surmised I was being evasive and responded, “your family is Catholic, but you are an atheist.” Some of the workers seemed to take
it as their goal to convince me not only of the existence of God, but also of ghosts, spirits and magic. Some of the employees were afraid of the center at night and swore they saw various “espantos” or spirits haunting its grounds. The cultural world of the llanos is filled with all sorts of intermediate figures such as saints, devils and demons, which seek to interact with the living, while moving between this world and the next (see Ferrándiz 2004, Montiel Acosta 2001). These figures are shared by indigenous belief systems, Catholicism and the increasingly prevalent evangelical Christianity. As workers were observant Catholics, evangelicals and practitioners of other syncretic belief systems that defied easy classification, the center was filled with stories of these forces and they entered daily life.

One of the most frequently sighted figures was la llorona. According to legend across Latin America, la llorona was a woman who killed her baby, either through drowning or with a stone and she was thereafter condemned to wander the deserted roads and caserios looking for her child. The spirit is thought to attack unfaithful husbands and fathers and I was told the story as if it happened right around that area. The woman was Venezuelan, or perhaps Colombian according to the workers. I had heard the story many times before in other parts of Hispano-America and doubted the veracity of the historical details on that basis, but there were several ‘sightings’ of the storied woman on the farm and the llaneros—the workers tasked with caring for the center’s herds—swore they heard strange sounds coming from El Bohio, an old indigenous dwelling on the back part of the farm.

One night the security guards raced to this part of the farm after receiving a call from the workers in the area who feared someone was trying to forcibly enter their bunkhouse. But when we arrived to the area, we found nothing. The workers swore up and down they had heard the sound of knocking on doors and tried to convince the security guards that the threat had been
real. Some of the guards were skeptical. My friend, the chief of security, was fed up with the
workers, but did not contest that they had seen something preternatural. Instead, he thought “it
was duendes” or dwarf spirits who live in tree stumps and crawl out of the rivers. Along similar
lines, one of the truck drivers swore he had seen witches flying over the sugarcane fields of the
neighboring state enterprise on the road to Sabaneta. He often passed through the area when he
dropped off workers at night and he pointed out the witches’ flight path.

At the security post near the headquarters where the guards and drivers gathered to eat,
talk and occasionally, clandestinely drink, I was talking with the workers one night when one of
them said offhandedly, “You know the farm is haunted?” I heard many fantastic stories including
stories of possession by the devil, of invisible bulls with “eyes like candles” that captured souls.
Since the bull could not be seen, it appeared as if a man was fighting for no reason. Captivated
by the eyes of the animal, the man would inexplicably fall to the ground and die. The most
fascinating story I heard was the story of the former owner of the estate. The estate had been
owned by Marquez del Toro, the father-in-law of Simon Bolivar; hence the original name of the
farm, La Marquesena. One of the security guards who was an avid reader of fiction novels and a
pretty good storyteller held me and the others entranced as he recounted the tale of del Toro and
his Faustian bargain. “This farm was owned by Marquez del Toro and they say he made a pact
with the devil. Every year he would sacrifice a slave, un negro, un indio—un obrero—to the
devil so he would make him rich.” His choice of the word obrero seemed more than incidental,
and I wondered whether he imagined a kindred relationship between these laborers and the way
he and others saw themselves sacrificing for the objectives of the Florentino project.

Del Toro was supposedly building a great palace in the farm, but one year he had failed
to make the sacrifice, so the devil withdrew his protection. Having broken the deal, the farm was
sacked by the Spanish in the War for Independence and the palace burned to the ground. Del Toro fled towards Barinas where, according to that night’s storyteller, he was captured and executed (the proper punishment for dealing with the devil and end to any Faustian epic). In reality, del Toro survived the war and spent the rest of his life in the service of President Jose Antonio Paez. But it was rumored del Toro had buried his fortune somewhere in the farm and the workers wistfully wished they could find it. Also, they claimed to see strange lights emanating from various points around the farm, which might be an indication of the treasure or one of the apparitions. Another theory stated that the treasure was buried in an area called Las Ruinas or “The Ruins,” which was now used to grow rice. I made an investigation of the site where the palace was alleged to have been constructed, but there was no trace of the structure or the treasure.

During my early months at the center, I heard a variety of stories about the farm and its history, but was not able to make any strong linkages between the stories and paranormal activities. I appreciated the stories in themselves and thought of them in terms of their interpersonal function, endearing informants to me and providing a break from the daily grind and boredom. They were entertaining and it was an enjoyable way to pass the time. More practically, however, the stories served to alert me to the presence of metaphysical mappings of the farm and its landscape, which linked to some historical facts.

Several months into my fieldwork in Florentino, I began to hear chatter about the farm and its history which threw a different light on the paranormal sightings. The farm had been used as a base of military operations in the late 1960s to combat the left wing insurgency in the area and a number of people were said to have been tortured or murdered on the grounds of the estate. As part of the campaign against the insurgents, a network of surveillance was set up which
resulted in the disappearance of several activists in a gruesome story of political repression. The group of young men had been drinking in a local bar when the owner overheard their conversation and judging it subversive, notified the authorities. The young men had left the bar before the police arrived, but three of them were later apprehended on the road in their car. They were taken to the military base at La Marquesena where they were tortured and murdered. Their car was later found abandoned in a remote part of the district. The memory of this violence persisted in the area and workers speculated that many more had been killed on the farm. They didn’t know exactly how many, but their deaths testified to the nature of “the false democracy of the Fourth Republic [i.e. the previous regime]” and more than a few workers thought the farm might be haunted by the souls of the dead men.

In the case of the murdered men, I was able to make a concrete connection between the sightings and actual events. But the devil was still a mystery. Whenever I talked with the workers about their religious beliefs, the existence of the devil was taken for granted. Of course the devil existed. But the ideas about where his influence could be felt varied a great deal and the most coherent devil narratives all seemed to come from above, i.e. from government officials, spokespeople and professionals. It was not really a narrative I saw coming “from below” and I did not hear a well-developed cultural critique of capitalism from the enterprise workers. Also, the sign did not appear to organize working class solidarity in any overt way as in other ethnographic contexts.

It made sense that intellectuals concerned with history and trained in sociology would have a strong grasp of the story of Florentino and how it related to the culture of the llanos. But when I asked some of the workers about the significance of the center’s name, they said Florentino was “a friend of the President,” “a revolutionary from the 1960s,” or simply, “a
legend.” The first two responses were good guesses, but they were incorrect, and the workers who knew the story of Florentino, as in the third instance, did not seem to make a strong connection between the legend and the center’s activities. When I queried them about the mission of the enterprise, these workers offered vague responses that they were ‘working for the nation’ or ‘trying to do something good.’ For all the political work the legend seemed to do at one level, the workers did not seem especially convinced of its ontological significance or able to articulate the meaning of the appellation. Among the various stories workers told me about the history of the center and its activities, there were no clear references to the devil or Florentino, until it came to the workers’ own status, where these figures took on a distinctive role.

The Wealth of Venezuelan Society

As Karl Marx (1867) suggested in his critique of political economy, survival in capitalist society requires an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the price and behavior of commodities. As he wrote in the opening chapter of Capital, capitalist society presents itself as “an immense accumulation” of these smaller, cellular units, making the commodity the fundamental structuring form of the mode of production and a natural starting point for analysis (35). My informants in Florentino certainly seemed to grasp this method (although they lacked formal training) and the commodity was the starting point for their analysis of society.

In Florentino, we spent long afternoons talking about the price of everything under the sun. The workers were eager to compare the prices of commodities in my home country with local prices and they were not satisfied until they had queried the price of nearly every item they could think of. The workers would pull up an old bench near my house at the front of the farm, and I would sit with them, talking and listening for hours about what they wanted to buy, what they were waiting to purchase, or what they had already secured. All too often, I had no
knowledge of the items that interested them, and it became clear we had a very different awareness. The awareness of the workers was not restricted to consumer goods. Indeed, I marveled at their knowledge of the workings of the capitalist economy writ large. Average workers without much formal education were able to offer elaborate discussions of the relationship between the price of petroleum and the value of the national currency, why purchasing power fluctuated against the price of the resource and how wage increases had the potential to create internal markets for domestic manufactured goods, if coupled with proper trade policy. Although the workers did not use such terms, I heard clear presentations of the concept of ‘effective demand’ and ‘the multiplier effect,’ as well as macro analyses which would have satisfied any Keynesian economist (and which were clearer than the analyses offered by most college students in North America). How could workers who were often functionally illiterate have such a clear awareness of the behavior of the capitalist economy and its exigencies?

Writing of the case of Bolivian tin miners, June Nash (1979) argues that the acute understanding miners have of their place in the world is owed to their position in “the international exchange setting” (xxxiii). Their knowledge of the effects of the capitalist economy is a direct result of the way in which it impinges on their daily lives and the specific effects of the global market in the periphery. These workers at the end of a global chain of value in which the nations of the global north take surplus from the global south by way of the price of exports and the shifting terms of exchange gives them an awareness of the role of their labor in the revenue stream and ultimately, the national economy.

Likewise, the dependency of Venezuela on petroleum gave Florentino workers (and many other Venezuelans) an acute awareness of the effects of the world market on society. The
prices of petroleum printed in the newspapers were a daily reminder of the impact of the resource on society and the resource economy certainly presented a less complicated picture than the financialized economies of the global north, making it easier for the layperson to grasp. But such knowledge was also a requirement for daily survival and it was this factor which was most critical to the consciousness of workers.

Unanticipated inflation could destroy the savings of a family and erode the gains made over years of work if precautionary measures were not taken. Workers could lose their savings in rapid devaluations and hence they sought to secure alternative currencies that held value in the face of inflation and to protect their savings by investing in durable goods. The unpredictable monetary policy of the Venezuelan government (i.e. adjusting the money supply to accord with international market conditions) put these actors at the mercy of state officials who were custodians of the rent and directors of the circulation of capital in society. It was the state officials’ position of superordinate power which spawned an incisive critique on the part of these subaltern groups, and eventually came to affect the heads of the Florentino enterprise.

**The Devil Wins in Florentino**

One of my key informants, Pedro, worked as a security guard in the enterprise. We spent a great deal of time together due to his friendly nature, but also due to his role in the center. Pedro was one of the security guards tasked with preserving order at the front part of the farm and keeping records of the entry and exit of vehicles each day. He was also responsible for transport to the towns in the local area, which meant that if I wanted a ride, I had to rely on his grace. Pedro was an average Venezuelan who fit the archetypal roles set out for rural men of his station. He lived several miles from the enterprise in a shack of his own construction on a parcel of land he had carved out. I recall him describing the search for a suitable terreno that nobody
wanted where he could build his *rancho*. The private property claims of the rural poor were often in the interstices of the large estates. The image of the rugged male and masculine provider was part of his make-up and he was keen to reproduce the patriarchal household from which honor and dignity flowed. He wanted a large family in which he would enjoy the prestige that came from his role as provider. Setting up a household is a central male role and it carries social prestige. In most ways, he was typical. Yet he was exceptional in one area of his life: he had seven children. He had come from a large family himself with his siblings adding up to four. He had thought about stopping at six children, one more than his own generation, but he wanted to have another child.

When Pedro and his wife were considering having another child, he reviewed his financial situation. “When I was thinking about making her pregnant, I thought maybe it isn’t a good idea. But I thought about it a while and then I decided why not. We have enough money.” His work at Florentino had made it realistic and although his wages were not overly generous, his salary was enough to pay for the basics and the diet of rice and beans on which his family subsisted. But even before the arrival of his seventh child, he faced a serious problem: they had far outgrown his *rancho*.

Pedro had one of the strongest critiques of the Florentino enterprise and the style of its management. “They don’t treat us with respect” he stated. “They order us around. They don’t ask us to do things. They just tell us.” He was particularly angry at the managers for their harsh style of leadership, but he also faulted them for their failure to deliver the social benefits he viewed as a right. In the early years of the Florentino project, the President of the Republic had come to the enterprise and as Pedro related the story, “[he] asked us what we needed. We said, ‘we need houses *comandante’” and the President responded, “anything for the workers of Florentino.””
Yet not only had the construction crews yet to arrive, Pedro did not know where he was on the list.

Like many of the other workers, he had waited patiently for the delivery of his social benefit, but its receipt had been significantly delayed. When the social development worker from the enterprise came to evaluate the status of his housing, she asked how many children he had and when Pedro replied “7,” the incredulous employee refused to believe him. She clearly thought he was exaggerating to improve his chances of receiving the benefit or speed up the construction, but when he had assembled all seven children before her, several of whom had been playing outside in the yard, or hiding under the bed, she could hardly believe it. Pedro was visibly upset at the insinuation that he had lied to receive the benefit or that he was somehow undeserving. When he recounted the story to me he was still incensed (the social development employee also later recounted her version of the story to me underscoring what an impression it had left on her). He had a strong sense of right to the benefit and in a contentious meeting with the staff over delays in the housing program, he had been one of the most vocal in a group of workers protesting the backlog of construction.

When the enterprise managers suggested the housing issue was taking up too much time in the meeting and they should move on, a group of workers jumped up and yelled at the managers: “It is a right! The President said so!” Workers complained that the housing benefit was first awarded to higher-level employees on the basis of status, rather than need and that this was another example of favoritism. Pedro wanted a house for his wife and seven children and a reasonable expectation that his wages and benefits would be delivered on time. He invoked the pledge of Chávez, which he felt confirmed the justice of his claim. Yet he was not one of the workers slated to receive the benefit in the next round of construction and there were also
problems with receiving his regular pay.

It was never entirely clear to me where the source of the problem lay and why it was that the workers were not paid on time. Could it be true that the Venezuelan leadership was short of revenue and Florentino was waiting for funds from the oil industry, as the managers alleged? Or was it that graft and corruption had interdicted the funds at some other level of government? Workers suspected that the heads of the enterprise were taking funds off the top and enriching themselves, but there was too much bureaucratic opacity for me or the workers to know exactly what was happening.

In one particularly onerous instance, Florentino was several weeks late with pay and Pedro was nearly out of money. He had already taken loans from several of his friends (myself included) and his network was starting to run thin. One afternoon after a long day in the office, I happened upon a group of workers at the front of the farm speaking in angry tones about their wages. When I asked Pedro what was wrong, he said flatly, “They don’t pay us,” and then more despairingly, “The devil is winning in Florentino.” I asked what they would do about the situation, envisioning a response centering on how they would make ends meet until they received their pay. Instead, I was surprised by Pedro’s response: “We will go out on the highway and hold signs so the comandante [i.e. President Chávez] knows what is happening in Florentino. The television stations will come and they will tell everyone.”

Up until this point, I had seen relatively little of what one might call “proletarian class consciousness” in the Florentino enterprise. Thus I was excited to see this sense of common interest arising from shared material conditions and the spirit of combativeness on the part of the workers. The form of resistance Pedro and his co-workers envisioned (i.e. holding signs on the highway that ran past the farm) was designed to bypass the hierarchy of the enterprise and make
their grievances known, calling upon a power they hoped would intercede on their behalf.

Hailing the ostensible incarnation of the will of the *populus*, the tactic identified the leader with the mass and called upon the leader to attend to the needs of *el pueblo* (in this case, the Florentino workforce) in a move characteristic of populism. The workers stated they would wait a week to take action, but the protest never took place as they received their pay and the anger seemed to subside. The incident was instructive, however.

In giving voice to his critique, Pedro drew upon his cultural knowledge of the story of *Florentino y El Diablo* to play upon the irony of the inequality in the Florentino enterprise and suggest “corruption” and the logic of the petroleum economy were seeping into the center. Ostensibly a site for the erasure of evil and the creation of relations of equality, “the devil” was creeping into the enterprise and he indicated that the old attitudes of bosses had persisted among the managers and the center, an exemplary space which was supposed to have been purified or distanced from the logics of the petrostate, was falling back into its clutches. The Florentino enterprise was supposed to generate a profit, a social profit as they called it, which would make the project free from cash infusions of the state drawn from petro dollars. But this required a degree of responsibility and stewardship on the part of the enterprise management that was very much in question. The accusations of corruption and misuse of funds were constant and the workers felt alienated and betrayed by the late wages and benefits. But they stayed in their jobs due to necessity and the promise of material betterment (Nash 1979). Nash suggests rituals invoking the devil are “active cults for the material improvement of [workers’] lives” and that “…consumption desires are the hold that this system of production has over the workers” (154).”

The Florentino workers were not involved in what I would call ‘a cult of improvement,’ but they did mix gratitude towards President Chávez for stable employment and social benefits with critique of the attitudes of the bureaucracy, and the ongoing problem of securing their rights. In
this sense, the devil certainly seemed to mediate the effects of the transition.

**The Populist Temptation**

The desire to explain misfortune is no doubt one of the most basic human impulses. The urge to find meaning in the otherwise inexplicable and to account for the ills that befall us over the course of our lives is a central preoccupation and one of the major functions of culture and religion. The task of making sense of inscrutable forces is aided by a worldview which may not be able to control external forces, but at least makes its bearer feel less abject. Even if we do not have total sway over the world and the forces around us, at least we can ascertain causes and discern patterns, predict when misfortunes are likely to occur, etc. We can also seek to propitiate malevolent forces, which according to classic studies in anthropology, is the purpose of magic and to a certain extent, science (Evans-Pritchard 1937, Tambiah 1990, Graeber 2001). Yet the making of such meanings does not occur in a vacuum. The process of signification and the systems of signs we use to interpret social phenomena are dependent upon historical and material factors that shape subjective agency.

The idea that the devil is present in everyday life, and acts upon social relations is very strong in Venezuela. But the mere existence of such a belief does not explain why certain actions are attributed to malevolent agency, while others are not, or why certain signs are attached to certain relationships. Why certain accounts should prove more convincing than others is a question that can be studied ethnographically and which requires local theories to be treated as reasonable. But it also requires they be treated as necessarily partial.

The workers of Florentino had their own theories for why things were the way they were. These theories were frequently acute and well developed, drawing on a variety of intellectual and
cultural resources. As Gramsci (1971) suggested, every person is a philosopher in so far as each individual struggles to develop a worldview that is consonant with or at least helps to make sense of the world. That awareness is necessarily generated in dialog with other social actors and never in total isolation. The awareness of Venezuelan economy on the part of the Florentino workers came from a variety of sources, including television news media, face-to-face interactions and the site of production itself. But when the explanatory capabilities of their theories reached existential limits, the devil crept in.

The devil gave voice to workers’ feelings of frustration and inability to act upon the forces that affected them, most particularly social elites and the exigencies of the rentier economy. The devil in Florentino was neither “a cult of material improvement,” nor a ritual practiced designed to mitigate alienation (cf. Nash 1979). Instead, the devil signifier was used to critique surplus appropriation and the creation of a particular form of value, but it had an awkward relation to the labor practices in Florentino. It was far less regimented than what anthropologists have observed in other settings, as the free floating signifier of the devil could be attached to a variety of actors and relations, including enterprise managers, the occult powers of petroleum, or the corruption endemic to society. It seemed to occlude as much as it illuminated.

In the struggle for meaning, social actors can attribute ontic significance to events seeking out objective causes or agents for what are, in fact, the result of a complex interplay of social forces. Social actors often confuse structural causation with individual agency or attribute subjectivity to the end products of human labor and activity. Succumbing to what the philosopher Slavoj Zizek (2006) has called “the temptation to meaning,” social actors who prefer not to live in aporias often attribute causal agency to objects, situating the power of occluded relationships in other registers, natural or preternatural. Zizek argues this temptation is central to
populist politics and that populist discourse appeals to the immediate experience of social actors, offering a universal equivalent identity for what are in reality multifarious processes.

Populist discourse explains the objective position of social actors in relation to a spectral figure that is frustrating their demands. “…[I]n populism, the enemy is externalized/reified into a positive ontological entity (even if this entity is spectral), whose annihilation would restore balance and justice…” (2006). The enemy is often construed as an intruder in the social body or a parasite to be exorcised and the discourse in turn treats real actors as instantiations of this spectral figure.

It seems to me that many of my informants faced this temptation. Venezuelans had watched the petroleum industry sap the strength of the other sectors of the economy and transfer large sums of wealth to social groups that had largely forsaken the interests of the nation. They had also witnessed repeated attempts to “sow the oil” into sustainable alternatives and most of these projects had failed to deliver the anticipated results. As a result, Venezuelans had just enough experience with progress to imagine that standards of living could be otherwise. But the fact that they were not left many with a feeling of frustration with petroleum and elites. Indeed it was in times of intense frustration that the workers in Florentino most often invoked the devil and when the fetish seemed to stand in for the social relations in the enterprise. The devil was a spectral figure working to forge ties between disparate forces, both for the leadership and for its critics.

The devil was the black box or signifier that helped to fill in the holes and gaps in their theories, making sense of forces beyond their experience. Although this was a critical consciousness that often assailed the hierarchical nature of the state enterprise and its pretense to equality, it was not a total critique. I tried hard to connect the tales and references to what the
workers thought about the Florentino enterprise and the form of labor. But I never managed to find a strong pattern, other than a few of them invoking the devil, when they did not get paid on time or had to work long hours. These were the strongest examples I witnessed.

One of the office employees frustrated with her schedule circulated a short, critical essay among her colleagues, which asserted that the fatigue and separation from family caused by long hours of work were the pathways the devil used to enter into social relations. The essay suggested that long hours of work encouraged infidelity in marriage, disrespect for family life, and a failure to meet social obligations. The employee used the essay to give voice to her frustration about the work schedule in the enterprise and feelings of fatigue. But even here the critique lacked a systematic character. She was not the author of the essay, which she obtained from the Internet, and it did not critique the type of labor in Florentino, but rather its duration or intensity.

The devil talk mattered, but it was diffuse and disorganized, I suspect, because the sign often mediated relationships in which the workers did not directly participate. As Raymond Williams (1977) argued, the power of hegemony lies in part in its ability to make sense of and offer plausible explanations for relationships beyond the direct experience of social actors. The devil symbol in Venezuela was used to describe the negative effects of the resource economy on society, such as sudden swings in the value of currency, inflation, and the corruption of social elites with whom the workers did not interact, or in the case of the managers, whose actions were concealed by the structure of the enterprise. The workers could only speculate as to what was happening in the head office and they did not have direct experience with the petroleum industry or the central state. Yet they were on the receiving end of both the positive and negative effects of these structures. The social awareness of the workers in the Florentino enterprise thus did not
just come from the direct labor process or interactions with managers. It also came from the fetishes attached to the resource whose revenue was the basis for the space where they labored and their specific awareness was achieved by unifying their direct experience with ideas in wider circulation. This resulted in critiques making use of the devil sign—some of which were meant very literally.

Florentino workers, like other Venezuelans, used the devil sign in different ways. In one version of the use of the sign, it was the Venezuelan people who were at fault for the defects of the nation and oil was literally the work of the devil. Collective defects were largely responsible for the pursuit of the economic path that had resulted in a decline of standards of living and the loss of values. The greed of Venezuelans was largely to blame for the deterioration of society and this version revolved around notions of sin, a word often used in this context. Faulting their own loss of values for the wave of crime and social degradation faced by the nation, these Venezuelans asked if they were cursed or on the receiving end of divine retribution for dealing in the devil’s excrement. It was easy to make satanic associations when the substance God rained down on the sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah was rising from the earth below them and easy to wonder if they were cursed when the oil seemed to offer no serious prospect for development. Perhaps Venezuelans were not so sinful as to merit total destruction, but they were sufficiently sinful to be left to slowly sink. This reading was not unreasonable in the most literal sense of the word, but it did not perform the work of coalescing the type of subject the sovereignty project of the Bolivarian leadership required.

By contrast, the national leadership tried to resituate these readings of moral failure in an alternative framework. In the rhetoric of the leadership, Venezuela was a moral nation that had lost its way when certain sectors of the society led it astray. The leadership faulted the oligarchy
associated with the resource for sapping the strength and wealth of the nation, and tried to reframe the devil discourse as a critique of rentier capitalism. The leadership invoked the devil as a symbol of the destructive powers of petroleum and non-productive wealth that was ostensibly earned without labor. It was “a useless form of wealth” (Taussig 1980) that had to be surpassed in order for the nation to recover its dignity and sovereignty. Yet this wealth could also converted into spaces of productive capital, if the subject of *el pueblo* could be articulated and induced to take action to divert this wealth to more virtuous uses.

In his role as organic intellectual, Chávez effectively brought all these elements together into a coherent discourse, redeploying the story of Florentino as a critique of resource dependency and the dearth of sovereignty in Venezuela. Linking cultural knowledge of society with formal intellectual knowledge of the resource economy, he merged the two discourses into a critique of the oligarchic elites invested in extraction and rent capture, instead of living labor and productive capital. Representing a departure from the elite political discourses, which have historically marginalized large sectors of the Venezuelan population (see Malavé Mata 1987, Méndez 2004), his knowledge of the Florentino story burnished his credentials as “a man of the people” who grasped the cultural wisdom of Venezuela and valued its bearers. Effectively interpellating subaltern actors as protagonists in a struggle for the soul of the nation, his use of the narrative directed populist anger at the caste of elites associated with the petroleum industry as well as the consumptive lifestyles of the rentier bourgeoisie that ruled the economy and the flow of commodities in and out of the country.

Not surprisingly, the narrative also targeted the US, a nation with whom these elites were closely associated. It also drew upon “a geopolitics of evil” (Cañizares-Esguerra 2004) in which the malevolent forces of this nation could be felt within Venezuela. As retold by Chávez, the
relato or tale was a way of mapping the internal struggles of the political leadership with the opposition and its foreign backers, as the oligarchy fought to preserve the dependence of Venezuela on the resource and its client status—relations nicely embodied in the personage of George W. Bush, President of the United States and a Texas oil baron.

Reinforcing the idea the nation could be saved if the prescriptions of the leadership were adopted, Florentino was a David and Goliath story in which Venezuela, a peripheral nation dependent on resource export, was locked in battle with a much larger and more powerful opponent that also happened to be the largest purchaser of its export. Unafraid to liken himself to Florentino, the President cast Venezuela in the role of the giant slayer, suggesting the nation would outwit its stronger foe and emerge victorious in spite of the odds. This was certainly a radical discourse, but it also had its limits (Willis 1977).

The Resource Curse

Scores of intellectuals writing on the topic of natural resources have deployed the concept of the resource curse to account for the negative features of the rentier economy and its supposed tendency to support corruption, graft and social decay. The extraction of natural resources, especially petroleum, has been faulted for everything from war and hunger to instability and the decline of democracy, with some writers even suggesting fossil fuels are responsible for the rise of capitalism (e.g. Mitchell 2011, Collier 2008, Altvater 2007, Huber 2008, 2011, Renner 2006, Clark and York 2005, Klare 2001, cf. Labban 2011). These writers suggest the historical evolution of the resource and its uses can be used to trace the decline of political and economic systems. Writers have pointed to a number of destructive effects supposedly issuing from the resource and its revenues, including ‘a democracy deficit’ (Ross 1999), declines in real economic growth (Sachs and Warner 1995), and the rise of ‘a kleptocracy,’ whose sole aim is to preserve
power and enrich itself by way of gross spending on military repression (Klare 2001). While these are certainly recognizable features of the Venezuelan state and aspects of its political history, these features are not directly attributable to the resource economy.

As Michael Watts (2004) has argued, the literature on natural resources rarely takes into account the fact that the resource curse is only a symptom of specific modes of extraction and the use of revenue by elites. By relying on the idea of an intrinsic curse, he argues, writers are engaging in a form of fetishism which ignores the fact that the rentier effect is as much a result of the revenue policy of states and already weak sovereignty as ‘unearned income’ (cf. Ross 1999). In their own way, these writers have succumbed to the devil by confusing the properties of the resource (i.e. ability to generate energy, geological origins) with the social environment in which it is extracted (e.g. the state system, market conditions) and the method of disposing of the wealth (e.g. to fund consumption, imports) arriving at the notion that the resource has an intrinsic value form. In this way, they effectively assign an efficacy to petroleum which it lacks (see Labban 2010, Karl 1997) and fail to arrive at a true critique of resource dependency.

In this same vein, the leadership in Venezuela was effectively using a local version of the ‘resource curse,’ which was not much worse than formal academic treatments when it suggested petroleum income was ‘unearned’ and its value was created by the earth. Following established readings of the resource and its history, the rhetoric correlated the rise of oil with the devastation of the other sectors of the economy and the social crisis of the twentieth century using the devil image which was a part of popular culture. In the most fetishistic versions of the narrative the critique centered on the resource itself. Instead of a critique of the historical genesis of the peripheral capitalist economy and the rentier state which antedated the rise of petroleum (see Chapter 1), the narrative focused on the key export and it neglected to account for the forces
which had led to the dependence of the nation. It marked the nexus of the problem—the resource and the oligarchy—but failed to account for the social relations that had called forth the model of growth in the first place. It was not merely the extraction of oil and the capture of rent which created dependency, but the state apparatus associated with it (Karl 1997) and the systems of value and wealth architecture, all of which were part of a longer process of integration of the nation into the global market on a subordinate basis (a process which started with coffee in the 19th century)(see Chapter 1). Perhaps most crucially, however, the narrative did not call attention to the logics of the public sector and the linkage of the sector with the resource. It portrayed the former as independent and autonomous, but in reality, it was anything but.

This ‘local’ version of the resource curse in Venezuela drew attention away from the regimes of production in the state sector and the value form associated with the sowing of the oil. The curse targeted ‘the oligarchy,’ but ignored the complicity of the ruling party in the creation of hierarchies based on race, class, gender and education. The Florentino enterprise was the space where capitalism was supposed to be overcome in favor of a more egalitarian society. But the enterprise seemed to replicate many of the tensions of the petrostate, including the division between técnicos and laborers. The ambivalence of the reform was reflected in the reading of capitalism of the national leadership.

In an episode of his weekly television show *Alo Presidente* (June 18th 2009), President Chávez provided an analysis of the petroleum industry and his economic reforms. One instant he was talking about the practice of usury and the way in which Christian teachings and socialism coincided and in the next, he was drawing the circuits of capital that corresponded to these relations. Holding up his hand-drawn diagram to the camera, the President suggested the campesino had use-value as the end of his activity (C-M-C) and worked to “satisfy needs.” The
capitalist, by contrast, had money left over from his transactions and wanted to accumulate still more (M-C-M).

According to the presentation, this was the logic of the petroleum industry and the capitalist system. Yet Chávez only mapped the circuit of merchant capital associated with the oil trade and neglected to map the circuit of productive capital (M-C-C-M), which was the operational basis of the state enterprises. For Chávez, state enterprises like Florentino were “socialist,” not capitalist, and wage labor was not questioned. It was a critique of the pattern of circulation of capital in Venezuelan society and the non-productivity of rentier accumulation. Yet it was not a critique of capital in the sphere of production. Indeed, the national leadership could not question this model of development, without critiquing the form of value creation and industrialization they were endorsing.

Capital had to be brought into the sphere of production in order to transform the Venezuelan economy into a more independent system—one that would be sovereign and founded on productive labor instead of rent. As Chávez and his supporters told it, the Florentino story was a narrative of the triumph of “good over evil” which paralleled this project (Nieves 2014). It justified the creation of a site where labor could be commodified and exploited to extract surplus value (or at least where it would be once profits started to accrue). But it ignored the alienation of workers and was largely silent with regard to the power of technical castes to tap flows of revenue and bloc the demands of labor. The discourse thus served to explain one type of alienation (i.e. rent capture), while effectively ignoring another (i.e. wage labor), as it articulated a unified subject capable of going beyond the resource curse.

The belief in the harmful effects of petroleum dependency and its association with the devil exemplified a critical awareness of societal elites and the necessity of diversifying the
Venezuelan economy. But even at its most coherent, the narrative did not expose capitalist relations of production to criticism or propose a means of transcending a market-based regime of accumulation. A unified subject taking the abolition of rentier capitalism and the restoration of the autonomy of the nation-state in the global system as its goal could certainly be forged with this critique, but the scope of the critique was restricted to this end.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I tried to render legible voices from the global periphery, not least of which the voice that called George W. Bush the devil. But I would stop short of suggesting I have recovered them. The recent debates on the politics of ethnographic writing have treated the recovery of subaltern voices as one of the key tasks of the researcher and a way to contest western ontology (e.g. Clifford and Marcus 1983, Sanjek 1990, Rosaldo 1993, Abu-Lughod 1993, de la Cadena 2010). Premised on the idea that modernity is culturally relative, and the insights of the ethnographic researcher are but manifestations of one particular “way of knowing,” this critical approach to ethnographic writing has rejected the traditional authority associated with participant-observation in favor of relativist epistemologies based on strategies of inscribing alterity (Visweswaran 1994). This approach to the study of culture has relied on the inscription of the subaltern voice as a critique of western modernity, privileging the emic over the etic in many cases.

Denying the objective, material basis upon which culture is created, or at least the ability of the researcher to access it, this trend in the discipline has yielded endless debates over strategies of writing, largely disabling politics outside of text. If no inscription is free from cultural enunciation or able to stand outside of relativity, then our writing seems stuck with an intractable problem. The genres of speech and symbolic systems used by the subaltern do not
carry the weight of ethnographic authority if un-translated and therefore require exegesis to make them comprehensible to outsiders. Hence the act of “recovering voice” effectively reinscribes relations of power. Yet ignoring subaltern voices is also problematic.

A certain school of rationalist empiricism calling itself “cultural materialism” tended to treat critiques based in religion or metaphysics as unworthy of study, rejecting excessive attention to the voice of the subaltern as “window dressing,” or a distraction from “what was really going on” (e.g. Rappaport 1968, Harris 1979, D’Andrade 1995). I have tried to bridge these two perspectives here in an analysis attentive to both the subjective aspects of cultural production and its objective basis. I have situated subaltern voices in their social, cultural and historical milieu, but I reject the idea I have salvaged agency by way of this analysis. Instead, I tried to perform work akin to what Chakrabarty (2000) calls “translation,” rendering the cultural particularity of devil images in Venezuela less exotic or strange to observers who are not part of the shared culture system. This tack has brought me into conflict with a certain kind of modernity. My critique was not the kind of broadside attack on modernity that the stance of radical relativism might imply (Visweswaran 2010).¹ Instead the object of my critique was an imperial discourse that reproduced itself through exclusion and the denial of its own irrational impulses, or to put it another way, that ignored “the devil in its own house.”

The clash of George W. Bush and Hugo Chávez at the United Nations was not an example of rational liberalism facing off against obscurantist populism as the US media portrayed it. It was at best an example of what scholars have called “the clash of fundamentalisms” (Ali 2002, Achar 2006). Yet even this appraisal is dubious in light of Chávez’s suggestion that Bush’s speech could have been “evaluated by a psychiatrist,” invoking the discourse of madness with a clinical, scientific twist. Both leaders deployed elements of
modernist discourse to burnish their credentials as leaders of historically progressive forces and both deployed motifs drawn from Christian theology to invoke divine authority for their policies. But the North American media denied any parallels between the non-secular aspects of President Bush’s “crusade” in the Middle East, and Chávez’s reference to the devil, and in this regard, they were the worst offenders.

From the perspective of the US media, the equation of the devil with the US President was a mystery and the grievances of Venezuela as a peripheral nation reliant on oil exports were far off stage. Yet when taking into account the political economy and history of Venezuela, the reference made perfect sense. The devil was part of a populist discourse directed at coalescing a subject capable of displacing elites invested in rent capture and creating a productivist economy as part of the work of making sovereignty. This critique of the oligarchy brought together diverse social interests and worldviews, and was vivid due to the fact that it dealt with real aspects of the petrostate. Yet in spite of the vividness of the critique, I am not sure it was altogether adequate.

A variety of social actors in Venezuela (e.g. laborers, intellectuals and political elites) were able to make sense of the occult features of the peripheral capitalist economy using a shared culture system. Yet their penetrating insights were often limited by the nature of the system they used to interpret it (Willis 1977). Venezuelans attached the symbol of the devil to oil—the nexus of their woes—and they were thereby able to critically evaluate the actors associated with the resource and its ill-gotten profits. But this was not a critique which could account for the historical genesis of capitalism, weak state sovereignty or the forms of alienation with wage labor in the state enterprises.

It accounted for the specific form of degradation associated with rentier capitalism and the sphere of circulation, but it fell short when trying to explain the relations of production in the
state enterprises. It could describe the former as “evil” and castigate the actors responsible, but it could not relate this form of wealth creation to the historical genesis of devilish subjects or effectively critique the relations arising from the sowing of oil. Pedro’s critique targeted the terms of labor in Florentino, not wage labor itself. Although clever, and certainly adequate for his intended purposes, the devil was in the details and the cultural signifiers he used did not appear to give him the grist to critique the selling of his labor power.

But this was not the greatest impediment to the growth of the type of consciousness that could have allowed these actors to transcend the subaltern condition. As Paul Willis (1977: 175) has argued, “…cultural penetrations are repressed, disorganized and prevented from reaching their full potential, or a political articulation by deep, basic and disorienting divisions.” These divisions are the subject of the next chapter.

Mural outside offices of the National Institute of Lands, Barinas supporting the Ezequiel Zamora Peasant Front. The mural shows a campesino with a machete threatening to cut off the tail of the devil as General Zamora looks on.
Part II

Fixes
Florentino was a different type of enterprise than the peasant-based cooperatives the Venezuelan leadership had tried to create at El Charcote (see Introduction). From the standpoint of production, El Charcote had been a total failure. The press aligned with the opposition had made hay out of the dramatic decline in output, and the invasion of the estate by campesinos from the area had called the stated objectives of the agrarian reform into question. The stated objective of the reform was to place fallow or underproductive lands used mostly for low intensity ranching under cultivation and thereby raise the level of domestic production. Instead, yields on the farm had fallen off and the land invaders were sitting idle. To make matters worse, large landowners framed the seizure of El Charcote as a state-orchestrated land grab and began to mobilize to contest any potential assault on their “rights.” Even supporters of the invasion were less than satisfied. Leading representatives of the campesino movement complained of a lack of aid and credit from the Ministry of Agriculture and that they had been abandoned by “their government.”

Surveying the results at El Charcote, it would have been difficult for Ministry of Agriculture officials to arrive at the conclusion that such peasant-based land occupations were productive. In fact, they likely arrived at the opposite conclusion: campesinos were not ready to run large estates and if the government wished to see large increases in output, it would have to rely on a qualitatively different set of actors. Relying on the caste of technical experts which had supervised state agriculture projects for much of the twentieth century (see Arvanitis and Bardini 1992, Delahaye 2001, Soto 2006), Florentino provided another model for the restructuring of land tenure relations and the conversion of large private estates into state property, and it was hoped, more productive units. In the case of El Charcote, INTI had acquiesced to campesino
desires in the belief that *campesinos* would take over the land and engage in intensive farming. INTI had divided the estate into parcels under the supervision of the individual holders. Left to their own devices, however, the invaders shifted to activities based on subsistence, which resulted in a drop in output. The results at El Charcote would in turn have a serious effect on the Florentino project.

 Whereas El Charcote was invaded by land hungry *campesinos* and INTI was presented with a *fait accompli* in which the agency was forced to transfer the land to the occupiers or risk its alliance, the takeover of La Marqueseña was largely uncontested. Apart from the obstinate former owner Carlos Azpurua who refused to recognize the state seizure of his land, *La Marqueseña* was unoccupied. Workers loyal to the former owner were living on another part of the farm that remained under his control and officials thus had a clean slate on which to build their vision. Indeed, this was part of what I found so appealing about the site. Instead of taking control of an already existing enterprise with its established norms and routines, state officials and experts would have a free hand to create their vision, literally from the ground up.

 This was a chance for me to see what state actors would create if they were given free reign, and if they did not have to placate their *campesino* allies. As it turned out, the aspiration of the elected leadership was to create a space governed by a logic which they described as social and that differed from their previous agriculture projects with respect to the value accorded to technical practices of improvement. In a mix of language derived from British New Labour and the Venezuelan Philosopher Simon Rodriguez, Venezuelan President Chávez hailed the Florentino enterprise as one of “the vanguard spaces of the new social economy” (2005). The word ‘social’ denoted a space in which market logics were secondary to public functions and the interests of the nation as a whole, not just a narrow sector, were taken into account. Center
employees told me with pride that the farm was a model for other such enterprises throughout the country, and the heads of these enterprises looked to Florentino for leadership. President Chávez confirmed as much when he instructed the heads of the new enterprises to “Look at what they are doing in Florentino.” The new enterprises were to follow the example of Florentino as they carried out their work. But there was of course a gap separating the operation of the center and the model of agrarian reform in official policy.

In 2007, I visited the offices of the Ministry of Agriculture in Caracas in an effort to gain a clearer picture of the agrarian reform. The public relations office gave me heaps of documents on the organization of peasant cooperatives and the ideas driving the agrarian reform. The literature underscored the necessity of debate and ideological struggle as part of the reform effort, and the materials foregrounded the political aspect of the restructuring of agriculture. The materials had an anti-positivist edge and included digested presentations of Marxist ideology, replete with phrases like “there is no neutral knowledge” and “ideological debate and struggle are revolutionary” (Ministerio de Agricultura y Tierras 2009). Noting how unusual it was for state bureaucracies to encourage their citizens to challenge authority, I was curious to see how experts supposedly inspired by this approach would interact with the mass of rural people. Yet my observations in Florentino would prove to be a departure from the vision suggested by the language of the leadership. The technical experts and officials in the enterprise tended to deploy knowledge in a fashion designed to preserve their own prestige and power, rather than empower those below. They were not resisting authority, rather they were entrenching it.

In this chapter, I explore the social division of labor in the Florentino enterprise and the ways in which its productive tasks intersected the ranks, roles and hierarchies in society. I identify two competing epistemes or logics forced to reach a détente in the enterprise as well as
the ways in which the two systems together constituted the intervention of the project in rural areas. The two systems—the technical and the social—were systems of knowledge that also served as the organizational scheme for the enterprise. Although formally parallel, the two logics were not treated equally and the technical was generally privileged over the social in the activities of the center.

With its tendency to reduce the complexity of reality to simple ends/means equations with clear answers, the technical tended to “screen out” the intricacies of social relations and define problems in terms amenable to the formulation of programs (Ferguson 1991, Li 2007, Scott 1999). These technically oriented programs tended to reinforce bureaucratic power and the rule of experts (Mitchell 2002), working against the narrative of the agrarian reform as a populist struggle for “land to the tiller.” But the preference for technical interventions was mitigated by the indispensability of social knowledge of the rural population and the caste of experts tasked with improving agriculture often found they could not achieve their aims without such knowledge.

As scholars have noted, development interventions must be formulated with at least some social criteria in mind and technical-productive tasks such as increasing yields not only have social ends, but also require knowledge of social relations if they are to succeed. A purely technical approach to agrarian reform neglects the social character of the actors in question and to conduct the reform in an efficient fashion, experts in Venezuela supplemented their optics with technically rendered, social knowledge (Li 2007).

This was the terrain of social experts in Florentino and other centers dedicated to agrarian reform. By and large, these experts’ knowledge practices were not grasped as ideology; instead they tended to have the features of either positivist sociology or everyday wisdom. But in a
socialist revolution, ideology is not so easily dispensed with and the tendency to de-politicize relations with a matrix that divorced economic from political questions was tempered by the fact that both technical and social experts were engaged in an agrarian reform project driven by explicitly ideological motivations. In Florentino, social experts often sought to intervene in the sphere of production in a fashion that sought to reduce social inequality and strengthen subaltern actors, while technical actors sought to preserve the authority associated with their expertise, creating a tension which was always just below the surface.

To explore this tension, I present a few incidents in which social and technical experts grappled with this dualistic form of intervention which sought to bring discrete sets of knowledge to bear on the problem of increasing production. I illustrate how certain activities were politicized or depoliticized as part of this work and the ways in which certain knowledges allowed various actors to articulate critiques of bureaucratic power that verged on critiques of the whole project. I pay special attention to tensions between social-technical expertise and local knowledge for the insight they bring into the division of labor as well as the ways the favored forms of knowledge in Florentino might give us insight into the character of the state form supported by the leadership.

The End of the Social

Near the end of the twentieth century, neoliberals in the global north declared the end of the social and with it, the end of ideology. With the fall of the socialist states in Eastern Europe and the crisis of the welfare state in the west, writers, politicians, technocrats and theorists began to suggest there was no longer any real alternative to the market as a mode of social and economic organization and that its superiority as a means of distributing resources had been proven. What had previously been value-laden debates about how to organize society and the economy would
now be a dispassionate question of apportioning utilities. What were once political problems were recast in the neutral language of science and technology (Li 2007, Ferguson 1991, Rose 1999, Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983) and decisions, which had previously been colored by ideology, would now center instead on questions of technical efficiency. This ethos was perhaps best captured in the term “best practice.”

Instead of a series of contested social logics with varying consequences for the actors involved, there was ostensibly one set of practices, which could bring about ideal outcomes for all parties concerned—all technocrats had to do was figure them out. This one-size-fits-all approach to governance essentially reduced the problem of running a modern state to a simple formula of reducing public spending, increasing the frequency of trade and market transactions, and erasing any vestiges of the social state that had established patron-client relationships between citizens and the bureaucracy (Harvey 2005). Yet the process of neoliberalization turned out to be more fraught and conflict ridden than its idealistic proponents had originally imagined. Ironically the process of marketizing society required heavy intervention by state actors and deviation from the first principles of neoliberal philosophy (Peck and Tickell 2002). Celebration of the victory of the neoliberal worldview thus quickly turned to debates over the practice of market reform in the global south and how best to promote liberalization. Latin America served as a crucial testing ground for these policies with the region experiencing the rise of neoliberal governance as another wave of modernization (Green 2003, Phillips 1998).

Designed to lift the region out of stagnation and bring its nations into the present, neoliberalization was constructed in the language of deficit and default. Like its predecessors, this wave was designed to give the region an asset it purportedly lacked. Previously, it had been a deficiency of capital or technology that held the region back. Now it was a lack of transparency
and responsible governance that kept the region from advancing (Hetherington 2011). In this reading of modernization, Latin American states were indecipherable and it was their lack of transparency which made the bureaucratic apparatus a locus for clientelism and corruption. State bureaucrats could not be counted on to carry out policy without awarding special treatment to their preferred clients or benefits to certain groups. Lacking the “requisite neutrality,” the remedy was therefore to remove these incentive structures by reforming the bureaucratic apparatus and divesting it of key regulatory functions (Cordeiro 1997, Giusti 1995, Calderón 1978).

Yet this reading of the problem of governance in Latin America was specious in that it failed to grasp the critical role of the social state as the protector of marginalized groups and provider of livelihood to the vulnerable in society. The ability of these groups to trade political support for public largesse was a distinct form of democracy that while antithetical to neoliberal notions of non-raced, gendered, or classed subjects exercising “free choice,” nevertheless, served as a survival strategy for precarious groups. The petrostate in Venezuela was an extreme example of this Latin American trend in which citizens were able to exchange political support for direct access to public resources. The neoliberal remedy there was correspondingly vigorous.

While neoliberal leaderships in other parts of Latin America soon recognized the critical nature of social knowledge and rapidly incorporated social criteria into their governmental interventions, the radical measures put forward by neoliberals in Venezuela in the 1980s and 1990s attacked the core functions of the political bureaucratic apparatus and thereby threatened society itself. As Karl Polanyi (1944) wrote, market society is a starkly utopian project because it threatens its own conditions of reproduction. The abstract-formal character of the price mechanism prevents the market from recognizing vital social relationships that are the basis of profit and so the market begins to destroy them. To counter this tendency, the affected social
actors seek to restore social bonds to prevent further dislocation.

Threatened by the proposed privatization of the oil industry in the late 1980s, broad sectors of Venezuelan society violently rejected neoliberalization, sparking the countermovement that eventually led to the installation of Chávez’s populist leadership in 1999. The pledge of his leadership was for a return to forms of rule that envisioned ‘a socially just development’ as the basis of technical interventions. Yet the backlash against the de-politicization of governance in Venezuela has been less than total. The form of the return of the social taken is specific to this nation and its condition, shaped as it is by the legacy of the petroleum economy. The interventions supported by the Venezuelan leadership have been informed by a conception of the social that draws upon the image of the welfare state in the global north in the twentieth century, but serves to address issues that are unique to the specific status of the nation at the start of the twenty-first.

**Mission and Vision**

The headquarters of the Florentino enterprise was flanked at its entrance on both sides by two large signs, which read “Mission” and “Vision.” The signs displayed the organizing principles of the project and the guiding objectives of the enterprise. The mission statement was:

“To promote, investigate and orient all productive activity of dairy cattle and certified seed toward the satisfaction of the needs of the population with animals and seeds of optimal genetic quality that permit the execution of breeding plans, cultivation and agricultural production, which assure the food sovereignty of the Venezuelan population.”

The statement indicated the types of activities taking place in the enterprise and was fairly concrete with regard to objectives. Oddly, the vision statement that I expected to have something
to do with the socialist ideals to be achieved through the center’s work, repeated much of the same technical language:

“To be an enterprise which executes the state policies in the development of the production of milk cattle, certified seed for national and regional production, and of animals and seeds of high quality, thus guaranteeing the execution of policy assuring the food sovereignty of the Venezuelan population with an integrative vision of the country” (my translation, 2009).

The authors may have lacked strong ideological inclinations (at least as evidenced by the text) and instead of addressing the vision of society that was to be created by the revolution, it avoided the incendiary language of more radical elements in the ruling party and relied on the more neutral language of science.

Other signs in the enterprise had more populist flare such as the signs in the headquarters that stated, “This enterprise belongs to the Venezuelan People.” Yet to be more precise, it belonged to the Venezuelan Agrarian Corporation (CVA), a state holding company under the Ministry of Agriculture. The stated aim of the project was to work for the benefit of small and medium producers. Yet instead of sharing out land to potential beneficiaries, the model of agrarian reform required state enterprises to provide various inputs and support services to groups with the potential to increase yields. In this sense, the center accepted the basic premise of the first wave of agricultural modernization in Latin America, the Green Revolution, and its faith in the power of technical expertise.

Rather than a radical restructuring of land tenure and the integration of campesinos into the Florentino enterprise—as had been tried at El Charcote—the major goal of the project was
the transfer of scientific knowledge or *conocimiento* to direct producers. The center would provide the technical know-how or assistance to facilitate farmer incorporation of technologies such as ‘certified seeds’ (an updated version of “miracle seeds” of the Green Revolution) into cultivation, and the use of specialty breeds of livestock (see Chapter 5). “Serving the people” in this manner would increase the quality of life of the producers and reduce poverty in the rural areas. Ironically, however, the task of reducing inequality among producers located outside the enterprise required a division of labor which increased inequality inside the enterprise itself.

The headquarters of the enterprise had signs listing the various units arranged in what I later discovered was a hierarchical order of their perceived importance in the structure of the center. At the top of the list was the President of the enterprise; next came the General Manager, then the legal department, animal production, and crop production, then the department of commercialization, and thereafter, human resources. At the bottom of the list was a unit somewhat oddly named “socio-productive development.”

Each department was equipped with a team of experts trained in an appropriate area (e.g. forestry, animal husbandry, agronomy, sociology) and a complement of manual workers to facilitate its activities. The departments tasked with cultivation had the largest pool of expert staff and workers, followed by the offices of human resources and commercialization, which handled hiring and sales respectively. The socio-productive development unit had a much smaller complement of experts and manual workers, and appeared to be generally underprivileged in the allocation of the center’s resources.

The socio-productive development department was oriented to the concerns of groups both inside and outside the enterprise and handled the bulk of the work linked with the education of the workforce, including remedying basic deficiencies such as illiteracy and failure to
complete high school, and providing political education. The department was also tasked with organization of the *consejos comunales* or the popular governance structures which the ruling party was attempting to foster in the urban and rural areas. The organization of the councils was ostensibly an exercise in “popular power from below,” but in practice, it was devoted to preparing enterprise beneficiaries for the interventions of technical experts and the receipt of the social benefits known as “missions.”

The tension between the politicization of rural actors and their bureaucratic organization as groups of “mission” beneficiaries was reflected in the heterogeneous composition of the department and the struggle over its name. The word ‘productive’ had been added to the name of the department a few months after its creation in order to burnish its reputation and signify shared values with the other departments of the center, the majority of which were devoted to an aspect of production. But social development was still its common name. The department was staffed by university-educated experts with different areas of expertise (e.g. sociology, political science, education) and varied ideas about how to fulfill the department’s mission.

On the one hand, the department was supposed to intervene in social relations in a rational fashion, and use surveys and other technical instruments to make actors outside the center legible for the experts in production and the upper levels of the CVA. But the department was also supposed to build political support for the project and ‘teach ideology.’ Hence those who tended to ‘the social aspects’ of the reform process had to engage civil society from both technical and political perspectives. This division was reflected in the staff of the department who were divided in terms of their worldviews and values. In addition to their preparation in varied disciplines, they were also ideologically diverse group, some representing an older generation of state experts and others, a younger generation, who had only known “the
One of the oldest social development workers was said to have been a member of the Christian Democratic Party before the revolution and he retained many of his conservative views, while several younger members of the department had become radicalized in university and were ardently interested in “serving the revolution.” Yet in spite of the radical leanings of at least a few of its members, the department was fairly top-down in organization, which was reflected in the everyday life in the office.

The office observed a fairly rigid schedule regardless of their workload, a practice foreign to state agencies in rural Venezuela. The rationale of keeping office hours was to make sure department staff were available to meet with the producers. A work schedule displayed in a hallway close to the entrance listed the operating hours of the enterprise based on its two tiered hierarchy: empleados (i.e. technical experts and office staff in the headquarters) worked from 8-5, while obreros (i.e. manual laborers without training or formal education) worked from 7-4. But visitors, accustomed to the old model in which government offices were usually empty by 3pm rarely arrived at the late hour. It was hard to break accepted routines, and this particular technical-bureaucratic solution could not change the prevailing social practice. Hence, staff often spent time at the end of the day pacing back and forth waiting to go home. Home was also often a fair distance away.

Few of the experts were from the local area and even fewer lived in the vicinity of the farm. The majority lived in the state capital about half an hour’s drive from the farm and they were always eager to return to the city. At the end of the workday, the office workers would load up in their cars and rush back to the city, leaving the security guards, on-duty veterinarians and some of the manual laborers to fight with the insects and keep watch over the center at night.
Most of the manual laborers, recruited from the surrounding area, also left the farm to return to their homes at night. The next day, the workers all returned early to start another day in the office or the field.

The headquarters was its own social world that was somewhat separate from the rest of the enterprise—a fact well understood by the staff. A young woman who worked in the headquarters observed: “It is no secret that there are three groups in Florentino: the laborers [obreros de campo], the professionals, and the management.” Several of the oficinistas or “office staff,” as they were also referred to by segments of Florentino, had never been to the back parts of the farm, and they had no idea what was there. Specializing in their own tasks, such as internet, budget, and hiring, they had little to no contact with the rest of the labor force. By contrast, I was dedicated to exploring the farm as part of my research and in a short time I got to know more of the people and places in the center than some of the office employees. Occasionally, this proved to be disconcerting for them. Average workers would greet me by name and warmly shake my hand, leading office people to exclaim *el sabe más que nosotros!*—“Aaron knows more than we do.” Indeed, the two groups seemed to work under very different conditions.

Outside the headquarters the enterprise was run more or less like a modern factory with definite start and stop times as well as break periods for the labor force. Theoretically, this routine structured the everyday life of the center and the work patterns of the staff. But enterprise workers often arrived late or left the center early and received sanction rather unevenly for the practice. The schedule had more to do with preserving a sense of order in the enterprise than with the production process itself. In truth, it often did not much matter whether certain activities took place on a certain day or whether a particular task was achieved during the span of a shift. Yet
some schedules were important.

**Metis and the Misrule of Experts**

One of the major goals of the Florentino enterprise was the sowing of corn for state food systems supervised by the CVA. The harvest was to be processed by state agro-industries, one of which was just a few miles down the road from the enterprise, and later sold in packaged form in state markets (see Chapter 4). Corn production seemed to be a measure of the overall success of Florentino and I later discovered it was a source of anxiety for the *técnicos*. A great deal of preparation went into the sowing of corn in the center and it seemed there was no margin for error. When I stated that I wanted to ‘participate’ in the sowing, I was met with worried looks by the managers who seemed to think I wanted to drive one of the tractors or somehow direct the undertaking. When I clarified that what I really wanted was to “observe the process,” i.e. to be on site when it took place, or aid in whatever way I could, they readily agreed. The sowing was too critical a task to let an untested researcher try his hand. I later learned the reasons for their trepidation.

The sowing of corn in the *llanos* was a tricky endeavor due to adverse weather conditions and patterns. The rainfall in the region was irregular and successful sowing depended upon anticipating precipitation. Subject to alternating periods of drought (*la sequía*) and torrential downpour (*la lluvia*), the earth in the *llanos* becomes hard and cracked in the dry season, so hard in fact that it can break a plow and, in the rainy season it floods and becomes waterlogged. There is a relatively narrow window in which the planting could take place. Lack of infrastructure made sowing an even more intricate task.

Whereas more capital-intensive enterprises might have transported water to the fields
with irrigation systems, the construction of such systems in Florentino would have been extremely costly. Instead, the center relied on nature to do most of the work of preparing the soil and nourishing crops. Ideally, rainfall would soften the earth so that it could be opened up and the seed sown, and then a second rain would help the seed to germinate. If the seed were left dry in the ground too long, it would fail to sprout and the sowing would have to be repeated. Gradually, I became aware of the rhythms of nature that had to be followed as the técnicos prepared the fields.

It had rained a few weeks before the department of crop production started sowing, but the enterprise had not been ready. The president of the enterprise had personally intervened in the sowing process, saying it was taking too long and the team “needed to get on with it.” He more or less ordered the técnicos to prepare the fields and carry out the sowing. After waiting a few days to take part in the process, I was picked up one morning by a truck driver from the crop production department and taken to an open field where the sowing had begun. It was taking place in a massive field on the back part of the farm and work teams were loading fertilizer into spreaders on the back of the tractors. After the sowing, the earth was raked over the seeds to ‘put it to bed’ with tractors kicking up clouds of dust as they made wide turns and went up and down hundreds of rows. After several days, the sowing in a large part of the center was done and they waited for rain to come. Yet I soon began to hear chatter among the manual laborers who were skeptical of the likelihood of success. As one of the truck drivers told me frankly, “Everyone knows we’ve waited too long. The corn should have been sown already.” And they were right.

Knowledge of the local ecology was widely dispersed among the workers and even those workers who were not farmers had familiarity with the seasons and when sowing should take place. The técnicos, trained in the techniques of the green revolution (i.e. knowledge of chemical
fertilizers, crop varieties, soil types) conversely were ill-equipped to produce in this idiosyncratic environment. As James Scott (1999) has argued it is perilous for technical experts to ignore *metis* or local knowledge. While lacking the authority or systematic rigor of technical knowledge, *metis* is often more “flexible” and better able to represent the complexity of ecological systems than high modernist schemas. The use of such forms of local knowledge by subalterns can in turn threaten the authority of actors sanctioned by states. This is precisely what happened in Florentino.

_Campesinos_ working around the enterprise easily anticipated the weather using a variety of signs such as patterns of clouds in the sky and the smell of the air. Based on years of years of experience, and the fact that failure to predict the weather historically resulted in starvation, elderly _campesinos_ in the area could have told the _técnicos_ when to start sowing. Yet I saw no effort on the part of _técnicos_ to appropriate this knowledge as their pride and sense of superiority prevented it. The radical separation of expert knowledge from local knowledge in the center, combined with the complete denigration of _metis_ on the part of this stratum of experts, left them scrambling to explain why they had failed. Their answers were various—the heat, problems of tropical agriculture, organizational difficulties, etc.

The experts sowed multiple times. Yet only on third attempt did they have any results, and these results were far from spectacular. The corn which sprouted was sickly and yellow, indicating the sowing had not taken place at exactly the right time. The failure was obvious to everyone, and was made worse by the successes of _campesino_ groups in the nearby area. The _campesinos_ that lived to the northwest of the center had strong stands of green corn and the workers of Florentino remarked on the disparate results.

Relying on local wisdom and knowledge of the ecology, _campesinos_ had successfully
anticipated the weather and had sown in perfect time. The lackluster harvest in Florentino made a mockery of the experts’ claims to authority on the basis of their technical merit and the crop director was eventually forced to resign and reassigned to another post in the wake of the failure. The frustration at the results boiled over among the técnicos and resulted in a few outbursts, including one particularly poignant tirade by a senior expert. Dismayed at the inability of the center to achieve better results than local farming groups he regarded as lacking the degree of education, he dressed down several of his colleagues saying, “How can these campesinos—a bunch of illiterates—grow better corn than the center?!?” These instances when expert knowledge failed were also instances in which the workers in the enterprise began to query if the técnicos merited the status and salaries they were accorded. Maybe the workers could run the enterprise without them?

One night while I was sitting around a table with a group of truck drivers, laborers and security guards, a debate erupted over the cultivation practices in the center. Having heard few explicit critiques of the center and its productive goals, I listened attentively as the debate unfolded over the course of the dinner. “These técnicos are worthless [no sirven para nada],” one of the truck drivers stated. Another piped up and added, “What’s missing is the practice [lo que falta es la practica].” While the university-educated experts might have the knowledge of “books,” they concluded these experts lacked the necessary experience to put the knowledge into practice.
One obrero declared confidently that he would know when to sow and apply the fertilizer and he could do just as well if not better than the técnicos. But a subsequent interaction with the técnicos seemed to cause him to have second thoughts. On the later occasion, the técnicos used specialized knowledge of the mixing of fertilizers and chemicals to tamp down criticism and disabuse him of the idea he could perform their job. When he asserted that he would know when to sow and apply the fertilizer, one of the técnicos quizzed him by proposing situations in which the obrero would have to make decisions about the quantity of fertilizer applied, all of which the obrero was forced to admit, would have resulted in his “burning” the crops. After this interaction, the obrero seemed to retreat, less convinced of his knowledge, and I never heard another such assertion on his part during my fieldwork. All the same, the failure of the técnicos seemed to confirm what many of the laborers had been telling me privately: the staff of the enterprise was not entirely suited to this work in spite of their credentials. The social division of labor in the enterprise between mental and manual labor was reified in the technical distinction between those who knew when to sow and those who actually directed the process.
The division of labor in Florentino was causing friction not only between técnicos and manual laborers, but also between technical and social experts as well. The social development workers were frustrated with their secondary role in the enterprise and they felt that much of their work on key social questions was ignored. Their agenda was taking a backseat to other issues and as a unit they strove to lift their profile in the center. But there was also tension within the social development department itself. There was a tension between social knowledge of subjects to be governed, and social knowledge that regarded these subjects as part of a political struggle. The ‘red’ social experts wanted to treat laborers as subjects who were as much leaders of the reform as followers. Yet the more conservative social developers had absorbed elite prejudices that allowed them to treat obreros and campesinos as if they were objects to be governed, a tack supported by the organizational philosophy endorsed by the leadership in Florentino and beyond.

**The Revolution Will be Technicized**

A description of the atmosphere in Florentino at the time of my fieldwork would have to take account of the feeling of constant motion. The Venezuelan leadership was transforming the entire nation into a project and Florentino served as an epicenter of the reform in the state of Barinas. The staff of the enterprise were assigned a constant stream of tasks and kept busy meeting one set of objectives after another. There seemed to be an endless succession of towns to visit, meetings to attend, reports to write and records to keep of their efforts. A map in the headquarters of the enterprise showed the various regions where state projects were underway, and areas where work had yet to be started. There were charts listing objectives, and the resources that had been allocated, which were never really quite enough. Hence the leadership sought to find ways to channel resources to maximum effect. This led to debates on the right
ways to intervene in social relations and the types of schemes to be enacted in various arenas. Because the enterprise and centers like it did not have infinite resources, they relied upon the existing social relationships, networks and structures to deliver benefits.

Social relations were conceived as enabling the work of developmental intervention, but these same relations also had to be optimized and transformed. Social relations had to be arranged in a fashion such that they were amenable to a technical solution that could achieve the desired results with the least opposition (Li, 2007). This was achieved by rendering the social in technical terms. As Tania Li (2007) has argued, technical renderings are a way of “…extracting from the messiness of the social world, with all the processes that run through it, a set of relations that can be formulated as a diagram in which problems, plus interventions, will produce a beneficial result…” (265). This rendering of social relations led to a general decentering of politics in the Florentino enterprise and a downplaying of ideology. But the antipolitics in Florentino was not a dismissal of ideology tout court. Rather, the quandary was where to place ideology in the field of intervention and how to prevent it from interfering with technical objectives. The leadership had to structure a field of intervention in which the social could be allowed to operate and the recipients of state benefits could exercise a degree of agency, without interfering with productivist goals. The social development department was to teach ideology and politicize these actors, but in a fashion that prevented these subjects from becoming unruly and only encouraged them to take up the objectives proffered by the elected leadership.

The clearest and most concise statement of this philosophy came from the social development manager who told me this orientation reflected the views of the directors of the CVA. He explained to me one afternoon in his office how the problem of rural development was to be tackled; in his words, ‘the revolution’ should be ‘more technical than political.’ The
statement sounded incredible to me, as I had assumed the revolution was necessarily a deeply ideological and value laden process. I asked if he could explain further what he meant by the statement. In Latin America, he said politics was “too emotional” and affective, while “in the developed countries, any government: reactionary, progressive, socialist—whatever—has a technical policy that guides the bureaucracy.” He referred to Chile as an example of a Latin American state that had successfully enacted such a technical policy, but did not mention that Chile was at the forefront of neoliberalization in the region (see Schild 2002). He went on to say that politics in Latin America and Venezuela in particular should be “less emotive” (although he himself was prone to emotional tirades). He argued that the function of the bureaucracy was to execute the technical requirements of national development. He defined the nation-state in terms of “language, culture, identity and territory.” The preferred modus operandi for Florentino, in his words, was “technical with political implications, not political with technical implications.” By “political” he meant the partisan allegiances or interests that often drive and interfere with technical and social policies. The goal, he suggested, was to devise the most efficient means to realize the technical aims of development and in practice, to quote the Cuban attaché in Florentino, that ended up meaning: “first the production, then the socialism.”

In this production first scheme, ‘production’ figured as an ideologically neutral activity with objective criteria guiding it. It was in many ways a restatement of the Stalinist theory of the development of the productive forces in which social relations marched in lockstep with technical progress changing their form in accordance with the growth of the economy. It was a view largely alien to the writings of Marx, for whom ‘production’ was not a neutral or disinterested activity, but one that reflected the interests of specific social groups. Marx’s “a critique of political economy” fills in the critical space between the relations of production and the forces of production based on a theory of social relations that tries to grasp the lived
experience of social actors alongside the objective material processes, which shape them. This vision of the social was essentially different from the vision of the social adopted by planners in Florentinio. And there were two different conceptions of the social in operation in the Florentino enterprise.

This conflict surfaced frequently in the enterprise and recalled the classic problem of “red and expert” that plagued the twentieth century socialist projects. There was a contradiction between the caste of technical experts who controlled the special corpus of knowledge required to manage the economy, who were not always progressive politically, and the ideology of the staff dedicated to the social aims of the project which could not always be technically rendered.

This practical-ideological tension loomed large in the minds of those Florentino experts tasked with planning the social. Social development employees often fretted about the lack of ideological dedication on the part of staff in other departments. As one social development expert put it, “There are people who know how to work, but don’t have the ideology, and people who have the ideology, but don’t know how to work.”

There was also a contradiction between the right of workers to participate in the organization of the enterprise and the objectives of production, which supposedly necessitated a hierarchical structure. The more astute técnicos readily detected this contradiction which one of them nicely phrased as “a conflict between the development of the human being and the development of the economy.”

The técnicos also grappled with “the social problem” as part of their work, noting that it was “hard to change the culture of the people.” Their interventions were often hampered by the values, attitudes, and ideas of certain actors, which they scarcely knew how to change. I found their use of the word ‘culture’ especially suitable in this context as it derives from the same Latin root as the word ‘cultivate.’ It was exactly this—a way of cultivating or tending the land and the
ideas associated with it—that these agricultural experts were most concerned with altering, but which their technical knowledge alone would not allow them to impact. Indeed, it was precisely this intersection of the cultivator with the cultivated and the politics of that interface, which tended to be “screened” out by the productive interventions.

The técnicos were striving to transform an “agri-culture” that had developed over the course of several decades, if not longer, and although the technical knowledge deployed by the experts allowed them to perform their work, i.e. to select appropriate soils, sow, apply chemicals, evaluate yields, harvest, it did not allow them to address the wider context in which these actors and “culture” were embedded. The facts of life in a petrostate (the glut of foreign imports, weak incentives for higher yields, the harmful effect of Dutch Disease which sapped capital from the sector were not on stage in the interventions of the técnicos, but nevertheless the técnicos relied upon the social development staff to provide the special knowledge to get campesinos to follow directives and overcome these political economic forces.

Although this modus vivendi was the prevailing orthodoxy in Florentino, certain social development experts were uneasy with the placing of technical goals ahead of political or social ones. Several of the young people in the department had been drawn into the enterprise by their ideological fervor and dedication to the revolution. They were not seeking to build their careers so much as to serve ‘the people.’ These “true-believers” were the most vocal opponents of the purely technical approach to intervention and they often had to be placated by the head of social development. Their efforts to “politicize civil society” and in the most radical rhetoric, to “advance the class struggle,” were constantly tamped down by the leadership, which urged patience and tried to persuade them that technical improvements in cultivation practices would eventually translate into social consciousness.
For their part, red experts claimed to “know more about the community” they worked with, and wanted to take more seriously “the needs and demands” of these actors. These social development workers also tried to bring together the councils from the local area and engage them in the running of the enterprise as mandated by law. The leaders of Florentino, however, did everything they could to prevent the councils from having meaningful oversight over the enterprise. The councils and residents of the surrounding towns were described, “as meddling in the affairs of the enterprise.” After a contentious meeting in early March 2009, there was never another such event organized by the center during my stay.

Ironically, the leaders whose structural position gave them an impetus to tamp down red fervor on the part of their employees also found themselves stymied by the same social-technical division. Actors like the head of social development, who partially embraced the fusion of the social and the technical, found that the synthesis did not always work out to their advantage. In July 2009, I attended a forum on the topic of rural development organized by the branches of the CVA, which was held in the auditorium of the Florentino enterprise. The forum exposed the underlying tensions between social and technical expertise and the extent to which each sphere was conceived to operate according to its own distinct laws. The head of social development served as master of ceremonies for the symposium, which consisted of presentations by officials and technical experts, discussing the agrarian reform and its objectives.

The officials presented slideshows about the organizational schema of the CVA and its current projects. The first official gave a talk about the territory of Venezuela and the use of natural resources. It was a rather generic presentation couched in the technicized language of developmental practice and normative categories. The first presenter provided a discussion of the various techniques and models used by the Venezuelan government to optimize the interface of
territory (grasped in terms of a Cartesian conception of space) and land (an object with useful organic properties). The subsequent presenters discussed the problem of population growth and its relationship with the use of the territory as well as definitions of the two terms. But the analysis was prescriptive, rather than descriptive in the sense that it was designed to justify the approach of the Ministry and the particular data or relevance for average Venezuelans were strikingly absent. Also absent from the presentation was any discussion of how social groups or agencies might shape these interactions. It was taken for granted that “the state [el estado]” was a sovereign entity, which had a technical matrix that could be applied to the territory and its subjects, and moreover that this plan should be supported.

This presentation received little debate from the audience because it allowed no space for critical dialog or commentary. All the same, the social development manager seized an opportunity to try to inject a more sociological edge to the question. In a subtle or thinly veiled critique of the presenters, the head of social development discussed the philosophy of Herbert Marcuse and his book *One Dimensional Man* (1964), citing the importance of treating the construction of socialism as “a multi-dimensional project” that was social, cultural, and political, not just technical. While he praised the presenters for addressing the issue from several angles, he also noted the relative absence of the human factor in the discussion. Attempting to build a bridge between his sociological knowledge and their technical knowledge to show how the two together could achieve socialist construction, the manager drew attention to the fact that the target of intervention was human beings, not objects. It was worth considering the social and cultural aspect of the question, he argued, as well as the technical. Yet he was greeted with alien looks and stares from the officials. I appreciated his remarks in the sense that the manager was drawing attention to elements the matrix deployed by the officials had neglected. But just as the manager was silenced, the matrix the social development department laid over top the social
relations outside the center itself had the effect of silencing another set of actors. There were
certainly tensions between the technical and social experts in the enterprise, but there were also
tensions between the social development department and *campeños*.

Social Development Worker conducting ideological education class in Florentino.

**Can the *Comuneros* Speak?**

After a few months of work in the office of social development, I had effectively become a
member of the staff and was regarded as such by the headquarters experts and the laborers. For
my part, I regarded several of the employees in the office as close friends and I learned a great
deal from our interactions. All the same however I had begun to feel a bit confined in the office
and I was eager to see life outside the enterprise. I was interested in how the department
actualized its task of organizing the local communal councils and how talk of “politicizing civil
society” actually played out. Thus when a chance to participate in the extension work of the
office outside the center presented itself, I readily agreed.

One of the social development workers told me that the office had been working closely with a local council in the vicinity of the Florentino enterprise and they planned to start several projects there. She also related the story of how the center had first become involved with the council. According to her the council had been selected as a project site somewhat serendipitously as part of one of President Hugo Chávez’s visits to Florentino. After a meeting in the center, the president had climbed into his helicopter to return to the capital, taking off from the baseball field outside my house. Yet in flight he spotted the poblado and decided to stop there. He landed and alighted from the helicopter to talk with the residents. As my friend recounted the story, “He said, it was ‘a beautiful community,’ but it was a shame it was in such bad shape—the houses and the poverty. He came back to Florentino that same day and asked the staff of the department to help the community.” Since the directive of the President, the enterprise staff had devoted time and energy to a plan for the council, devoting whatever resources they could bring to bear on its problems.

In a preparatory meeting with the staff of the crop department, social development workers agreed to join their efforts to raise the standard of living in the project area and bring government aid programs to the hamlet. The department first had to ascertain what was to be achieved in terms of social programs and how the unit could facilitate the work of the technical experts who were mainly focused on raising corn. The crop manager spent much of the meeting lecturing the subordinates in his own department on the technical aspects of the intervention, suggesting the number of plants per hectare adequate for commercialization and discussing the delivery of mechanization to the work site. I found the use of the term “commercialization” to describe the intervention somewhat odd since the harvest was destined for a state network, which did not
always sell according to the logic of profit and commerce. But no one brought up the incongruence or the potentially controversial ideological connotation of the word and the meeting went on. In the consultation, the social development staff was largely on the sidelines and the conversation centered almost entirely on technical issues. The social development workers did not have a great deal to say other than they would do whatever was necessary to facilitate the intervention of the crop-oriented técnicos and they would begin surveying the area and organizing the members of its council.

When we arrived at the council to begin our survey work, I had to agree with the Venezuelan President: it was beautiful. Situated in the hills to the west of Florentino the council had an amazing view of the low-lying areas surrounding it. To reach the council, we passed through these areas before climbing the dirt roads into the hills. When we arrived the council lands seemed rather empty. We had to ask owners of the modest houses as to the whereabouts of their neighbors. The answers varied and the data was not always reliable. We had to fit varied
responses into the survey sheets, which proved challenging. The survey turned out to be a major focus of our efforts for the next few weeks. It laid the groundwork for intervention and provided the enterprise with basic data about the residents. We established contacts with council members who seemed receptive, but as so often turned out to be the case, the initial receptivity and straightforward nature of interactions later became strained when real issues were at stake.

On a second trip to the hamlet, we found the residents already well organized and our interactions were more contentious as a result. While waiting to attend a meeting of the council, we gathered outside an area devoted to the storage of seed, plastered with posters from the Ministry of Agriculture extolling campesinos to fulfill their obligations to Venezuela, which meant to raise yields.

“Producer, fulfill your commitment with Venezuela. We are counting on your revolutionary support for the construction of food sovereignty.”
Standing idly outside the fenced-in storage area where bags of seed and fertilizer were stacked up before the sowing takes place, the council members slowly started to gather and filter in to take their seats, waiting for the meeting to start. The children in the audience appeared bored and listless. The storage area had an office desk placed at one end where the President of the Council, an elected officer was seated. The President of the Banco Communal welcomed us warmly and said he would preside over the meeting, which would start shortly. A few residents placed chairs near the desk for us and we were invited to sit down facing the council residents.

When the meeting started, the *vocero* or speaker, a man in his late thirties, stood up and began to detail the problems of the council. Raising his frustrated voice, the speaker stated that “the government organs” had failed to deliver on their promises to improve the infrastructure of the council and INDER had not arrived to pave the roads to the area. Periodically looking in our direction as if to assign blame, he described how access roads were impassible, making it impossible to transport crops out of the council lands. The roads we came in on were indeed muddy and rocky, with deep ruts carved by wagons and other vehicles, poor roads being an example of a near universal problem in the plains. The weakness of the infrastructure often blocked efforts to convert its agriculture into a commercial system and reduced producers’ incentive to expand production. The roads in the *llanos* were frequently impassable due to rains, and crops could not be marketed as a result. *Campesinos* could fall into debt from failed ventures and they were often reluctant to invest in expanded production. Better roads were a prerequisite for more full incorporation of growers into the regional economy. Yet the state had failed this season.

After the speaker completed his report, each of the Florentino experts was given the
chance to address the residents. The crop técnicos described the goals of the intervention, including the raising of corn and tomatoes for the CVA. The técnicos were more supportive of the idea of raising these crops than the subsistence crops put forward by the council (e.g. yucca, corn, beans, plantain), since tomatoes were in short supply in the state and the increased corn harvests could be easily incorporated into the existing plans. The tomatoes could be readily sold on the market and the Florentino enterprise was already sending corn to the processor in Sabaneta and it was relatively easy to integrate the harvests of the council into its delivery. The técnicos had barely given the reports, however, when a serious dispute erupted over the goals. I had already detected that the goals of the campesinos were somewhat at variance with what was being proposed by the Florentino experts as they seemed more receptive to subsistence cultivation, but another issue—the uneven distribution of state resources in the local area—caused even greater friction.

A group of young men in the audience from a nearby council stood up and complained that their council had been neglected by the enterprise, while the council hosting the meeting had received “all the attention from the state.” An older woman in the audience from our council spoke up in favor of the young men saying, “We are all small producers. We all have the same needs.” She suggested resources should be distributed equally or that their council should receive attention as well. The criticism of these men was not well received by the social development workers, however.

One of the social development workers seated next to me tried to quiet what had now erupted into a raucous debate. Invoking the expert authority of her colleague, who was to have spoken next, the worker shouted “Listen to the political scientist,” interrupting the audience. Underscoring her colleague’s credentials, the appeal to expert authority silenced the commotion
and brought the debate to a halt. As the council members quieted down, the social development worker started to speak again and said, “This process isn’t statist [puro estado]. You have to organize yourselves.” From her perspective, the disagreement stemmed from confusion or a lack of organization on the part of the council residents.

From my perspective, a lack of organization was not the issue. The statement implied that the dissension was the result of a lack of discipline on the part of the council. In reality, what was at issue was the politics of organization and the politics of production. The council had organized itself—at least somewhat—and the members of the council had shown a willingness to take up the challenge of self-governance and increasing yields. The issue was that the community had not organized itself along lines amenable to the technical solutions offered by state functionaries and they were in fact questioning the authority of state experts to make decisions on crops, saying they did not entirely approve of the direction. Some community members resisted the directives of the state functionaries and challenged their authority, suggesting the councils should be federated in order to press their claims. At least some of the residents viewed the councils as decision-making bodies with the power to accept or reject the advice of experts. In contrast, Florentino experts expected the councils to be an extension of the state enterprise, under its top-down chain of authority. The suggestion that the councils should make decisions, and align with other councils to achieve shared objectives, was a form of the social that had gotten ‘out of hand.’ Other forms of unity among councils were acceptable, as I would discover, but the unity which challenged the social-technical matrix deployed by experts was a form of politics that the social development workers and técnicos could not tolerate.

The social development worker tried to progressively steer the conversation away from the thorny issue of the unity of the councils and the desire of the campesinos to cultivate a
variety of subsistence crops to the much safer and less controversial topic of the social benefits the enterprise could provide. She detailed the various projects Florentino could bring to the council, including government health clinics and welfare missions such as the subsidized food program *Mercal* (see Chapter 4) and she received a favorable response. The audience began to clap and even the council member who earlier voiced support for her dissident neighbors reluctantly joined in.

Temporarily silenced by the applause, the young men tried one last time to establish the legitimacy of their claims and appealed to a specific technical issue to gain the sympathy of the experts. “We need help with trout ponds,” one of the young men said, hoping to engage the experts in a dialog. The expert seated closest to me waved away the suggestion, however, saying in response, “there are too many trout ponds in Barinas.” Such a project, he argued, was not commercially viable and there would be no aid for projects that did not seek a wider market. Silenced by the combined force of social and technical expertise, the *comuneros*, seeing they would receive no further hearing that day, slinked away from the meeting and walked back to their hamlet. The council meeting was distracted from pursuing unity among producers, and the event came to a close.
Members of the *Consejo Communal* waiting for meeting to begin.

In spite of having successfully deflected the challenge of the men from the other council, after the meeting the speaker of our council kept arguing with technical experts. The speaker was incensed at the treatment of the young men and with what he regarded as the slow pace of the land reform. “I have known people who for 19 years have been without land,” the speaker charged angrily, suggesting the state was not moving with sufficient haste. The *técnico* retorted, “We are here offering technical assistance. We are not talking about the policy of the government. That is why the government is expropriating *latifundia* in Barinas and Apure.” This answer was misleading, however. The land taken over by the state in most instances was not being given to *campesinos*; rather it was being converted into state enterprises like Florentino. Here was the crux of the problem with the intervention: it was not designed to deal with the political-economic question of land poverty or the question of the autonomy of peasants as political actors.
The question of the relation between producers, producer organizations, and the organization of production, was the kind of political-economic issue which the technical and social matrix deployed by the enterprise experts could not address directly without questioning the logic of the enterprise and their own power. Experts saw the lack of unity within the councils to be a major problem, but the unification of several councils together on the basis of subsistence production was a threat to the authority of state experts and more seriously, a threat to the leading role of the enterprise.

Campesino debating crop production with Ministry of Agriculture functionary.

After the meeting, we returned to Florentino to take stock of what had transpired. As I recall the social development workers were generally displeased with the behavior of the council, having expected a more favorable reaction to their involvement. While a few of the social development workers were more reflective about the interaction and endeavored to imagine ways to improve relations with the council, others were so incensed at having their credibility called into question that they branded the hamlet ‘a problem community’ and refused to have anything
to do with it. These members of the department maintained rather cold relations with the council for the rest of our involvement with the project. They leveled serious criticisms at the council, and suggested that campesinos were “lazy” and “did not want to sow corn.”

The social development workers were trying to achieve the productive aims set out by the leadership of the CVA. But the forms of social organization and crops favored by the councils ran counter to the specifications of the intervention and questioned the guiding role of the enterprise. They shared their neighbors concerns about the uneven distribution of resources and subsistence goals, and voiced support for uniting with other councils. Yet the enterprise did not have a mandate to organize federations of councils (at least at this point, cf. Ciccardiello-Maher 2013, Azzelini 2013, Valencia 2015) and the President of the Republic had said nothing about the question of unity, only that they should help the council he had visited. The burgeoning unity of the councils would have interfered with the leading role of the enterprise and strengthened campesinos’ claim to the right to produce whatever crops they saw fit.

After the contentious incident at the council, we never attended another such meeting of the residents and the social development team ceased to keep up the façade of consultation. Instead, they worked apart from the council, contacting the officials in charge of the assistance programs, so they could start to deliver to the areas. Yet the tensions of the intervention did not entirely abate even with this distancing. In spite of successfully imposing a technical-commercial agenda on the council, the experts did not have much more success sowing corn in the council lands than they had sowing in the center. They directed the sowing and instructed residents on how to use tractors, space rows, sow at proper depth, etc., but the sowing results were again disheartening.

The results of the survey by two state agriculture engineers at the end of the period of
evaluation were predictably grim. Surveying the fields of bare earth, kicking up clouds of dust as they walked along, the two experts noted the seed had failed to sprout in most of the fields supervised by the enterprise and the seed that had sprouted had only yielded sickly stalks. The verdict of the sowing when they returned was “extremely poor” and they would have to sow again if they were to have any success that season. Once again, it appeared the technical knowledge and systems favored by the enterprise failed in the face of ecological and weather conditions in the llanos.

The failure of the corn crop in the council lands alerted me to several contradictions in the division of labor in Florentino. The division of mental and manual labor in the enterprise divorced the actors with knowledge of the timing of sowing from the decision-making process and placed it in the hands of actors who had knowledge of green revolution technologies and machinery, but could not contend with the vagaries of the climate. Actors outside the enterprise also had this problem. Campesinos evinced an ability to produce effectively with the local ecology; yet they were not productivists and were not inclined to alter the logics under which they had acted for most, if not all of their lives, especially when the Venezuelan state could not ensure adequate road access to get crops to market. While the técnicos worried about their inability to achieve productive goals, others sectors of Florentino were enacting a vision of the social drawing upon existing practices and that challenged the hierarchy.
Social-ism

Underneath all the technical language deployed by the experts in the Florentino headquarters, I found a popular conception of the social at work for the laborers. The vision of the social endorsed by the enterprise leadership was not the only one available and whereas the official conception of the social was defined largely in terms of public ownership of the means of production, the creation of state markets, and the provision of benefits to the population—all of which intersected the state bureaucracy—this conception of the social was concretized by the practices of laborers themselves.

Over the course of several months of working in Florentino, I started to gain the trust of the laborers and distance myself from the technical experts in the headquarters. The laborers, mostly drawn from the caserios or informal areas of the nearby towns, were recruited by the social development office after having been identified as the actors most in need of work based
on a survey that revealed them as the people with the longest periods of unemployment, the worst housing, the greatest number of dependents, etc. These people were the greatest potential beneficiaries of stable work in the center and their labor was accessible to the center due to their lack of ownership of land and the dearth of reasonably paid wage work in the nearby area.

These people were rural proletarians who had long ceased to own viable land (if they ever had) and most of their income was derived from selling their labor cheaply to private estates. A few of the laborers, especially women, worked as domestics in the houses of more affluent families and a few of the men worked as taxi drivers. But what typified the group was the fact their livelihoods hardly allowed them to rise above subsistence and their incomes were chronically unstable. These people occupied the lowest rung in the rural class structure and Florentino sought to integrate them into the operation as one of its beneficiary groups. But these “beneficiaries” turned out to be a source of friction.

There was an obvious gap in the relative status of the laborers and myself in the center, and based on my physical features and the way I spoke, they interpreted me as part of the expert caste above them. At first, they were cautious in our interactions, likely fearing I might report any criticisms they voiced to the managers. Yet over time, I was able to dispel any suspicion that I acted as an agent of the managers. In the process of interacting with the laborers as they went about their work swinging machetes, loading trucks, and cleaning offices, I found there was another conception of the social coming from below. This conception intersected the official vision of state-society relations articulated by leaders in Venezuela, but it also diverged from this vision in critical ways.

These laborers, who lacked any formal ideological education, more or less took socialism at its word. They seemed to interpret the concept rather literally and viewed it as an ideology of
social-ism. Asking questions like “What does socialism mean?” “What do you think of socialism?” “What is good about socialism?” I frequently received telling answers along these lines: “Socialism means we are all equal,” “Socialism means the people have power,” “Socialism gives you the chance to advance.” These responses were essentially a reframing of liberal values and a declaration of support for popular sovereignty. Yet more than just a translation of hegemonic values into a new language, socialism was also an ethic of obligation or duty to one’s fellow—an obligation that entailed certain practices.

There was a great deal of visible solidarity among the laborers of the Florentino enterprise and there was an attitude of what I would call ‘camaraderie.’ Laborers could be seen gathered together at the end of the workday talking and engaging in horseplay as they waited for transport to take them. There was an abiding sense of sociality among the laborers and I learned they relied on each other as a source of interest free credit. There was also a strong moral imperative associated with the practice. The laborers told me they would not survive without these ties and the rising cost of daily staples made such loans crucial to survival. They told stories of having to subsist on bread and little else, noting that it was often the loans of neighbors and coworkers that allowed them to survive lean periods until they were paid.

If a friend required 50 Bolivares to make rent or purchase a key household item, it was the duty of his fellows to lend him money. The laborers explained the duty to reciprocate with the phrase, *hoy por mi, manana por ti*, which literally meant, “Today for me, tomorrow for you,” but in more specific terms, it conveyed the idea that the loan was social insurance against an uncertain future. The winds of fortune could change and the lender could become the borrower, hence it was a good idea to have a social network to draw upon. The laborers referred to these transactions as “socialism” and the micro lending that has always sustained the rural poor was
thus translated into a new language. I quickly found myself engaged in these practices.

Aware I had extra money to lend, the laborers quickly incorporated me into their systems of reciprocal exchange and over the course of my fieldwork, I helped to purchase everything from car tires to windows and livestock. The laborers borrowed from me frequently and it became a major task just to keep track of who owed me and how much. Often I was inclined to ignore the debts since the sums were so small. Yet the laborers and managers both admonished me to keep track of my debts owed, so as not to be taken advantage of. A few of the managers even suggested I cease the practice. Yet it was a good thing I did not heed their advice, as failure to lend was a source of real friction and those who did not lend or failed to pay back loans could be accused of “not wanting to help out a friend” or “not being socialist.”

In the case of one laborer I knew, the refusal of a friend to lend him money resulted in the accusation that a mutual acquaintance was a vendepatria or “traitor to the nation” who could not be relied upon to help others. At first I did not see the immediate relationship between failure to lend money and acts of sedition, but when I asked my friend to explain what he meant by the slur, he stated the two forms of betrayal were dos caras de la misma moneda or “two sides of the same coin.” As in English, the phrase was used to describe two things that appeared to be distinct from one another, but which were in reality the same. Yet I found his usage of the turn of phrase somewhat strange in this context. I had never heard the phrase used in quite this way and when paired with the term vendepatria his turn of phrase appeared to invoke not only the image a two faced person, but also a division within the nation. That he used the word vendepatria to mean “sell out” was clear. But there were other less charged words he could have chosen. He could have used the word hueso or ‘bone’ to describe an individual who could not be trusted with money or failed to pay debts. Yet he chose a signifier invoking the moral community of the
nation to justify his claim.

Failure to pay debts or lend to another worker were, in his view, tantamount to disloyalty and an individual that did not support his coworkers could also be expected to betray his country. A person who did not extend relations of solidarity to his fellow could not be trusted to respect the wider fraternity of the nation. A person who chose to remain indifferent to the plight of another, refusing to extend relations of trust to a fellow member of the imagined community, could not be trusted to act in accordance with the interests of the whole. The two were one in the same. What was the origin of this claim?

I suspect what had once been a moral obligation between friends, neighbors, and co-workers had been translated into a social duty for the subjects of the nation. A lot of this discourse was in the air and one could hear terms like *vendepatria* used frequently. I suspect old moral economies were translated into new political language to give them greater weight. This translation was a scaling up of the social relations among co-workers to the entire nation, suggesting that the failure of the actors to observe socialist norms disqualified them from membership in the nation. The man who could betray his friend could also betray his country.

This notion of ‘the social’ also informed how laborers thought the Venezuelan state should behave. In their ideal vision, the Venezuelan state and the state enterprises were an extension of these obligations to society at large and the state should behave in relation to the nation in much the same fashion as the workers did with one another. It should take care of the people and treat the nation in much the same way as a friend would—with a sense of duty, care and responsibility. The feeling the Venezuelan government was at least partially acting in accordance with these social logics was the basis of support of the laborers for the leadership. Indeed several of the workers in the center were directly involved in these types of relations with
Although most of the laborers were without land, a few of the truck drivers were raising corn on plots and they were receiving credit from the state. These truck drivers told me they expected el gobierno to “act like a friend” and engage in the same types of lending practices. The laborers explicitly conceived of their labor as a reciprocal exchange with the state. As one worker stated it, they worked in the socialist enterprise and el gobierno gave them houses in return. “We work and make food for the nation and the enterprise pays us. We support the government and the government supports us.” It was a social contract in which labor was exchanged for social benefits. But this favored role of the state was in tension with the austere productivism of Florentino and efforts to integrate the profit logic into the enterprise. The leadership in the enterprise fell short of the socialist ideal as one story illustrated to me.

One of the security guards who worked at the front part of the farm was especially friendly to me and he always smiled whenever I saw him. I marveled at his ability to stay in high spirits regardless of his situation (a fact which he could hardly explain) and I would have been even more impressed with him if I had known his trials at the start of our association. His son had a chronic kidney ailment that required frequent medical treatment and eventually an operation to save his life. The illness entailed serious financial hardship for the family. The guard was forced to seek out aid from the enterprise to defray the cost of treatment. The social development department had initially helped with the cost of transporting the child to the doctor, but the trips had started to pile up and eventually the unit could no longer, or did not want to, pay the costs and turned him away. Thus he was forced to seek other sources of aid.

For the most part, he depended on the aid of his fellow workers who had taken up a collection. One of his coworkers told me of the situation and I gladly contributed to the pool of
money. On the day they delivered the money, one of the workers made a point of telling him that I had also contributed and he seemed touched by the gesture, especially since I was neither a laborer nor Venezuelan. His gratitude at the receipt of the donations, however, was matched by the workers anger that day. As he sat considering the gravity of the aid provided by his coworkers, the workers launched into an invective against the managers of the enterprise and what they considered indifference to suffering as well as abdication of their social responsibilities. The laborers felt the failure of social development to aid their coworker called into question the department’s very mission. If the department could not transport a sick child to the hospital, what was the purpose of having a social development unit? This failure was made all the more galling by the fact that the enterprise had an ambulance that sat parked in front of the headquarters which the laborers suggested could have been used for the trips.

The laborers believed the enterprise should support workers in catastrophic instances and that it had more than enough resources. They detailed the salary technical experts received in pay against the average worker. I suggested the enterprise could devise some kind of system of fluctuating pay based on the needs of the staff of the enterprise and that I would gladly take a cut in pay. One of the workers, who was particularly cynical, responded, “Ah, but that’s because you’re a socialist. They are not.” The gifting created solidarity and in my case, evidence that I was a quote “real socialist.” In spite of the refusal of the social development department, ‘gifting’ was not entirely absent from the practice of managers; I was able to participate on at least one occasion.

Although Florentino was a technically sophisticated, high modern enterprise with a great deal of attention paid to its organizational schema and systems of production, as a mode of discipline the enterprise operated according to logics that were much older. Labor discipline was
preserved by a series of practices that were often more in keeping with a *hacienda* than a classic factory farm and these logics in turn had their own disciplinary effects. Workers were frequently on duty at odd times of day and night, often without much to do. On one such weekend, Felipe, a truck drive in the enterprise noticed the técnicos and laborers had completed harvesting a field of tomatoes and it was getting ready to be ploughed under. The field had been hit by a blight or *plaga* [literally ‘plague’] and the crews would not be able to harvest much more fruit. Nevertheless, he hoped to pick a few of the leftovers and he asked the expert on duty at the headquarters if he could comb over the field and take whatever was left. The técnico agreed and he gathered a few of us to help. I went with two men in a truck.

When we reached the field, we found it had mostly been picked clean. But there was still some fruit leftover that should not go to waste. Carefully picking over the field, we picked whatever we could salvage and were able to load up three crates. When the three of us returned to the truck at the edge of the field, I asked Felipe if he was satisfied with “our harvest” and he replied “yes” he was “quite satisfied.” He added he thought there might even be enough to sell and he thanked us for our help. The electrician with us replied, “That’s socialism, *papa,*” suggesting our freely given labor was an example of social solidarity. After our small harvest, we drove to the truck driver’s home in a nearby *poblado* to drop off the crates before returning to the enterprise. What the truck driver had asked for and what the técnico on duty had granted was a pauper’s share.

In feudal agriculture systems around the world, the elderly, poor, disabled and widows had the right to comb over fields and pick up whatever was left after the harvest. Provided by *hacendados* in Latin America and feudal landlords in Europe (Wolf and Mintz 1957, Thompson 1963), this benefit served to reproduce sectors of society that might otherwise lack livelihood
and thereby posed a threat to the order. This practice was couched in moral terms and an ideology that asserted elite duty to subalterns. As James Scott (1976) has argued, ‘the moral economy of the peasantry’ is founded on the idea rural elites owe subsistence guarantees to justify the exploitation of peasant labor or the appropriation of surplus. While relations between rural subalterns and elites may be exploitative in a Marxist sense, these ties may serve as a form of social insurance that protects subalterns in times of uncertainty (for a critique, see Roseberry 1989).

In Venezuela, this practice of moral economy served as a means of labor control, which to my skeptical eye, gave the enterprise the cast of ‘a red hacienda.’ A few of the laborers who had worked for other farms were accustomed to these practices and expected them from the leadership of Florentino. The fact that the harvest was sent to other enterprises in the state sector meant the workers had little control over the surplus and the relations of production in the enterprise conditioned by particular social and technical divisions placed them in a subordinate position vis-à-vis the técnicos who supervised the sowing of crops, the timing of planting, etc. These relations of production operated alongside paternalistic practices that could be referred to as “socialism” by workers. The two worked together to preserve labor peace and they were a way of easing tensions between the técnicos and the laborers they supervised. The most popular técnico in Florentino routinely gave surplus to the workers and was widely hailed as “a real socialist.” But the efforts of the managers to create a profit restricted their ability to perform the acts of largesse workers thought suited a socialist enterprise.

From the standpoint of the laborers in Florentino, this practice of gifting was an instance of socialism all too infrequently observed by actors at the apex of the structure. The heads of departments rarely made such gifts and they were frequently derided as “stingy” or “bourgeois.”
Although aspects of the structure of Florentino aligned with laborers ideal vision of socialism, the social basis of the project could not entirely counteract the negative effects of the division of labor or the profit logic the leadership was striving to integrate into the center. State control of land did not, in itself, increase the standard of living of rural laborers and it was only the offer of social benefits, higher wages and gifts on the part of the enterprise that seemed to guarantee any significant improvement in their material situation. The effects of these logics could be masked with gifting practices, but the budgetary constraints restricted the ability of the center to pay the costs of labor peace. The gap between the expectations of the laborers and the actual forms of compensation in the center caused these laboring subjects to draw upon their own moral economy practices and an image of the social which if enacted would have entailed a significant restructuring of the enterprise.

The laborers had a variety of theories for why the leadership did not observe these social obligations. Laborers cited greed, callousness, corruption and the economic logics of the enterprise as reasons. Regardless of the posited source, the failure of the leadership to observe obligations almost uniformly gave rise to a critique of the caste, a critique which was strengthened by the incapacity I have described. When technical expertise failed, it not only gave space for the laborers to contest the cultivation practices of the center, but also for their vision of the social to morph into a critique of the division of labor in the enterprise. If the technical experts could not even deliver increased yields, what was the role of the caste and why did they receive higher salaries than the laborers? Were their contributions to the cultivation process not equal to that of técnicos?

Verging on a critique of political economy, the insights of the laborers into technical expertise interrogated the subjects in the center and the relations of production engendered by its
structure. This critique was leading laborers in the direction of struggle with a sector of the state above them in the hierarchy of the center. Without perhaps fully grasping the radical nature of their assertions, the laborers were asking for a socialization of the surplus, the means of production and the process of production in the enterprise. They suggested this socialization of the enterprise could entail displacing of the technical caste, although they were vague as to how an another structure might function. Some of the social development workers I would characterize as “more red than expert” meanwhile had grown uneasy with the way in which laborers were ordered around in the center and the undervaluing of their own work. These social development workers saw this friction in the division of labor as a chance to join with the laborers and alter the balance of forces.

Detecting social knowledge was not valued or only valued in so far as it contributed to technical objectives, the social development workers flirted with the idea of an alliance with the manual laborers in the enterprise and in early 2010, they held a secret, closed door meeting without the presence of the head of the unit. During the meeting, the social development workers listed the many abuses of the management, including a failure to deliver the housing benefit in an equitable fashion, the abusive attitudes of the managers vis-à-vis the laborers and the privileging of technical expertise that undervalued their work and gave them a subordinate place in the hierarchy. Towards the end of the meeting, the workers debated the conversion of the socialist labor committees in the enterprise into real organs of power capable of directing the activities of the center. Pledging to go directly to the laborers and to seek out “the real revolutionaries” from among the técnicos, the social development workers ended the meeting with the banging of fists on the tables and spirited calls for “Homeland, Socialism or Death!”
Conclusion

In this chapter, I offered a brief genealogy of the social in Venezuela and its decay with the neoliberal reforms of the late twentieth century. The chapter also explored its revival at the start of the twenty-first with the reforms of the current leadership and the ways in which the social and technical divisions of labor in Florentino and its activities drew upon a specific conception of their mutual interaction. It also showed how efforts to govern the two spheres brought about friction among enterprise experts as well as resistance from actors outside the center.

Reflecting the contradictory alliance of technical and social experts in the Florentino enterprise, the staff of the center was guided by two overlapping knowledge systems which did not always result increased yields, to say nothing of ideal harvests. Finally, the chapter highlighted the inability of technical experts to improve upon the cultivation practices of local campesinos and the loss of face such failures caused.

Based on sedimented social experience, rather than a corpus of special technicized
knowledge, *metis* or local wisdom was often a more effective means of intervening in the local ecology than its high modernist counterpart. Too arrogant or embarrassed to consult *campesinos* below their station, *técnicos* frequently had no better cultivation strategy than waiting for the rains to come, and they often missed their window as a result. Sowing too early or too late, harvests were lackluster. As a result, *técnicos* inadvertently exposed the limits of their power-knowledge and the extent to which it was merely their ability to manipulate the social machinery of the enterprise—the hierarchy of roles, bureaucratic norms and procedures—rather than any special merit, which ensured their position.

As measured by the criteria of output or production, the technical experts occupied a rather arbitrary position in Florentino. The failure to deliver high yields or *dar el rendimiento* was a part of the micropolitics of the center and a frequent topic of debate for the laborers. There was a great deal of talk about the failures of experts leading to critical insights on the part of manual laborers who discerned social criteria might be the basis of the privilege of the caste, rather than any special competency. Yet in spite of these critical insights, the intricacies of running a modern agriculture enterprise, and the occasional successes of the *técnicos*, seemed to weaken the confidence of laborers in their knowledge and to reintroduce doubts into their ranks.

The goal of raising yields was critical to the mission of the Florentino enterprise and this widely accepted justification for the use of technicized systems of production tended to insulate this caste of experts from critique. *Campesinos* could not raise the yields to feed the large urban areas of the nation, and laborers accepted this fact as the rationale for the cultivation strategies used by Florentino (e.g. machinery, chemical inputs). The laborers could question the effectiveness of technical experts in achieving productivist goals, but they could not question the goals themselves, and these goals tended to align with logics that privileged total output over
egalitarian social relations.

The use of advanced technology in the name of productivity and efficiency has historically been a driving logic of capitalist agriculture and its would-be socialist competitors (see for example Lewin 1991, Wolf 1969, Verdery 2003, Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2005, Humphrey 1983). The increasing complexity of the technical division of labor in enterprises with the introduction of such technology leads to a tendency toward specialization of the branches of industry and stratification of the actors. As a result, the laborer is gradually divorced from the knowledges required to operate the entire enterprise and thereby prevented from taking direct control of the means of production (Braverman 1974, Sweezy 1942, Baran 1959, Baran and Sweezy 1966, Mitchell 2002). This deskilling was quite evident in the Florentino enterprise and its model of socio-technical organization.

The state enterprise was organized in a fashion such that laborers could not run the process of production without the técnicos and indeed no single person had all the requisite skills to control the entire system. Moreover, it was also easier to govern the workers when the division of labor prevented the absorption of critical knowledges on the part of laborers. The técnicos had no incentive to teach them and the accepted goals of the project accorded with laborers’ belief that the state [el gobierno] should protect the nation from variable market prices, a vision of the social derived from the history of the petrostate and at least in part from the practices of the laborers themselves. Laborers supportive of the ruling party felt el gobierno should duplicate this social lending practice and protect them from price fluctuations and the distortions of the compradors who controlled the food system, enabling them to buy food at the global market rate or in subsidized programs which negated the effect of such fluctuations.

The next chapter addresses the means by which this social economy was to be
constructed in Venezuela and the state run food system designed to create a clean, efficient and affordable means of distributing food to the population. This system would ostensibly prevent the kind of speculation and profiteering that threatened the food security of the nation, but we find the state system geared toward the social provision of nutrition based on price controls and subsidized distribution, effectively moved the site of distortion from the private to the public sector.
Chapter 4 Food Sovereignty and Security

In the headquarters of Florentino a large sign displayed overhead read, “we are strengthening food sovereignty.” The sign was visible to all who entered the headquarters and it displayed one of the central aspects of the center and its mission: the large-scale production of food for the Venezuelan population. The slogan suggested that food sovereignty was a status that already existed, at least potentially, and that strong leadership would allow it to fully manifest. The nationalization of the oil industry in 1976 certainly raised the prospect for food sovereignty to become a reality in Venezuela. The seizure of the energy sector offered Venezuela a source of income that could ensure the prosperity of the nation and the productive use of its land. Yet the latent potential represented by control of the resource had to be acted upon to achieve real independence.

The takeover of the oil industry created new expectations for the state on the part on the citizenry and the battle for the resource would be major feature of the politics and culture of the era. Capturing the expectant mood of the time, the Venezuelan protest singer Ali Primera articulated the feeling of anticipation and desire for action on the part of the populace in his song *Ahora Que El Petroleo es Nuestro*—“Now that the Oil is Ours.” One of the great cultural icons of Venezuela, Primera is widely celebrated as part of the national heritage and his songs articulate aspirations that frequently serve as the basis for popular conceptions of justice and society.

Decrying the illusory sovereignty Venezuela had endured for more than a century, the lyrics of the song conveyed the hope that with the revenue of the petroleum industry under
Venezuelan control a decisive leadership might finally be able to navigate the tensions of underdevelopment and the long promised “sowing of the oil” could take place. Predicting a national renaissance, the song suggested that leaders no longer had any excuses for the poverty of the nation, and Primera sang that he no longer wanted to see “beggars, sick without hospitals or children without schools.” With the petroleum industry under their control, the Venezuelan government could alleviate human suffering and free the nation from dependency. In the same breath that Primera called for raising the flag, a symbol of this national rebirth, he also called for “raising beans, *tajadas* and rice.” The juxtaposition of the flag with the sowing of crops in the lyrics explicitly tied the claim of sovereignty to agriculture. The lyrics also underscored the absurdity of a rich country that could not feed itself, which he analogized as a square *arepa* or deformed piece of the normally round, fry bread that is a staple traditional food.

Judging that the historical experience of Venezuela with oil had been a false blessing, the lyrics of the song critiqued the dependency that resulted from foreign control of the petroleum industry and the subordinate position of Venezuela in the global division of labor. As a purveyor of natural resources, Venezuela was a nation at the end of a chain of value in which the nations of the global north, especially the US, extracted surplus from weaker nations as they extracted petroleum. As articulated in the lyrics of the song, “We [i.e. Venezuelans] work it, we refine it—sirs, I don’t see the humor in this comedy—that we work, while they have the market.” In this reading of the contradictions of peripheral capitalism, the Venezuelan people endured hunger as a result of lack of control over their own resources. In a clever play on words, Primera suggested that what the people “hungered for” was sovereignty, and with the wealth of petroleum under national control, leaders could convert *soberanía* into *comía* or eating (1976). Yet, as it turned out, the Venezuelan people as a whole did not have the sovereign hunger.
In the years following the nationalization of the petroleum industry, the Venezuelan leadership pursued a policy of free trade and open markets designed to complement the rentier-commercial model founded on this revenue, increasing dependence on foreign imports (Llambi 1988, Rodriguez 2011). Instead of devoting public resources to the creation of an endogenous agro-food system, the food requirements of the nation were more and more satisfied with imports and upwardly mobile Venezuelans cultivated tastes for foreign products *de calidad y marca* or ‘name brand quality.’

By the late seventies, a rising standard of living for certain sectors of Venezuelan society had underwritten the rise of a consumer culture and the increasing prevalence of consumptive habits that served as signs of status. These habits, paired with the presence of supermarkets owned by foreign corporations (see Hamilton, forthcoming), allowed the upper echelons of society to shun native products and favor diets composed of “less than Venezuelan” items. Through consumption, they differentiated themselves from the rest of the nation and over the course of the next decades, foreign food and the places where it was purchased became symbols of entrenched social divides.

By the end of the 1980s, the incidence of hunger had risen sharply in Venezuela and the value of two party democracy was increasingly called into question as successive Venezuelan leaders proved incapable of solving the problem of food security. With its duopolistic structure, the pact of *Punto Fijo* gave power to one of two parties, neither of which appeared able to solve the problem as the price of oil declined and the rising cost of imports placed a heavy strain on the balance of payments. As food imports began to disappear and foreign products were increasingly unavailable even for the well off, the nation was less able to support the lifestyles which had brought a feeling of progress and modernity to society. It was then that the hunger for
sovereignty returned.

During the Caracazo riots in 1989, hungry looters raided grocery stores and there were reported incidents where police merely stood by and watched. Unable to control the rioters and perhaps secretly sympathizing with their motivations, police instead urged rioters to steal in an orderly fashion and avoid violence. Yet this laissez-faire tack was not the only reaction from state actors. In Florentino, I watched a presentation of the Ministry of Culture-funded film El Caracazo, which portrayed the clash of popular groups with the state in the riots. In one especially poignant scene, protesters march to a bridge in the capital where they are met by military forces and the two sides enter into a tense standoff. Unable to cross the bridge, the protesters sit down in an act of civil disobedience and begin to sing the national anthem Gloria al Bravo Pueblo—“Glory to the Brave People.”

After a few tense seconds, officers order the soldiers to fire on the crowd and the rioters are cut down in a hail of bullets. Reacting to the maelstrom of violence, a young intern in the audience exclaimed, “Who is right?! The people or the government?!” One of the social development employees seated in front of the young man turned around in her seat and replied, “The people were hungry.” Narrating events that had transpired before the intern was born, the social development worker justified the actions of the rioters and placed herself on the side of the people, suggesting they had the right to steal. Widespread hunger had eroded the legitimacy of the state whose sovereignty it ostensibly embodied.

The unrest depicted in the film reflected the cleavage between the state and the nation, which emerged from lack of access to food. What the Venezuelan leadership did to close that gap is the subject of this chapter. Here I explore the food security policies of the Venezuelan leadership and the strategies adopted to ameliorate one of the worst import dependencies in Latin
America. In particular, I explore the intersection of the task of ensuring the nation has an adequate food supply accessible to the population and the task of constructing a viable agriculture system that allows the nation to reduce imports. I argue the two aims—food sovereignty and food security—have a more complicated relationship to one another than populist formulas would like to admit. The food policies of the current Venezuelan leadership reflect a series of pragmatic concerns such as mitigating the precarity of resource extraction, reinforcing relations of patronage, and protecting the nation from the global market. These concerns are at least as important as idealistic aims like peasant sovereignty over land, an aim of social movements like La Vía Campesina.

The predicament of resource and import dependency has encouraged the Venezuelan government to adopt the language of food sovereignty and cultivate a political alliance with La Vía Campesina. Yet Venezuelan agriculture and food policy differs significantly from the vision of food sovereignty articulated by partisans of the movement who define the concept as “the right of peoples to raise food in their own territory, respecting cultural and productive diversity” (La Vía Campesina 1996). While the Venezuelan leadership explicitly endorses “the right of peoples to produce food within their own territories,” the vagueness of the category of ‘the people’ opens up the concept to interpretation on the part of its enactors. The struggle to define food sovereignty and fill the phrase with specific content is a central feature of the debates on food policy in Venezuela. The model of food sovereignty enacted by the leadership, I argue, is out of step with the vision supported by La Vía Campesina.

Contrary to agrarian populists who insist that redistributive land reform based on the peasantry is the most efficient and effective means of achieving food sovereignty (e.g. Rosset 2008, Rosset and Martinéz-Torres 2010, van der Ploeg 2012) and those who argue that
Venezuela is a model of such ideas (e.g. Rosset 2009, Schiavone and Camacaro, 2010, Page 2012, cf. Enriquez 2014), I argue that Venezuela is not a particularly good model of this vision of food sovereignty and that the concept has been significantly reworked in practice. This reworking is logical in light of the dynamics of the petrostate and the complexities associated with stimulating domestic agriculture and earlier flirtation with populist reforms that met with few successes.

The Venezuelan leadership’s revision of the concept is the result of a process of trial and error that has resulted in the adoption of a model integrating aspects of both populism and productivism. This hybrid model has allowed certain social classes to take over the food system to ensure access to basic nutrition. These actors, i.e. technical experts, are not the actors valorized in the iterations of food sovereignty favored by social movements and they tend to view campesinos as objects of their efforts, incapable of feeding the nation, rather than fellow protagonists in the struggle.

The Sovereign Hunger

The Venezuelan people as a whole may have had a sovereign hunger in the lyrics of songs like Ahora Que El Petroleo es Nuestro, but it was specific groups in society that went hungry. The song’s lyrics did not accurately reflect the reality of hunger and food insecurity in Venezuela. Specific social actors went without nutrition, campesinos among them. One of the central paradoxes of capitalist agriculture is that the social actors closest to food production are often those most likely to face hunger (Woolford 2010, Isakson 2009). This contention was certainly borne out by my experience in rural Venezuela where campesinos were just as likely the recipients of government food aid as active producers of agricultural surplus. They often
appeared to embody food insecurity rather than provide a solution to it, as La Vía Campesina campaigns propose.

Contrary to the image of the independent peasant farmer capable of producing large surpluses frequently featured in La Vía Campesina discourse, the Venezuelan countryside was often bereft of traditional forms of subsistence cultivation imagined as the basis of food sovereignty, and especially bereft of small scale farmers interested in increasing their yields (see Chapter 3). Agrarian populists who see redistributive land reform based on the peasantry as the necessary basis of food security, and highlight the peasants’ role in preserving the genetic diversity of crops (Isakson 2009), cultivating without fossil fuel (Woodhouse 2010), and demonstrating flexibility and resilience (van der Ploeg 2014) are likely to be disappointed. In Venezuela, very few rural residents fit the description of the independent or self-sufficient peasant capable of provisioning the household solely from the land. They certainly were not present in the areas around Florentino, however much they wanted to engage in such production or managed to supplement their needs. Their absence was a result of the rise of the petrostate in the mid-twentieth century and the emergence of a food system in which trade with the US played an ever-larger role.

One of the main foreign policy tools of the United States, the provision of food aid to Latin America has long articulated the complex and fraught relationship between the nations of the region and their neighbor to the north. After the first and second world wars in which Latin American nations supplied allied armies with food and agricultural products, the US sought to reverse this relation of dependency and make itself the major supplier of food to the region. The Good Neighbor policy treated trade as the key to strong relations between the United States and Latin America as well as the basis of a future regional development and integration plan (see
Friedmann 1993).

Started in the 1960s, the Alliance for Progress was designed to halt the spread of hunger in Latin America and with it the spread of socialism. The Alliance for Progress reforms also made the region dependent on US technology, especially fertilizers and technical inputs. The Alliance for Progress did succeed in halting the advance of socialist governments and the spread of radicalism, but it failed to reduce hunger and in some cases exacerbated it. On the heels of the Alliance for Progress and the Green Revolution, the United States embarked on the Food for Peace program, a drive for increased exports under the guise of fighting world hunger.

Conceived by the former Secretary of Defense and World Bank President Robert McNamara, the Food for Peace program was founded on the Malthusian assumption that world hunger was a product of scarcity. By increasing production and the quantity of food available in the global market, the problem could be easily solved. The plan called for an increase in distribution from surplus producing nations and a loosening of the trade restrictions that were thought to prevent the entry of agricultural surplus into third world nations. The program effectively dumped cheap grain on the developing world.

Progressive social scientists and economists opposed the scheme, arguing that it would make developing nations dependent on flows of resources from other nations and create more insecurity in the long run (e.g. Frank 1976, Myrdal 1975, see Escobar 1995). The plan conveniently disposed of agricultural surpluses generated in the global north and it was adopted with great fervor by mainstream development institutions. The access to cheap grain temporarily aided the urban poor in parts of the developing world, further contributing to the urbanization process already underway, but the plan also had the effect of crippling local food systems creating pockets of rural hunger. The nations of the global south, especially Latin America, could
not compete against free or heavily subsidized food aid and local farmers were displaced, creating a whole new class of insecure subjects. The weakening of the domestic agro-food system via foreign aid was only one of the mechanisms contributing to the spread of hunger.

In 1973-74, a world food crisis effectively aligned with spikes in energy prices, suggested that solving hunger was more complex than increasing production or distribution. It required establishing a strategic balance of sectors, a balance which Venezuela found especially difficult to achieve. In 1944, one of the authors of the first agrarian reform law in Venezuela, Miguel Parra Leon, wrote, “...it is a fact admitted by all that the nations which endure economic crisis best are those that strike a balance between industrial and agricultural activities” (my translation, Leon 1944). This universal common sense, enjoying the status of economic orthodoxy at the start of the twentieth century, was seemingly lost with the rise of a rentier state based on resource extraction. The growth and social transformation predicted by Venezuelan modernizers and widely accepted by the people allowed social elites to ignore the growing dependence of the nation on energy resources and foreign capital and place faith in an urban future without farming.

For most of the twentieth century, agriculture had been a protected activity in Venezuela with elevated levels of public subsidies and price supports (Gutiérrez 1992). Such supports protected the agriculture sector from foreign competition and subordinated the logic of profit to the creation of jobs and rural livelihoods. At least some food was grown in the national territory providing for the consumption needs of the population and buffering the nation from external market shocks (ibid.). Yet by the start of the 1970s, it was believed that petroleum would secure the future of the nation and Venezuela did not need an effective agriculture sector to survive. The nation would be developed long before there was another economic crisis and the increased purchasing power generated by rent would offset any temporary increases in the price of food,
thus securing the nation.

Opening up its markets to foreign competition, the state began to plow revenue into the energy economy and resource sector, losing the critical balance of activities that had preserved a margin of independence. The embrace of neoliberal agriculture policy such as the reduction of state subsidies in the 1980s, an end to land redistribution, and the decline of influence of peasant organizations exacerbated the dislocation of local agriculture producers and food systems grounded in traditional smallholder production. The outcome was a decline in local food production in Venezuela and many other nations in the region, as domestic systems and enterprises were replaced by foreign agribusiness.

In many cases, foreign investment added little to the national economy as foreign corporations often bought already existing enterprises and integrated them into their holdings, making foreign capital parasitic on the agro-systems that had previously been created. While subsistence agriculture never entirely disappeared from the region, it no longer embodied a key part of many national economies, nor did it provide a livelihood for the largest segment of the active labor force. Instead, subsistence agriculture in its purest form became an activity which occupied only the most marginal actors in society, and which was more commonly supported by wage labor and cash crop production (a pattern relatively common across the region)(see Kay 1995 and for a prescient treatment of this trend, see Mintz 1974). Nowhere was this more the case than Venezuela.

By the start of the 1990s, Venezuela had the highest import dependency of any Latin American nation with more than eighty-nine percent of its food coming from foreign sources (Gutiérrez 1995). It was also the only nation in the region to import more agricultural products than it sent abroad. Significantly, the Venezuelan peasantry was also one of the weakest in the
region. The subsistence sector, which had never been especially strong in Venezuela (Roseberry 1989), but yet had survived the myriad changes of the twentieth century, had all but disappeared. The decline of the *campesinado* and the weakening of peasant agriculture in Venezuela formed a vacuum into which the neoliberal food regime was inserted and a new series of vulnerabilities were created as a result.

While describing the ideology that drove the reshaping of the food system, the phrase “neoliberal food regime” is not an especially accurate description of the relations prevailing in Venezuela after the 1990s (cf. Friedmann and McMichael 1989, Pechlaner and Otero 2010). With an abundance of cheap labor and arable land, the nations of the region turned to the cultivation of specialty export crops to earn hard currency. More often than not, the crops cultivated were not food and this strategy of export-based growth led to the obvious incongruity of using arable land to raise flowers or cotton, while large portions of the society were threatened with food insecurity.

Upsetting the hegemony of ruling historic blocs, the neoliberal debt crisis in Latin America in the 1980s contributed to civil unrest and the fall of governments across the region. The end of corn subsidies and the liberalization of the land market in Mexico was a major catalyst for the Zapatista uprising in January 1991, and the eventual fall of the PRI-led government (Fitting 2010). Likewise, the end of price supports in Venezuela was a major turning point and cause of the *Caracazo* riots in 1989 as well as the military coup in 1992.

Shortly after the February coup in 1992, the Venezuelan leader Rafael Caldera spoke before the Venezuelan Congress and addressed the nation stating, “We cannot ask hungry people to immolate themselves for a democracy that has not been able to give them enough to eat” (1992). Even if the leaders had asked the Venezuelan nation, they would have likely refused as
the leadership had lost the consent of the average citizen and there was popular support for an alternative, democratic or otherwise. Faced with a crisis of its political system sparked by a marked increase of hunger over the preceding twenty years, the nation which had fought for most of the twentieth century for sovereignty over petroleum now turned its attention to sovereignty over food.

The Peasant Way

In November 1996, activists of La Vía Campesina, the global social movement devoted to peasant agriculture and family farming, introduced the concept of food sovereignty at the World Food Summit. The concept was an elaboration of the idea of food security, a concept which had informed debate on global hunger for more than a half century. The concept reframed the problem of hunger as not only a technical problem of production and distribution, but also as a problem of democratic access (Patel 2010, Rosset 2003). The declaration of the movement pointed to peasants in developing nations as the actors best equipped to ensure access and the development of more just food systems.

As an alternative to food systems based on industrial agriculture and capitalist logics of profit and accumulation, food sovereignty also meant that price would no longer be the key criteria in deciding what people would eat. Instead, national decisions would reflect the strength of the food system, the culture of food, the specific traditions of the people, and the need to provide employment. Subsequent iterations of the declaration added other criteria, including gender and ecological concerns, which were viewed as consistent with the restructuring of the global food system. In the spirit of anti-colonialism, food sovereignty envisioned a system of autonomous nation-states each with their own local agriculture systems adapted to prevailing
ecological conditions, which would reduce the need for trade and exchange. The declarations emphasized that agriculturalists had the right to produce food on their own lands and that progressive governments should support farmers in their efforts to take advantage of the resources of the nation. Food sovereignty should be the basis for agrarian reform in the global south and it should also stimulate fraternal relations among nations and agrarian social movements.

In Venezuela in 1998, the Movement for the Fifth Republic led by Hugo Chávez was elected on a platform of social and agrarian reform, gaining disproportionate support in rural areas. Utilizing the language of food sovereignty taken from the global social movement, the constituent assembly in Venezuela incorporated the concept in the constitution as an indication of the altered relations between state, nation and food system. Affirming food sovereignty as the goal of national agriculture policy, the constitution enshrined the right to food as a basic principle and the foundation of other rights. Alongside traditional rights like freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of the press, every Venezuelan was guaranteed basic daily nutrition. Several other countries in the region followed suit by writing the concept of food sovereignty into their constitutions or by passage of major pieces of legislation (see Giunta 2014, McKay et al 2014). Yet there were critical silences in the definition of food sovereignty adopted from La Vía Campesina.

The declaration on food sovereignty authored by La Vía Campesina spoke in the voice of the peasant and the nation, treating the two as if they were effectively the same. The “we” in the heart of the declaration was vague and the criteria of inclusion or exclusion were open to interpretation. Presumably the “we” included the entire nation and referred to its citizenry, overlooking manifest power differentials among social actors and the prerogatives of national
governments, which were critical in Venezuela and elsewhere. The declaration also failed to recognize that certain nations might have reasons for wanting to protect themselves from the vicissitudes of the global market, but lack peasantries capable of creating large food surpluses or serving as the catalyst for viable food systems. In such nation-states, the creation of endogenous food systems was more than a question of ‘hailing’ these subjects and offering the resources required to restore agriculture production, as Venezuelans soon discovered.

**An Agriculture of Ports**

Whenever I discussed the status of Venezuelan agriculture with the técnicos in Florentino, the catchphrase on their lips was *agricultura de puertos*. Translating roughly as ‘port agriculture,’ the phrase referred to an agro-food system that was focused outward and which focused on external markets, rather than satisfying internal demand. Internal markets were weak and the agriculture system was highly specialized producing just a few high value export crops. The system operated more or less like a swinging door with the majority of the food required by the Venezuelan people being imported from abroad, while the majority of the agricultural products raised in the nation were shipped out. This port-based agriculture was the source of the chronic instability in supply and prices that threatened the nation and which it was feared could invite foreign intervention.

In a very real sense, food security was national security and food sovereignty was regarded as key for national sovereignty. There was an abiding sense of worry and anxiety associated with the heavy reliance of the nation on food imports, and the fear that the supply could suddenly fail figured centrally in the actions of state agriculture experts. The technical experts and agricultural engineers in Florentino told me with urgency that they estimated the
nation would starve in a few weeks if imports were cut off. A ring of US naval ships around the coast could starve the country, forcing Venezuela to capitulate without firing a shot. They would not even have to attack. Even precluding such a disastrous scenario as a US blockade, the food insecurity was unsustainable and required amelioration. It was not just a technical question of raising output, however; it required changing mindsets.

In addition to attempts to increase domestic food production, the Venezuelan leadership was also striving to reshape attitudes toward food and the food system. The goal of the leadership was to reduce the prestige associated with individuals who consumed foreign products and emphasize the national character of food and Venezuela’s culinary traditions. The campaign for food sovereignty included a savvy media campaign with clever advertisements designed to encourage the populace to eat traditional foods and think about the origin of their diets. Venezuelans had grown accustomed to diets consisting of non-native fruits and vegetables and food sovereignty meant changing these acquired tastes and the values associated with them.

In an effort to mold the tastes of the Venezuelan people, political leaders gave talks on television describing the nutritional quality of traditional dishes like pabellon criollo, which incorporated “all the essential nutrients” of a balanced diet. Leaders declared that it was the duty of Venezuelans to eat traditional foods and appealed to national loyalty and cultural authenticity in public service messages. Venezuelans were called upon to show their loyalty by shifting their consumption habits. In a kind of “you are what you eat, nationalism,” it was the duty of “true Venezuelans” to eat local creole food, which could be grown in the territory while shunning foreign products. This interpellation effectively divided society into two categories: “true Venezuelans,” who ate local creole food and “false or fake Venezuelans,” who shopped in supermarkets and purchased imports. This attack on the culture of dependency was also taken up
At the time of my fieldwork, the image of ‘mangoes rotting in the street,’ while Venezuelans paid dearly for imported fruit was a ubiquitous image of dependency and a critique of the colonial nature of the food culture. Several people I worked with in Florentino made reference to ‘rotting mangoes’ as evidence of the irrationality of the food system and the necessity of changing the mentality of Venezuelans. Native fruits could be had for next to nothing, but they were ignored—and indeed wasted—in favor of imported apples and pears. For these critics, this waste was evidence of an internalized racism, which regarded everything from outside as superior and everything from inside the nation as inferior. The técnicos were frustrated with the gap between the objective ecological conditions in the territory, i.e. what could be grown, and the taste preferences of the Venezuelan population. As one técnico exclaimed with frustration at this situation, “Can you imagine?! A nation like Venezuela is importing fruit?!”

The managers in the Florentino enterprise shared this sense of outrage with taste. Perhaps drawing inspiration from Ali Primera, the head of social development analogized the problem of food sovereignty in Venezuela as the quest for the national dish. He claimed that Venezuela would have food sovereignty when it produced the ingredients of pabellon criollo. “When we have the national plate—eggs, rice, beans, shredded beef and plantain, we have self-sufficiency, then we will have sovereignty.” His analogy linked Venezuelan culture, identity and nationhood to the diet. He asked me rhetorically “what Venezuelan doesn’t eat arepa?” I suggested that perhaps there were “escualidos” [the derogatory term used to characterize the opposition, literally “skeletons”] in Caracas who did not. He conceded that it was possible, but he retorted that “real Venezuelans” ate arepa. Real Venezuelans, who appreciated food culture and its relationship to fidelity with the nation, staffed the ranks of the revolution. Their shared objective
of fidelity to the nation by way of its food system brought them into a practical coalition. Yet the rhetorical populism of food culture was only one part of the food sovereignty movement.

As part of its alliance with La Vía Campesina, the Venezuelan government had built a school of agronomy just a few miles down the road from Florentino. The school was a joint venture between the Venezuelan and Brazilian governments. It brought together teachers, students and activists from the various member organizations of La Vía Campesina and a variety of social movements in Latin America. Included among their ranks were indigenous rights organizations, peasant leagues and groups opposed to the construction of dams. I spent many evenings in the school with the instructors and students after the workday in Florentino, learning a great deal about this group’s dissatisfaction with official agriculture policy in the process.

Instituto Agrario LatinoAmericano (IALA) near the Florentino enterprise.

After having followed the advice of La Vía Campesina, pouring substantial amounts of money into peasant cooperatives and organic cultivation systems in the first years of the agrarian
reform, the Venezuelan government had changed course. So many of the agricultural cooperatives had failed in their first years of existence that the leadership felt a need to reevaluate its model. Long accustomed to subsistence cultivation and unfavorable market conditions, campesinos were not adopting technology to maximize output and they were often content to live off credit. Yields were poor and the increases that did take place were not viable in economic terms. Hence the Venezuelan government switched gears, weakening its alliance with the peasant social movements.

Many of the instructors and students at the school complained that their relationship with the government had become strained and that it was no longer what it once was. The Venezuelan government did not have “faith in the small producer” and the Florentino enterprise was pursuing an all too conventional approach to agriculture. Instead of the organic-smallholder model favored by movement activists, the enterprise was relying on pesticides, chemical fertilizers and technical expertise. This strategy was no different from the high modern, capitalist agriculture they vehemently opposed, and the actors empowered by the center were not the ones they envisioned. While I questioned the activists’ “faith” in the capacities of small producers, I certainly grasped their point about the growth of new power relations in the state enterprises and the social hierarchies that accompanied productive relations portrayed as more efficient means of building food sovereignty.
Private Grocery Chain sign reads, “We accent the Freshness.” Note the apple.

This is Socialism. Everyone Eats.

One afternoon as I was working with the técnicos trying to learn about raising plantain, the President of the enterprise drove up in his white pickup truck. We had been sowing in an open field on the back part of the farm and I was focused on the labor relations between the técnicos and workers and how the former served as supervisors. That day I learned that the technical experts were also closely supervised. The President had come to check up on their progress and the técnicos appeared a bit nervous in his presence. He asked how things were going and he listened as they described what they had done. The nervous look on their faces showed they were afraid of a negative review, but they were visibly relieved when the President was satisfied, praising them with a simple, effective, “Good job, boys.” The incident illustrated to me how much anxiety the técnicos felt about achieving productive goals and the degree of power wielded by those whose job it was to enforce these imperatives. Indeed a performance by the President
following this evaluation showcased to me the critical nature of success in the productive arena and how far the legitimacy of the leadership depended on it.

While we were standing near the field, a group of workers who had just eaten lunch and noting the presence of the President brought out a colander of boiled corn. The President and the members of his staff gathered around him each took an ear, but there were not enough ears for all the people assembled. I wasn’t particularly hungry, so I declined the offer, saying, “No thanks, don’t worry about it.” The President of the enterprise, noting the appearance of scarcity and a chance to make a point, insisted that I eat and bid the worker to return to the house and bring me another one. The worker went back into the house and returned with another colander full of corn. The President turned to me and stated grandly, “This is socialism—everyone eats.” The gesture was designed to deflect attention from the fact that the state enterprises were not making up for the deficit of food production at the speed desired, and there were still shortages. The President could not stand the appearance of scarcity in the vanguard socialist enterprise, and the performance endeavored to show me that the dearth was to be overcome. Yet no matter how much Venezuelans made an effort to eat local, creole food, Venezuela did not produce the volume of food necessary to feed an urban population of 27 million. If the goal was to have everyone in the nation eat, interim strategies would have to be adopted while the state enterprises worked to increase domestic output.

One of the most urgent tasks of the new Venezuelan government after its election in 1998 was to improve the food security of marginalized sectors of the population. Among the first and most popular of the new government programs was *Misión Mercal*. The program providing subsidized food at below market prices paid for with revenue from the petroleum industry, delivered food via a chain of state run grocery stores around the country.
Located in the areas where food insecurity was greatest, the Mercal stores carried basic staples such as milk, rice, beans and meat, providing daily sustenance to large parts of the population. The subsidized products, at times offered below the cost of production, improved accessibility and were some of the only places the poor could afford to shop. At the same time, however, there was a marked unevenness in the stores. Some Mercal stores were fresh food supermarkets with meat, fruit, vegetables and a wide variety of products, while others were tiny corner bodegas chronically short of items. In spite of these drawbacks, the mission was intensely popular with average Venezuelans and the Venezuelan leadership sought to expand points of access in the network. The program also delivered food to the state enterprises and work sites where they did not have established stores and to distant areas where people would wait in line for long hours. The program’s popularity caused the Venezuelan leadership to make up for supply shortfalls by creating a second program directly supervised by the state oil company.

Started in 2005, PDVAL or Productoras y Distribadoras Venezolanas de Alimento was designed to both provide employment for women, as direct producers and through jobs in the distribution network, and food security for the population at large. The mechanism of distribution for the program consisted of a fleet of large trucks, which arrived in neighborhoods in the early morning causing long lines of waiting patrons to form. The workers described attending PDVAL events where fisticuffs had broken out when customers at the front of the line purchased too much product, leaving little for those behind. PDVAL had been forced to establish rules limiting the size of the purchase to prevent the eruption of smaller-scale versions of the food riots that were sweeping the global south (see Schneider 2008; Bush 2010, Ghosh, 2010). Some violence was linked to deliberate attempts to disrupt distribution. Political ads sponsored by the Venezuelan leadership featured actual footage of a well-dressed woman grabbing a bag of rice at an event saying, “This should be in the supermarket!” As the workers wrestled with her,
the bag of rice tore open, spilling the grains on the pavement. The ads were an effective propaganda tool, conveying the idea that the opposition would rather see food destroyed than see it get into the hands of the poor.

By contrast, the distribution events held every few weeks in Florentino were relatively orderly. Held near the headquarters on the basketball court, the programs enabled center employees to purchase food from one of the state programs and they waited patiently in what they considered a line. Yet there was always friction between the programs. In Florentino, I had the opportunity to interact with employees from the various food programs and I got a sense of how the programs interacted with one another. In spite of claims that the various food programs were supposed to complement one another, it was evident there was competition for a customer base. Mercal would sometimes have a distribution event right after PDVAL and there were fewer customers as a result. The workers in Florentino did not seem to be able to distinguish one program from another and often mixed up their names, missions, and objectives, and thus did not always purchase according to program guidelines. Workers were not the only ones who were confused about the objectives of the programs.
During my first PDVAL event in Florentino, I was introduced to the mostly female employees of the program. In the process of asking several questions about their work, one of the women suggested I talk to the head of the PDVAL program. I was disoriented, however, when she directed me to speak with a man in his mid-thirties sitting on the nearby bleachers. I walked over to the man and introduced myself as a resident student in Florentino and I told him that I was conducting research on food sovereignty in Venezuela. As it turned out, his wife worked in the department of crop production and I had met her on a previous occasion, so the two of us were able to start an amicable conversation on that basis. Over the course of our conversation, we talked about the goals of his program and its major activities. He described the quantity of food distributed that year as a record for his branch of the program and PDVAL in general. He also took our conversation as an opportunity to burnish the credentials of his program over that
of its “competitor,” Mercal.

Leaning over to me and speaking quietly in my ear, he said, “PDVAL has the advantage. There are always shortages with Mercal. We have more meat.” I had already heard speculation that PDVAL would replace Mercal as the favored state food security program and this seemed to confirm what I already suspected: sectors of the state were working at cross-purposes and there was a rivalry among the programs. No doubt PDVAL employees were eager to garner the resources of the other state program for themselves and whenever I talked to representatives of the PDVAL program, they seemed ready to affirm criticisms of the other distribution plan. Their program was more consistently provisioned than its competitor, or so they said, and it had better selection and higher quality products. This fact, however, rested on the origin of the products. The name of the program was “Venezuelan producers and distributors of food.” But I learned there was more distribution than production in the project. The program was obtaining foodstuffs from other nations and thus was cheaper to operate than Mercal, which was subsidized and required the use of Venezuelan products. Técnicos in Florentino told me derisively that the PDVAL program was distributing meat from Argentina and milk from the Antilles and that the Venezuelan government flew planes to the Caribbean to supply the network. The técnicos felt the program negated their work and threatened domestic growers. To make matters worse, the programs were also marred by scandal.

One of the Florentino employees told me of small-scale corruption taking place in the program, including a scam in which employees sold products at prices higher than the rate established by the subsidy. Because consumers were often unaware of the official price, they would accept the word of the program functionaries and pay the higher requested fee. The employees in turn pocketed the difference and the consumer was never the wiser. Reports of
kickbacks connected with food distribution programs were widespread, and they were also a source of tension inside the ranks of the ruling party. In 2010, Ricardo Fernandez Barrueco known as “the Czar of Mercal” was arrested on corruption charges for illegal bank transfers (Pearson 2009, Fuentes 2010). Previously an ally of the Venezuelan President, Barrueco had distributed food during the 2002 coup against the government, as a way of fighting back against the destabilization efforts. He had been rewarded for his loyalty with an ever-widening sphere of control over the food system. In the process, he had amassed an immense personal fortune, including 29 companies and several banks, and had come to represent a new class popularly referred to as los Boliburgeses or “the Bolivarian bourgeoisie.” These pro-government businessmen who had personally benefited from and enriched themselves through ties with the socialist state, tarnishing the image of state programs. Corruption was not limited to private businessmen working with the state, however.

In 2010, the President of PDVAL was implicated in a hoarding scandal. Program officials were found to have been hoarding meat in government warehouses in hopes of driving up the price. The meat had gone rancid and attracted flies as well as the attention of state workers who reported the hoarding to police, leading to the arrest and indictment of key officials (Suggett 2010). The evidence of corruption as well as competition in the state food programs was waved away by a few of the experts in Florentino. But it was transparently obvious that both existed and others openly admitted it. The existence of the two programs alongside one another seemed to breed tension between their respective functionaries and to interfere with, and even prohibit, the emergence of any coherent agro-food policy. The competition between the two programs, however, did not bring the Venezuelan government any closer to resolution, as the competition among suppliers in traditional capitalist markets might have. Not only was the conflict no closer to resolution after several years of in fighting and turf wars, but also there was already another up
and coming competitor.

**The Communal Markets**

In late July 2009, the head of social development returned from CVA headquarters in Barquisimeto. He brought some news that would prove consequential for the operation of the center as a whole and his department in particular. He had attended a meeting of officials from the various socialist enterprises around the country and the leaders of the CVA had informed them that the company was starting a new food distribution program. The program was geared toward the residents of marginalized communities near the state enterprises and Florentino was selected to participate as one of the pilots of the project. The state enterprises would serve as a network for the distribution of CVA products and guarantee food security in vulnerable areas.

The CVA distribution plan was geared toward “the most vulnerable in the community” and officials listed single mothers with children, the elderly and unemployed as the intended recipients. These people, who were assumed to be chronically food insecure and lacking in means to provide for themselves, would be delivered food free of charge. In addition to bi-weekly deliveries of free food to these vulnerable residents, the state enterprises would also hold weekly market events or *mercados comunales* in which other non-designated residents could purchase as much food as they wanted at “solidarity prices.” The head of social development spent the next several days touting the official line that it was our duty to charge *un precio justo* or “a just price,” and avoid replicating the behavior of the class of compradors that controlled the Venezuelan food system. Yet here again the food security problem was to be solved, not at the point of production by *campesinos*, as the accepted reading of food sovereignty required, but by means of a socially controlled market price and state industry.
In contrast to the capitalist market, which was purportedly chaotic and oriented solely toward the pursuit of profit, these communal markets were tailored to meet the needs of marginalized portions of the nation and were thus a manifestation of social solidarity. Cleaving tightly to the official line of the leadership, the social development manager further distinguished these markets from capitalist markets by telling us that unlike capitalists markets, these ventures would be ‘planned.’ It was our responsibility to organize the delivery of the food in an efficient and regular manner. In particular, we were told we would need to coordinate our efforts with the center’s Department of Commercialization, which was responsible for marketing products and tackling budget issues. By utilizing the social development department’s infrastructure, we would ensure that the program was carried out in the best possible way. But first there was the matter of selecting a site.

On a large table in the social development office, the social development experts spread out a map of the surrounding area, so we could search for an appropriate site. We were looking for a site in the nearby area, which did not have any outreach programs. We finally settled on a cluster of poblados just south of the enterprise. The cluster of poblados with names like Masparro-Guafita and Masparro-Cambur were in relatively close proximity to the enterprise, but they had no connection to the center as yet. Next came the task of organizing a visit.

One of my friends had the unenviable task of organizing transportation for the project. This entailed significant difficulties. The social development department was chronically short-changed in the allocation of enterprise resources, including vehicles, and while other units had their own small fleets of trucks, social development only had one. To make matters worse, the other departments frequently borrowed this single vehicle and the truck labeled number ‘23’ was derisively referred to as “the whore of Florentino” because, in the words of the social
development workers, “everyone has their hands on her.” The import of automobiles in Venezuela required a special license and imports were severely curtailed to support domestic assembly. There were long waiting lists to buy vehicles and speculation in automobiles and corruption associated, including a political scandal involving opposition politicians who were convicted of hoarding vehicles to raise the price. The center was short and the project plan mattered little if you didn’t have trucks.

The center appointed a chief of transportation to coordinate the various resources available. The chief of transportation was a disagreeable character with a gruff voice and bad temperament, which made dealing with him hard. He had a difficult job to be sure and that may have contributed to his behavior, but all the same he was not well liked in the center. My friend Luis would often imitate his voice in the office and have me in stitches. Yet in spite of the interpersonal difficulties, Luis had managed to secure a vehicle for us and a few days later we set out to investigate the poblados.

The first poblado, Masparro-Guafita, was composed of a cluster of small fondos or land allotments with names like La Soledad and Canta Clara. Straddling a dirt and gravel road with houses on either side, the condition of the community was rather shabby. But Luis seemed more concerned about how to apply the criteria of the enterprise to the program and he was hoping to find leaders to work with us. We spent nearly an hour looking for the leaders of the council, but we could not make contact with anyone. Nobody in the poblado seemed to know where they were and the social development employees took this as a sign that we should move on.

In the next poblado, Masparro-Cambur we found a different situation. Although it was much the same as the first in terms of its level of development, this community was better organized. We stopped and asked the local residents if they had a council and who “the
“president” was. An older man quibbled with Luis over the terminology, saying they preferred the term “vocero” or speaker as opposed to president. Luis asked where ‘he’—or as it turned out “she”—was to be found. The conversation yielded a contact number for ‘the president’s’ cell phone and she arrived later in a truck, pledging to help us in whatever way she could. “Did they have a consejo communal?” Luis inquired. “This is already organized” was the answer.

When we returned to the office, the social development workers decided in a rather arbitrary fashion to join the two hamlets into a single unit with the more ‘reliable’ council functioning as the liaison for the Florentino enterprise. From the standpoint of the social development workers, the two poblados Masparro-Guafita and Masparro-Cambur were now a single entity: Masparro-Cambur-Guafita.

Over the next several weeks, social development workers surveyed the residents of the poblados gathering basic data about household incomes, employment history and dependent
members in an effort to gain a sense of the standards of living and households that might fit the criteria of the program. Yet the data proved hard to obtain. The power of bureaucratic optics notwithstanding, the mercurial nature of human interpersonal relations made it extremely difficult, if not impossible for government experts to obtain up to date and accurate information about the areas they served. The shifting relations of dependency in the households mirrored the vicissitudes of labor markets in the region. Temporary residents, tempestuous marriages, and work migration all meant that individuals were constantly moving in and out of the area, and more than a few of the households seemed to form and reform with regularity. Thus, it was difficult to determine who was “a single mother.” What did it mean to be ‘a single mother?’ Did it refer only to a woman’s marital status? Or did it refer to her material relationship to a male income earner? The social development employees had a hard time sorting all this out and they often relied upon the manual workers from Florentino to make these actors socially legible. The workers were tied to the residents in these poblados with bonds of kinship and familiarity, which gave them intimate knowledge of the social relations.

The survey results, when they were finally obtained, generated several neat tables of data, including the names of the residents, their civil status (i.e. single, married, divorced, separated, common-law or widowed), level of schooling (whether they had completed primary or secondary education) and profession. But the straightforward presentation of the information disguised the intricacy of the social relations it was intended to represent and the extent to which the data depended upon the subjective evaluations of the surveyors.

According to the survey, the two poblados together had 59 women and 50 men in residence (although as I have suggested the category of ‘resident’ was far less precise than it appeared). The majority listed ‘obrero’ or laborer as their profession, yet several of these
residents also described themselves as working *por propia cuenta* or “self-employed,” suggesting a confusion as to whether the category of *obrero* referred to income from wage labor or whether they regarded the nature of their work, i.e. physical labor, as the basis of their status as ‘workers.’ It was also difficult to understand how many of these people could actually be engaged in the type of labor that would give them this status. Older people who described their profession as ‘*obrero*’ likely referred to their previous work history, rather than present activity. The rest of the residents listed a “small business” such as ‘carpentry’ as their major source of income, and a few residents had *tiendas* or small stores that generated some income. By and large, however, the customers of these businesses were other members of the *poblado*. Hence, their main function was to recirculate cash that was already present in the community, rather than to draw in ‘new’ money. A few of them claimed to live off their own farming, and there was evidence of marketing of the harvest when a chance presented itself, as in the case of one resident who sold a social development worker a bag of yucca for a family gathering. However, most of the residents were integrated into the cash economy through wage work in agriculture, petty trading, or by the receipt of funds from family living in urban areas.

A great many of the residents were elderly and past their prime years for intense physical labor. Although they may have described themselves as “workers,” they were often reliant on cash flow from relatives, if they were so lucky. They were also often caring for children or grandchildren. The trickle of remittance funds was likely precarious and barely sufficient to care for the members of many of these households. Thus these individuals were designated as potentially ‘food insecure’ and the main recipients of the free food we would deliver.

‘The markets’—the term used to describe both the delivery of free food and sale at “a just price”—involved a considerable degree of planning and coordination on the part of the enterprise
staff. Every two weeks the social development department had the task of organizing the communal markets and preparing sacks of food with the proper contents. Based on the survey data we had collected, we were given lists of households which we consulted as part of the preparation, adding a certain quantity of each food type based on whether the household had infants, small children, or other vulnerable subjects.

The goal of giving food to the insecure seemed admirable to me and I enjoyed being involved in the work. Yet the staff of Florentino were considerably less enthusiastic. These food distribution events took place on weekends and were staffed by enterprise employees in their usual roles (social development workers liaising with recipients, truck drivers helping with delivery, etc.) as part of trabajo voluntario or “voluntary labor.” Following the example of the Argentinian-born, Cuban leader Che Guevara, the plan encouraged the use of moral, rather than material incentives, as compensation for hours of unpaid labor and office workers were expected to sweat alongside obreros as part of cultivating socialist consciousness. The leaders of the Florentino enterprise were given orders from the officials of the CVA to organize work teams and staff were expected to perform voluntary labor in the service of social need and they did so—albeit with little excitement.

Everyone in the Florentino enterprise, theoretically, had the choice of whether to participate in the communal markets, but in practice, everyone knew it was obligatory and workers referred to such work as “involuntary, voluntary labor.” The staff of social development was often called upon to do more than its fair share of the labor, leading one of the women in the department to remark to her colleagues that ‘the pretty girls’ in the other units never had to do any work. In light of the obligatory character of the labor, it is not surprising that the efforts were not always well-executed and often yielded lackluster results.
The markets were frequently less than successful, and they often took place late in the day with residents going home after hours of waiting, having lost their patience. We always had trouble with the availability of trucks for the mission and were frequently forced to use personnel buses, loading up the bags of food on the seats as if they were people. The products delivered from the various branches of the CVA to Florentino were also scheduled to arrive on Thursday, which would afford us two days to prepare before the markets on Saturday. Yet, more often than not, the products arrived late and this created a last minute scramble at the end of the week to pack the bags. This caused the staff to sarcastically call the project ‘mercados no-planificados’ or “unplanned markets.” In addition to the chaotic character of the preparations for the markets, the weekend events were an exhausting affair and workers constantly protested about the arduous physical labor associated with them.

If the scheduled workers arrived on time (which they seldom did), the work started at 7 a.m. and lasted until about 5 or 6 in the evening. The plan required strenuous physical labor in the heat of the day and few employees were willing to give up their weekends for it. Consequently, I became a critical and at times, seemingly indispensable member of the team. After a few weeks, I was automatically factored into the organization of the markets by the head of social development and the phrase “O.K. this week it will be Aaron, Luis and Alejandra” became a running joke. Even before I left the field, my colleagues were already anticipating how hard it was going to be to run the markets without my presence, since the other employees had no desire to participate.

On Saturday mornings, the unfortunate few selected for ‘voluntary work’ duty gathered in front of the headquarters. The well-dressed office employees accustomed to air conditioning and work behind a desk were often unwilling to exert themselves during the mission and were
largely along for the ride. They would sit in the truck while we carried heavy bags in the heat. These office workers who felt their station placed them above manual labor were impervious to criticism and could not be goaded into helping, no matter how much we tried. Over time, we came to resent their presence and would have preferred if they had just stayed at home instead of keeping up the charade. We spent the days leading up to the market loading up the trucks with bags of food from the warehouse and checking inventory: palettes full of beans, rice, sugar, powdered milk, coffee, cornmeal and pasta. When traveling outside the center, I was greeted with some troubling scenes and I began to understand what employees had meant by the stark contrast between life in Florentino and “the reality of the Venezuelan countryside.”

The CVA’s concern with providing evidence of delivery (a means of ensuring accountability) meant the recipients had to sign a receipt record. This proved to be difficult in a setting with high rates of illiteracy. In most instances, the recipients were elderly campesinos or young men and women who had had few educational opportunities. Thus frequently, they couldn’t sign their own names. Instead, we had to use a pad of black ink to take thumbprints. A couple of days we forgot the pad on deliveries and had the recipients mark an “X” on the line in lieu of signature. Whenever we met a recipient capable of signing the form, we would inevitably have to wait while the person painstakingly formed the curves, loops and lines of his or her name, seemingly remembering the pattern more than the significance of the letters.

Not surprisingly, we ran behind in our deliveries as a result of delays and Luis wanted to speed up the process. Often I would carry the heavy bags to the door, especially when the recipient was elderly, and after several weeks Luis began to protest that it was taking too much time. Personally, I thought these people had probably carried plenty in their lives as their faces showed hardship, and I could certainly carry a heavy bag to the door for an elderly woman. Luis
and I argued a bit about it. “She’s a campesina—she’s strong, she can do it.” In spite of our arguments about the deliveries, we were unified in our belief in the project. As part of the deliveries we made, I saw many deathly skinny and undernourished people, which I found reminiscent of the images of the prison camps in the Balkans. One older man lived alone in the campo on a small plot in a house surrounded by mango trees and fields of sunflowers as far as the eye could see. He was little more than skin stretched over bones and the truck drivers like to engage him in horseplay to test his vigor when we made deliveries. Another house with a dirt yard was occupied by three elderly people who we came upon one afternoon in the middle of meager lunch. As we walked back to the truck, Luis remarked, “you see those three viejitos [elderly people] eating a can of sardines and arepa? Those are the people we are helping.”

The residents began to anticipate our arrival. Recognizing the truck, they would come out of their houses to meet us. After several weeks of deliveries, we knew the recipients fairly well and as it happened one shared the surname of the social development manager. Upon our return from the delivery, Luis joked with the head of his department saying that we had visited “his cousin,” playing off the obvious difference in their social status. His reaction was decidedly negative. There were many such cases of vulnerable groups in the area, but one particular case stands out in my mind.

One of our recipients was a woman in her late thirties who lived with her two daughters in a small house. The woman’s frail body and visible skeleton combined with what seemed like an impossibly large head atop a spindly frame were physical deformities that were the identifiable result of chronic childhood malnutrition. She had two daughters, but I thought it was a wonder she could bear children at all. The técnicos who worked on the project remarked on the health and beauty of her children, which they believed marked a stark contrast with their mother.
Here was the legacy of the deprivation years of the 1980s when the price of petroleum had declined precipitously and millions of Venezuelans found themselves living in increasingly precarious circumstances. The vagaries of the petroleum economy and the circulation of capital in society were etched into human bodies. Sadly, her misfortunes had not stopped there.

One night while walking home intoxicated, her husband was killed in an accident. The man had tripped and fallen in the roadway and passed out where he was later struck by a truck driving down the unlit road. The widowed woman and her two daughters were now living alone and she was classed as a “vulnerable” person in need of aid. Yet there was not a great deal of sympathy among the técnicos. Indeed some of the técnicos laughed cruelly at the story of the death of her husband, and after we left the house one of the técnicos parodied the incident by taking his right hand and slapping it against a closed fist to imitate the sound of the truck hitting the man. I did not think the story was funny at all and their jokes were especially cruel in light of the kindness the woman regularly showed us. The woman was very friendly and conveyed worry that I would burn in the sun using the universal racializing trope that my ‘beautiful white skin’ would “turn black.”

By the time we reached her house near the end of the delivery route, we were always badly in need of water, which she supplied. In turn, I always carried the food parcel into her house, no matter if we were running behind schedule or not. With her frail body and seemingly brittle bones, she did not look able to lift the heavy bags and Luis never argued with me about carrying the bags for her. One of us always brought the bag to the door or sat the delivery in her kitchen. She was one of the human faces of the project, but she also embodied its contradictory logic. The dependence of rural people on petroleum-funded imports had damaged their bodies and food security in the past. Now petroleum-funded imports were offered up as the solution to
food insecurity in the case of the PDVAL and Mercal or in the case of the CVA program, raised in enterprise paid for by the state oil revenue. What had previously been the basis of insecurity in the private market was now conceived as the means of guaranteeing her security and that of her children when placed under the supervision of state institutions. The programs were paid with the same source of revenue and the structural terms of the dependency had not changed remarkably; they were still derived from oil, only the locus of the dependency had changed.

Several months into the program, Luis attended a meeting at CVA headquarters designed to evaluate the progress of deliveries and to clarify the logic of the selection process. The program had to confront the reality that shifting prices and the mercurial nature of state funds derived from petroleum were used to pay the cost of solidarity. The officials emphasized that the priority of the plan was to care for households headed by single mothers with multiple children. It could not cover all the disadvantaged in society. Some subjects were to be emphasized over others, and it was not hard to detect the logic of social triage at work in the program (Biehl 2011). Luis described the selection criteria and rationale of the CVA leaders as follows: “We can’t help it if older people go hungry. Our job is to be sure those children have enough to eat.”

The Venezuelan leadership had limited resources and officials wanted to devote those resources to subjects who might be future productive members of society, but who could not be cared for in the present. They certainly wanted to take care of the elderly whenever they could, but officials also hoped to create a new generation of Venezuelans who would never know hunger. It was the idea of a social rupture or break with the past that the leaders had in mind. With the criteria of women, as reproducers of the nation, and indexes of its overall health, were regarded as the point of entry. This is hardly surprising, yet what was somewhat unique was the role the state played in relation to them. The state was a kind of *pater familias* or father figure that served as the guarantor of the social stability of women, their children, and the nation.
In contrast to neoliberal ideology which regards the responsible individual head of household (usually male) as the guarantor of the security of his dependents, and not coincidentally sovereignty, in Venezuela, the state replaced the masculine subjects who had abdicated these roles or proved unable to ensure social reproduction. The state was the basis of food security, and Luis took seriously the idea of protecting a new generation of Venezuelans through his work. But as the difficulties of the project began to take their toll on him and the other ‘volunteers,’ their utopian strivings began to recede and they became increasingly frustrated with the efforts.

Because I showed up to every distribution event, it became evident that I was the only one in Florentino consistently willing to engage in “voluntary labor.” The heads of the enterprise noticed the fact and in a meeting of the managers, the President of the enterprise was purported to have said, “We should follow Aaron’s example. He has more of a sense of belonging here than Venezuelans!” A friend in social development echoed the sentiment both flattering and
offending my political sensibilities by saying, “Aaron is like a modern Che Guevara. He came to another country to fight for socialism.” In my view, I had done little to warrant comparison with the man Jean-Paul Sartre called “the most complete human being of our age” (Alexandre 1968). Such praise, for what I regarded as ordinary compassion, signaled a lack of devotion to the project and a business-as-usual attitude on the part of much of the staff. The prevailing attitude among most of the office workers was that they were above physical labor and it was rare to see a person actually taking up the work with any eagerness. My sincere interest in the project thus marked me, as a “true believer” in the eyes of social development experts.

If the técnicos and obreros did not have the sense of belonging which would encourage them to engage in extra labor or behave as if they had a stake in it, as the senior managers worried, it was because they did not have such a stake. The work was not coupled with an increase in material compensation or real control over the terms of labor. Thus, they found it difficult to take up “voluntary” tasks with any great fervor. The staff of the headquarters was composed of individuals who either felt too privileged to perform manual labor or exploited by overwork, as in the case of the social development employees. This placed an undue burden on the rest willing to pick up the slack. To see anyone taking on the burden readily, (as a researcher in my position easily could) called forth the image of Che Guevara, the self-sacrificing revolutionary, and a fair amount of self-deprecation on the part of the social development employees who regretted that they could not find it in themselves to make such sacrifices.

My friends in Florentino may have thought I acted like Che Guevara in light of my desire to perform ‘voluntary labor.’ but the official who headed the communal markets actually looked like Che Guevara. Later in the year, I was able to attend a meeting held by the CVA leadership in a state enterprise not too far from Florentino. Sitting with my friend Luis, I listened as officials
began the meeting with a short slide show presentation on the purpose of the markets. The assembled representatives of the state enterprises were informed that the name of the program had been changed from ‘communal markets’ to ‘socialist communal markets.’ The lead official quipped about the name change and the addition of a single word saying, “Sometimes it takes a while for the name ‘to settle.’”

Each of the functionaries present was asked to give a short report on the progress of the markets in his or her area. When it came Luis’s turn to speak, he revealed that midway through the program we had changed our modus operandi and had begun accepting ‘donations’ for the food from recipients. It had not occurred to me at the time that this was corruption money, although in hindsight I cannot imagine how I did not see it. I had thoughtlessly assumed it was an effort to defray the cost of production or to pad the budget of social development. There were lots of silences and incoherences in the practices of state workers in Venezuela and the program outlines were rather vague, so the receipt of money seemed fairly innocuous to me. It turned out, however, this was actually “the cost of doing business” and it likely went straight into the pockets of at least one of the managers in the enterprise. The officials very quickly detected that we were engaged in a less than honest practice and they offered a stern rebuke.

One of the officials who had been silent now stepped up and offered a populist tirade criticizing us. Luis was not in a position to refuse the instruction from his superiors to gather “donations,” but he nevertheless bore the brunt of the criticism. “We don’t exploit the community. We sell at a just price. We are not trying to make a profit here. We are not Arabs!” the official exclaimed. The racist tone of his invective, which compared us to the caste of small storeowners who charged ‘unfair prices,’ angered me, but as a guest with a tenuous status who had been invited to the meeting, I sat silent and held my tongue. When the first official had
finished his tirade, the head official who looked like Che Guevara then asked us how much we had charged for the deliveries. We had accepted fifty Bolivares Fuertes per package, which still reflected a real savings for the recipient, but this was too much. After considering the money collected, the head official decided the amount we accepted was too high.

From his perspective, the issue was not so much that we had taken money from recipients, but rather the rate. The rate, he suggested, should be more modest and less extractive: instead we should ask for twenty-five Bolivares. While our group was the only enterprise that openly acknowledged engaging in the practice (and this may have been Luis’s way of pushing back against corruption), such practices were rumored to be widespread in the state sector. I found it difficult to believe that we were the only ones who had come under such pressure and the fact that the official offered a quick answer also suggested to me that he may have given this response before. The other markets selling at “a just price” could have been subject to this same kind of practice, as Luis and others asserted. Although I did not personally witness such padded transactions in Florentino, there was little reason to believe they were not a regular part of the CVA programs when the category of buhonero or individual who sold state products for profit was widely used (Dutka 2014). The only saving grace for the program was that the food was not defrayed with a heavy subsidy and ostensibly reflected the cost of production, making it harder for employees to add a profit onto the price. Selling the products at such a high price would have been more easily detected and made the products less competitive when compared with the private market and other state programs.

After the dressing down of the market participants for a series of failures and inadequacies, the leaders allowed questions and comments from the audience. A young woman in her twenties stood up and spoke against the tenor of the meeting. “It’s not only the leadership
who gets to criticize! The revolutionary process is critical and self-critical,” she protested. By this she meant that the leadership should also bear some of the responsibility for the shortcomings of the program and any instances of malfeasance. The officials claimed they welcomed the criticism, but the look on their faces betrayed the fact they were not happy about it and they were clearly unused to this practice of accounting.

Afterwards, I talked with Luis about the incident. While he did not seem phased by the racist overtones of the leader (in spite of the fact one of our closest friends was Arab-Venezuelan), he was nevertheless disturbed by the attitudes of the officials. During Luis’s report, he had brought up the issue of vehicle shortages that were hindering our deliveries and causing cancellations, but we were not given a concrete solution. The official I thought looked like Che Guevara had an austere response: *Hay que resolver*—“It has to be resolved.” The statement was notable for its lack of a clear subject. Exactly who and how the matter was to be resolved seemed of little concern to him. Luis seized upon this indifferent attitude and said to me, “We can’t make trucks appear from nowhere.”

Luis and I both marveled at the appeal to the force of will on the part of CVA officials who seemed not to understand or care that the prerogatives of the Florentino enterprise managers diverged from their own. Nor did they understand how the uneven allocation of resources in the center prevented us from supporting this shared socialist vision. Our dedication to the revolution could not make up for lack of material resources. Hence calls to revolutionary spirit rang rather hollow to us, and Luis and I talked about the problem in the Marxist language of ‘contradictions between the forces and relations of production,’ a language with which he had some familiarity as a graduate in sociology, but which I doubt he would have used without my having offered it. I underlined that if we weren’t afforded the right tools to carry out our work (i.e. if we didn’t have
a pickup truck), we could hardly establish a stable relationship with the residents of the area and ensure regular delivery. Nor could we resolve these issues on our own.

The markets were supposed to be regular events, taking place at the same time every weekend, which would have allowed recipients to become used to a pattern. Yet we could not make this happen. The leaders expected us to behave flexibly when it came to the resources of the Florentino enterprise. We should be “creative” and develop ways to solve the problem and execute the plan ourselves. In other words, the officials did not wish to intervene in the details or cause a scandal by intervening in another agency.

For the time being, we would have to keep delivering the food aid much as we had been while diverting money to the pockets of the leadership. The social development employees never discussed this openly in the department and no justifications were made for the practice on the part of the Florentino leadership. It seemed a fact of life in the center that was tacitly recognized, and which we would have to continue. Yet the relatively transparent corruption associated with the programs was not their most problematic aspect. The food security programs and their compatibility with the logic of agriculture policy were increasingly being called into question. It was one thing to distribute the products of the CVA to marginalized groups, since the products came from inside Venezuela. It was quite another matter to distribute the products of other nation-states, as in the case of Mercal and PDVAL, which had no specific mandate to deliver Venezuelan food. How long could this go on?

10, 20—or 200 years?

The last market in which I participated took place in late April 2010 and it was by far the most
arduous of my fieldwork. Those of us selected to participate worked the entire day without stopping to rest or eat and by the end of the day all the ‘volunteers’ were exhausted. Several of the enterprise workers complained of the degree of exertion that day and my friend Luis was feeling especially fed up. Riding in the bed of the delivery truck on our way back to the center, he protested at the lack of equity in the allocation of work hours and stated that the burden was borne by the social development workers because they were the ones who cared most about the project. They were the ones who always had to work and as Luis testified, they were exploited because of their care for the rural poor. “Social development always eats the dirt,” he stated flatly. As if by providential force to give weight to this assertion, a large cloud of dust kicked up by a tractor working in a sugar cane field hit us in the face. We spent the next few minutes spitting grit out from between our teeth with Luis remarking rather fatalistically, “See what I mean, comrade?”

After we left the enterprise, we went to Luis’s house to watch a special weekend long edition of *Alo Presidente*. On the show, the Venezuelan President discussed the critical role of the communal market program in ensuring food security. Chávez excoriated ‘the chaotic character’ of the capitalist market that arises spontaneously from the tendency to barter and truck, and contrasted this image with the markets of the Venezuelan government, which were an expression of the true socialist ethic. Luis’s spirits were somewhat lifted by hearing the President mention the critical nature of the work he was doing. Although he had just grumbled, “…after ten years of revolution, Chávez has done nothing,” he became more circumspect and revised his appraisal. “Well, maybe if this is still the same society in twenty years, then we can say Chávez didn’t do anything.” I replied ten years—even twenty years—was not a great deal of time for a revolution to remake a society, especially when it was sabotaged, and when its leaders were not entirely in control of the means to achieve its goals. Luis seemed somewhat heartened by this
remark and reassured that things were at least moving in the right direction. Yet I myself was unsure of the trajectory of the revolution and where the reform efforts were heading. While I offered my friend reassurances out of a feeling of obligation and sincere belief that what he was doing was worthwhile, I had my own doubts about the future of food sovereignty. The task of changing tastes and replacing food imports was hardly complete—indeed government officials admitted as much—and certain programs were threatening the goal, yet a hybrid model was already in the works.

In 2010, the Ministry of Agriculture established a special fund called *El Fondo Bicentenario* in recognition of the two hundredth anniversary of independence. The fund was designed to support domestic growers producing select crops such as coffee, tobacco, and cacao. Yields were directed to geopolitical allies such as Iran, Syria, Belarus and the member states of the EU. The fund provided support for local agriculture groups to increase the extension of their operations, using the typical language of support for small and medium producers. Still the export orientation of the fund seemed to explicitly contradict the endogenous orientation of food sovereignty and its emphasis on production for internal consumption.

The official release on the program in the state of Barinas spoke of the reputation of Venezuelan products abroad and boasted that “[t]o speak of Venezuelan coffee and cacao in France is to speak of high quality.” The release also noted that the state of Barinas had signed a trade accord with France for the export of cacao beans and the neighboring state of Portuguesa had signed an agreement for the export of coffee. The governor of the state of Barinas and brother of the President, Adan Chávez, while delivering a speech on the program, affirmed that recent changes in the strength of the currency would help “strengthen import substitution” and replace currently imported products while allowing Venezuela to increase agricultural exports.
“With import substitution for export, we are collaborating to guarantee the food sovereignty of the country” (my translation, 2009). The statement sounded incoherent and it appeared to evade the manifest contradiction of an official policy that straddled several, largely incompatible, objectives. The object of import substitution is usually the creation of internal markets for domestically produced goods, yet here officials were talking about increasing exports likely to generate a source of foreign earned income as an alternative to the petroleum economy. Venezuela was not an importer of chocolate and had no reason to import coffee from other states. Thus, it was not substituting imports by subsidizing their production.

The official policy was designed not only to increase domestic production, but also to stimulate the export of agricultural goods to earn revenue. It was a continuation of the export dependency which Venezuela had known in the 19th century, and which had never entirely disappeared. While preserving rhetorical allegiance to the concept of food sovereignty, including valorization of small and medium producers, the Venezuelan government was leaning heavily toward activities that generated profit as the key criteria for state aid. The central government was developing the productive capacity of its lands and increasing yields wherever it could, while distributing ‘culturally appropriate food’ consistent with the populist definition of food sovereignty. Nevertheless, more efficient forms of production and profit motives were also leading away from ‘the peasant path.’

The practices associated with the food sovereignty project in Venezuela were indeed contradictory. The leadership’s practical understanding of food sovereignty did not match the normative definition of La Vía Campesina and it appeared that particular interest groups bent the concept to suit their own exigencies. Official policy lacked an overriding logic. Not only were there tensions between high tech enterprises and peasant producers, but the distribution of
imported food also worked against domestic production of all kinds (state enterprise or peasant based). This contradiction was not lost on the technical experts who held onto the autarchic promise of food sovereignty.

I was never able to confirm if PDVAL trucks were actually loaded onto cargo planes and “flown to the Caribbean” to be loaded with imported milk and other products, as técnicos alleged. The image, however, nicely captured the anxiety and frustration felt by the class of technical experts. It was a fact that many or most of the products sold by Mercal and PDVAL were not grown in Venezuela. Ironically, the nation was shifting its import dependency from the United States to Brazil and other allied nations as part of a trade pact called The Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas. Many of the técnicos voiced their disquiet with this fact and made it clear they were not sure they wanted to replace the dependent relation on the US with another nation.

The CVA program thus was trying to bridge the gap between food security and food sovereignty by distributing home grown food. But it was also effectively competing against other sectors of the state apparatus and the private market. Remaining faithful to the goal of producing the majority of the food within the national territory as the true basis of food sovereignty, the técnicos were not satisfied with the pragmatic distribution of foreign imports and CVA officials lobbied the leadership to cease distributing such products in favor of their own internal production. Even so, they would have great difficulty imposing their views as countervailing logics and pressures increasingly forced the hand of the central leadership and pushed leaders to make concessions.

From Agrarian to Alimentary
Near the end of my fieldwork in 2010, the head of social development told me that the CVA would undergo a change of name. The company would no longer be referred to as the Venezuelan Agrarian Corporation. Instead, it would now be called the Venezuelan Food Corporation or *La Corporación Venezolana de Alimento*. This new name, downplaying domestic agriculture production in favor of a more general concern with the food system, reflected a shift in policy that had already been quietly underway. The new name was a tacit recognition of the fact that the activities of the company were no longer in keeping with its original mandate, that they were no longer confined to the sphere of production and that its mission was now much broader. The newly restructured state corporation, embracing the entire agro-food system, was designed to put an end to the turf wars and overlapping markets of the various food programs, concentrating the process of production and distribution in the hands of a single entity. The various food programs under the authority of the state oil company and other divisions of the Ministry of Agriculture were transferred to the newly reorganized company over the objections of officials who incurred significant losses for their bureaucracies. But the threat of the new corporation was not limited to bureaucratic groups inside the state. The new company clashed with the private sector and acquired more assets as a result.

On March 3rd 2009, the Ministry of Agriculture declared the forced takeover of Cargill, one of the largest agricultural corporations in the country. The assets of the company, concentrated in rice production, were to be taken over and integrated into the state food corporation. The transnational had refused to cultivate rice for regulated prices and by the end of the year its fixed capital investments had been taken over. The expropriation of Cargill was followed by a wave of such seizures across the nation (see Suggett 2009a, 2009b, Pearson 2009). For the first time, the takeovers not only affected the privately owned estates and processing industries, but the retail sector as well. The seizure of retail stores like the Franco-Colombian
chain *Cada* was precipitated in part by the hostility of the private sector to state regulation and the refusal of these stores to carry the products of the state food company (see also Lares 2015).

The antipathy of private capital to the ruling party and the desire of owners to preserve relations with their favored suppliers caused the stores to try to block competition from the state. The Venezuelan leadership in turn retaliated by issuing a decree forcing the outlets to carry the state brand or be subject to expropriation. The stores that held out against the decree were eventually seized and converted into state property (see Ellis 2010). Shortly after I left the field, a wave of such takeovers cut deeply into the retail sector with the negotiated buyouts and wholesale expropriations indexing a broader trend of the state moving into the commercial sphere.

The move effectively gave the Venezuelan state its own chain of grocery stores known as *Absastos Bicentenario* and an ability to twin the productive function of the state enterprises with market distribution. The state sector meanwhile was also slowly choking off the class of compradors and speculators blamed for food insecurity. It seemed as if the ruling party had devised a clever strategy to weaken its opposition and take control of the existing infrastructure by way of a clever arrangement of legal conditions that engineered the failure of certain companies.

While I worked in Florentino, one of the slaughterhouses in the state of Barinas was found to have been hoarding meat in an effort to artificially drive up prices. The ruling party had used this example of price inflation as an opportunity to move against the owners, stepping in to take control of the assets (Correo del Orinoco 2010, see also Fischer-Hoffman 2015). The same scenario played out in several in other instances during this period. Each time the Venezuelan leadership instituted price controls for a specific product and adopted measures against
speculation, business owners ignored the price controls or inflated the prices, giving the ruling party a chance to step in and take their assets (see Economía América 2010, Méndez 2015).

The strategy effectively enlarged the state sector, but it did not always help the technical experts tasked with increasing output, nor did it always help the average Venezuelan. The price controls provoked acts of sabotage and “strikes” by the private sector, causing prices to rise and officials to step in and offset the increases with greater food aid. The growing lines of customers waiting for the food programs, however, did not enhance the image of the Venezuelan leadership, nor abate the growing perception that the nation was in the midst of a food crisis. A friend who worked as a truck driver in Florentino borrowed the words of the official news media reports of “capitalist crisis in the global north” to articulate his own concerns. Evaluating the rising cost of food against his own, meager wages, he said, “we really are in crisis” by which, he meant both his household and society. Affluent Venezuelans, meanwhile, complained of a lack of variety in supermarkets and the disappearance of foreign products from shelves. Italian and American brands were disappearing and they were replaced by imports of milk, meat and other products from allied nations. This translated into a threat to the lifestyle aspirations of the urban cosmopolitan classes. To many of these Venezuelans, the crisis seemed a return to the worst era of the social and economic crisis in the late 1980s. Unlike the past, however, they argued the ruling party was artificially creating the crisis, a view increasingly shared by some supporters of the revolution.

**Disappearing Agriculture**

On June 5th 2009, a strongly worded editorial appeared in the pages of the major newspapers around the country. The editorial written by Alberto Domingo Rangel, a writer and social critic
long associated with the left, was entitled *La Agricultura Desapareció* or “Agriculture Disappeared.” The editorial addressed to *El Comandante*, criticized official policy suggesting the revival of agriculture was a risky, if not impossible task. The editorial was especially poignant since the criticism came from within the ranks of the revolution and the author was long associated with socialist causes. The editorial suggested efforts to revive the agriculture sector were “quixotic” since nothing was left upon which to build an agriculture sector. The isolated ‘oases’ where agriculture had survived were a kind of ‘sarcasm’ or exceptions that proved the rule. The Machiques district in Zulia and the state of Barinas were the last outposts of a faded system that had been dealt a mortal blow by the rise of the petrostate. Efforts to revive the system were going against what the author regarded as irreversible transformations that were set in motion nearly a century earlier. Speaking of the path of national development, Rangel wrote, “Look at our rural areas and you can see: Venezuela has no agriculture system.” He acknowledged the veracity of the official claim that an embargo was the fastest way to starve the country, but he contended that it was the Venezuelan leadership that was enacting one by blocking cheap imports. The leadership was forcing undue hardships on the people by closing the ports to trade and the very real problem of food imports being cut off came not from the United States, but from the populist leadership in pursuit of an unattainable goal.

The tone of the editorial was a bit histrionic and perhaps overstated the degree of danger in the plan, but the histrionics underscored a real contradiction in official policy. The reduction of food imports required to build up the domestic agriculture sector menaced the food security of the nation. The policies described as leading to food sovereignty were actually having an opposite effect: raising the cost of living for the average Venezuelan and weakening local agriculture. The objectives of food sovereignty and food security did not translate as easily into each other as official discourse asserted, and the editorial implied they might actually be
incompatible.

Instead of balancing each other in an organic synthesis as official discourse suggested, food sovereignty and food security existed in an uneasy détente. The efforts to build a new agro-food system based on local markets and growers, and the populist food programs distributing cheap imports, were contradictory. There was no foreseeable way out of the impasse, however. Food was not reaching the most vulnerable groups in society and the leadership decided the state had to step in and take over the regulation of the food system to ensure access. Still there were divisions in the ranks of the leadership over how this should take place.

The leadership’s early foray into agricultural cooperatives including the project at El Charcote had resulted in very low yields and the leadership had beaten a tactical retreat from the populist policy that brought higher prices. This shift caused a rift in the ruling coalition, dividing its supporters into two camps: populists and productivists. This distinction may be overdrawn, as the two groups had overlaps in terms of their adherents (and certain individuals were situated between the two with the ideology of both groups influencing their thinking). Nevertheless the two camps were discernible.

The populist group was chiefly composed of peasants, students and members of the various social movements. This group had an *a priori* commitment to the *campesinado*, which I respected, but which I also found blinded them to Venezuelan realities. I shared many of their criticisms with regard to official policy and the inequities emerging in the new agriculture model. Yet the reform of the agro-food system envisioned by populists, based on petty producers and small farmers with the option of trading surpluses on the open market or marketing harvests through the state, could not be created by a peasantry that did not exist. The neocolonial relationship with the United States could not be severed overnight and without a strong
agriculture system to fall back on, a significant reduction in food imports meant serious
sacrifices for the Venezuelan people. I required evidence that a populist food system based on
the peasantry could replace what already existed and the Venezuelan people required evidence
that such sacrifices were worthwhile. Yet there was already evidence to the contrary. “The
disaster of the cooperatives,” as it was referred to by technical experts, caused the leadership to
alter its course and adopt a strategy which tilted more toward the authority of expertise and
capital-intensive systems, giving the productivist faction the upper hand.

The productivists were largely a caste of experts in state enterprises who relied on
technical systems and who were unwilling to depend upon campesinos they deemed
underproductive, inefficient and backward. These people were modernizers who thought that
they were the actors best equipped to handle the crisis of agriculture. These attitudes were readily
apparent among the técnicos in the Florentino enterprise who treated campesinos with disdain.
The productivists were granted a leading role in the agrarian reform, as evident in their prestige
and ample salaries. They were the ones who would ensure the food sovereignty of the nation by
providing adequate nutrition.

In the Florentino enterprise, the productivists definitely had the upper hand, but their
efforts were not free of friction. Florentino was sending corn to the state processor in the nearby
town of Sabaneta to make flour for arepa. Yet the state enterprises were funded by foreign
capital and in their own way reflected a lack of food sovereignty. The state enterprises were
constructed with capital from China, Brazil, Argentina, and in the case of the flour processor
near Florentino, Iran. The state enterprises were funded with loans to make up for the potential
shortfall in petrodollars and the loans from these nations were thought to be more secure than
traditional lenders. But in exchange for investment, Venezuela was compelled to partially open
its markets to products from these nations.

Even experts aligned with the ruling party quietly whispered that Venezuela had merely switched its dependency from one group of nations to another and that talk of food sovereignty was just that—talk. The two key sources of imports, the United States and Colombia, were progressively being phased out, with the second nation complaining at what it called “an economic blockade.” It seemed Venezuela had shifted the focus of its dependency, rather than its nature, as import policies that served to mitigate short-term food insecurity worked against food sovereignty in the long run. Despite this effort to shift priorities, it became increasingly apparent that even the short-term measures were not working out, as state stores experienced shortages and the leadership was forced to institute rationing.

**Conclusion**

This chapter underscored key contradictions in Venezuelan food policy and its divergence from the concept of food sovereignty as articulated by La Vía Campesina. The chapter showed that the goal of increasing domestic food production was not wholly compatible with reliance on peasant producers and even the high tech systems of production in enterprises like Florentino could not immediately meet the demand (cf. Purcell 2013). Instead of a rigorous, well thought out plan of intervention into the food system, the state distribution programs were a series of quick fixes and half-measures to deal with the fallout associated with restructuring agriculture. The programs buffered the worst effects of the transition to a new agro-food system and protected the most marginalized actors in society. Yet the programs were also taking on tasks that were ultimately incompatible with the goal of achieving productive independence. The distribution of cheap or free food by the Venezuelan state—much of it imported—met a non-negotiable material need of the population. But the distribution of such food hampered domestic production and the growth
of internal markets. The state enterprises could not compete with the price of subsidized imports and peasant producers had their own troubles entering saturated markets. Yet producers were not the only group affected by official food policy.

The redistribution of income is a major factor governing the pull for commercially produced food in the global south and the construction of domestic markets in Venezuela required an increase in the average household income to succeed. This increase could only come from the redistribution of revenue from the oil industry, which tended to bolster resource dependency. The Venezuelan leadership was striving to reallocate capital resources in fashion that could create stable internal markets, capable of absorbing increased output, while supporting the project of rural industrialization. Yet it was difficult to achieve both populist and productivist objectives at the same time.

The average Venezuelan had to have the purchasing power to afford food that was higher priced than foreign imports and state enterprises had to generate the right quantity of food, at the right price, while defraying their own costs of operation. This entailed an intricate balancing act in which the various factors of production and distribution had to exist in just the right proportions, or the project would fail. It was not always clear the Venezuelan leadership was succeeding in establishing this intricate balance.

When the various factors could not be brought into alignment, the Venezuelan leadership began to develop a series of short-term remedies or patches designed to straddle the gaps. Yet what were billed as temporary measures had all the hallmarks of becoming permanent institutions as sets of interests began to cluster around the projects and the leadership marched forward into an increasingly uncertain future. It seemed that no matter what the Venezuelan government did a degree of pain would be inflicted upon the population. The nation was caught
in a classic ‘Catch 22’ situation. The polices required to ensure food sovereignty over the long
term entailed a degree of sacrifice and even insecurity in the short term as the rising price of food
affected key government constituencies and eroded popular support. Yet this was not the only
aspect of food sovereignty that was less than popular.

The guiding slogan of the CVA was “Producing Food for the People, Constructing
Popular Power.” As my research at Florentino showed, the degree of popular power involved in
the food programs was questionable at best. The CVA behaved in a fashion that was more likely
to encourage communal councils to become passive recipients of food aid or extensions of the
existing state apparatus, than active protagonists in the struggle for food sovereignty. The
councils were used as a means of organizing residents and delivering food to their areas. Yet it
could not be said the food programs were examples of popular power. Instead, they were deeply
pragmatic endeavors, using existing technical actors, working through their biases and
inclinations.

If there was any activism on the part of the councils I worked with, it was in asserting
their right to the aid of the benefactor state or the claim to a portion of the wealth from the
petroleum industry. The idea of the right of citizens to social benefits was very strong for both
workers in Florentino and the campesinos nearby. Thus there may have been a conception of
popular power in rural residents’ appeals to the deliverers of food security. But again, this was
the notion of the right to state largesse, rather than exercise of direct control over food
production. Peasant control over land and its various uses was largely irrelevant to the operation
of state food programs, and campesinos did not exercise real control over distribution where I
worked. Food sovereignty of this sort was at best an unrealized ideal in Venezuela. It was also
not likely to take shape as the ever-increasing cost of benefit programs drove the leadership to
adopt logics of scale and efficiency, relying heavily on state enterprises and technical expertise.

Nevertheless, a certain relation between the state and citizens was visible in these spaces of interaction. The various CVA food programs perpetuated a reification central to sovereignty: the idea of the state as an agency separate from society, which stands above its subjects. The patron-client relations established between the paternalist state and average Venezuelans were a manifestation of sovereign power, and an exercise in obtaining consent for the leadership. Every two weeks state enterprise workers arrived in the hamlets and bestowed a care package on residents of these neglected areas. “This gift” from a state institution made the agency real in the lives of these actors, and in this sense, I was part of the magical state (Coronil 1997). Perhaps it was not magical in the sense of exceptional, but it was magical in the sense of an ordinary event whose causes are mysterious.

Although the lack of familiarity of campesinos with bureaucratic processes often meant they made requests beyond our capabilities (e.g. the paving of roads, electrification, the blanket distribution of food), the food programs bolstered the idea of the state as the incarnation of the sovereignty of el pueblo. Rural residents frequently tried to verbally barter political support for integration into the food program, suggesting residents felt like they were a favored group with at least some agency. Campesinos who were not as yet integrated into the food programs often approached us and not only described their need, but also their loyalty to the ruling party and the fact that they had always been “muy Chavista.”

In these interactions, state employees mediated the ostensible sovereignty of el pueblo by deciding who would be integrated into the program and who would not. Sovereign power rested in the hands of a state apparatus that was largely staffed by university-educated experts who did not have the social status or class origins of the groups they served. It was clear this caste was
responsible for delivering food security to the rest of the nation. Thus the populist call for food sovereignty based on the campesinado or ‘the masses’ was in tension with the paternal and sectional character of the state, a tension that eventually opposed sectors of the campesinado to the state.

The next chapter takes up the issue of bureaucracy and popular power and the contradiction between government functionaries who claim to act in the name of the people and the efforts of social groups that constitute this public to contest state practices that violate their ostensible sovereignty.

Social development workers discussing criteria for inclusion in the CVA food program with members of the council.
Chapter 5 Dependency and Development

Development or rather the failure of development was arguably the driving force for the coup led by an army lieutenant colonel in the early hours of February 4th 1992. For much of the twentieth century, Venezuelans regarded themselves as members of an up and coming nation destined to take its place among the affluent societies of the world. The development projects sponsored by the Venezuelan government and funded with revenue from the petroleum industry were taken as evidence of progress and the impending arrival of modernity. Showcasing the technical prowess of the Venezuelan state, these projects captured the national imagination and won consent for elites by calling forth aspirations for total societal transformation. Building on the promise of a bright future, Venezuelans dreamed that one day they would be rich. With efforts to industrialize the country in the 1970s, there was every reason to believe the nation would reach first world status. Yet by the start of the next decade, this vision was revealed as a fraud and the society, which was to have been rich, turned into a society that struggled for its basic needs.

In the aftermath of the Caracazo in 1989, Venezuela was beset by disorder and wracked with instability as the existing ruling circles were discredited. As the utopian aura linked with the project of sowing oil receded, feelings of anger began to settle in. The lack of consent for rule in turn sparked further unrest as a group of military officers calling themselves the Bolivarian-200 Movement staged an armed revolt. Faced with a coup, President Carlos Andres Pérez appeared on television to make an appeal to the armed forces to abandon the revolt, and the revolt was put down. But the absence of legitimate authority surfaced again a few months later when another coup took place. The threats to his rule growing, the next year Pérez was impeached. The first beneficiary of his fall was Rafael Caldera.
A senior statesman and founder of the Christian Democratic Party, Caldera held the office of President in the early 1970s when he pacified a leftist insurgency and convinced guerillas to lay down arms in exchange for amnesty. In the lead up to the 1994 elections there was widespread hope Caldera would repeat this feat and restore order. In a move, matching the exceptional nature of the historic conjuncture, Caldera broke with the pact of Punto Fijo—the two party system which had shaped Venezuelan politics for most of the twentieth century—cobbling together a unity coalition bringing together the parties of the right and newly legal left. In the parlance of the campaign, Caldera declared that he had assembled a *chiripero* or “lucky charm” which could unite the badly divided country.

The wheeling and dealing associated with the formation of the coalition saw the rise of such unlikely figures as Teodoro Petkoff, a former guerilla and leader of the Movement Toward Socialism, and the legalization of the Venezuelan Communist Party. The inclusion of such forces in the ruling coalition seemed to suggest receptivity to popular demands on the part of the new leadership and a willingness to reevaluate austerity. Yet the avowed socialist Petkoff turned out to have as much zeal for structural adjustment as his more conservative colleagues and the continued pursuit of neoliberal policies by the second Caldera administration opened up space for forces to the left of this coalition (Muñoz 1998). Although still in prison, the case of colonel Hugo Chávez had by now become a *cause celebre* and the campaign for his release had grown into a movement. In a calculated move to bring Chávez into the fold, the newly elected Caldera pardoned the young military officer and invited him to join his coalition. Yet upon his release from prison, Chávez set about forming his own political party and in 1998, ran as a candidate for president, capturing fifty-six percent of the vote. This surprise election victory shocked the Venezuelan establishment and brought an end to nearly fifty years of two-party rule. Shortly thereafter, Pérez fled the country, fearing incarceration or worse.
In his inaugural address to the Venezuelan Congress, President Chávez pledged to break with the hated policies of the Washington Consensus and lead a reform process that was “...as much state as necessary, as much market as possible.” What this ‘third way’ was to mean in practice was anybody’s guess. Yet what was transparently obvious was the degree to which Venezuela had suffered at the hands of international lenders and the extent to which broad sectors of the population were willing to pursue a new course. The IMF and World Bank had used Latin America as a testing ground for their policies and the results from the neoliberal laboratory suggested their experiment had failed.

Over the preceding decade per capita income had declined 10-15% in the region and the figures for overall growth were not much better. Other key measures of wellbeing had also deteriorated, and to make matters worse, the fiscal disciplining of the region had not even managed to salvage solvency (Solimano and Soto 2005). Efforts to stabilize the economy were enacted at the expense of rising inequality and this inequality was not offset by restoration of the structural resilience of the economy (Solimano 2006). Heavily in debt and beset by one of the worst banking crises in history, at the start of the 1990s, Venezuela was on the verge of collapse.

Accounting for the meteoric rise of Chávez and the rapid shift in the political landscape, one of the técnicos told me the 1980s had been “lean years” and the IMF had given them “bad medicine,” as he placed his hand at his throat to show they were supposed to choke it down. By the late 1980s, a counter-consensus had developed in Venezuela, which stated that the rapid growth model followed in the previous decade had been badly executed and the high debt to income ratios it entailed left the nation exposed. Venezuela had taken on far more debt than was sustainable and when global energy prices dropped at the start of the next decade, Venezuela was effectively bankrupted.
At the start of the trouble in the early 1980s, the Venezuelan President Luis Herrera Campins had lamented that he had inherited “a mortgaged country” and he could do little to support development. As in much of the rest of Latin America, the eighties became “a lost decade” for development in Venezuela as the nation endured massive reductions in social spending and the cure for weak growth proved to be worse than the disease. The inequality exacerbated by structural adjustment and an onerous debt burden led to rising frustration among the lower classes of society (Ellner and Hellinger 2003). Disarray in the political system also added to this atmosphere of organic crisis, which as Gramsci (1971) noted, is a time ripe for “charismatic men of destiny.” To many Venezuelans, Hugo Chávez appeared such a man.

In the aftermath of his first election victory in December 1998, President Hugo Chávez declared that the Venezuelan people had stood up and made a revolution. Yet in spite of the radical nature of his rhetoric, the stance of his government toward development was remarkably unchanged. Although Chávez placed greater emphasis on cooperation and suggested that development was “a collective endeavor,” the model of growth endorsed by his leadership was essentially the same as had been put forward in the 1970s. The model envisioned a central role for the Venezuelan state in the economy, regarding it not only as the engine of growth, but also as the arbiter of social conflict. The Venezuelan state would use the revenue of the oil industry to support development efforts, sowing its profits into state enterprises as it regulated the market and defended the interests of the nation from foreign competition. From this standpoint, the agenda of the new leadership was not so much a radical departure, as a restoration of the status quo. Whatever the superficial resemblance of the unrest which brought Chávez to power to revolution, the rupture was also notable for its continuity with twentieth century development policies. In my view, a Venezuelan leader would be insane not to promise development in light of the fact that it is universally desired. But what is it about the concept—its substance or lack
thereof—or this iteration of development that has allowed it to host a variety of aspirations and to survive even a revolution?

In this last chapter, I disentangle the interplay of factors that together constituted the endogenous development program of the current Venezuelan leadership and the way in which one Florentino project drew upon this vision. I take as my starting point the useful distinction between Development as intervention into a society with the goal of achieving specific ends, and development as a conception of the unfolding of history in which the nations of the global south are imagined to be destined to achieve standards of living enjoyed by the north (Hart 2009, Cowen and Shenton 1996). The failure of the latter to manifest at the end of the twentieth century in Venezuela, I argue, is the basis of the practical-discursive assemblage deployed by technical experts to create a self-supporting economy capable of meeting the needs of the nation. While much of the rest of the world has abandoned the Rostowian project of the total uplift of underdeveloped societies (1952, 1962), the revival of this project in Venezuela at the start of the twenty-first century, I argue, is tied to the history of the petrostate and the precarity associated with resource export.

In the chapter, I explore the forces which have allowed this vision of development to become deeply ingrained in society, and function as a normative state of being which citizens feel their society has yet to achieve, a claim made by various actors on the Venezuelan state, and a description of the process of capital accumulation. In an effort to explain this case of “development after development” and what supporters of the Venezuelan government construe as its absolute opposite—dependency—I argue that dependency theory still has much to teach us (e.g. Furtado 1970, Dos Santos 1970, Quijano 1971, Galeano 1971, Cardoso and Faleto 1979, Prebisch 1981), but that its insights must be augmented with attention to the logics of power in
such interventions.

Not all development projects work against dependency and why sovereignty should be regarded as the solution to precarity is the subject of interest. I present an analysis of the Florentino cattle-breeding project as a case study of endogenous development and the tensions it seeks to negotiate. My focus is how efforts to build a better cow intersected the logic of capital and the logic of government which seeks to improve the health, wealth and welfare of the population (Foucault 1991a: 100). For Foucault, deliberate intervention into society, takes the form of biopolitics or the regulation of bodies, heredity and species. The cattle-breeding project intervened directly on the species by way of its genetics to restore sovereignty and improve the health, wealth and welfare of Venezuelans. The link between social reproduction and cattle suffused the everyday practices of the técnicos involved in the project and its raciological terms became a way of talking about identity. Yet the biopolitical logics of the project, which treated the species as an agent of social change, intersected the logic of capital in a fashion that weakened its overall effectiveness. The strategy of commercializing the breed to defray budgetary costs worked against its technical specifications for certain ecologies and while the state enterprises used resources which had long been underutilized, the pursuit of profit undercut the intended use of the breed to remedy deficient subjects. The breed was not able to target the actors slated for intervention by technical experts due to its price, yet the subjects regarded as “deficient,” ironically, were also valorized as the source of sovereignty by the elected leadership.

**Endogenous Development**

In 2007, I visited a government development project in the western part of Caracas. Known as *El Nucleo de Desarrollo Endógeno Fabricio Ojeda* or Fabricio Ojeda Endogenous Development Nucleus, the project was located in an especially crime ridden part of the city on the grounds of a
former PDVSA gas station. The site, I was told, had become a disposal ground for murdered sex workers in the past decade with several bodies having been discovered. But the site was now being recuperated into a project for women, and state employees discussed the significance of the project in terms of this reversal: from a place associated with violence against women to a site which sought to lift them up. Yet the gates of the nucleus were adorned with images of two men.

The sign above the entrance gate of the nucleus featured an image of Fabricio Ojeda, a guerilla leader from the 1960s who took up arms against the central government in a bid to overthrow the ruling party AD and an image of the Venezuelan President with the words “Fabricio, we are taking up your banner.” The sign suggested that the Bolivarian Revolution was the successor to a previous generation of struggles and President Chávez, a successor to an earlier generation of leaders. Yet the terrain of battle had shifted decisively and whereas in the twentieth century the left had started insurgencies in the rural areas in hopes of encircling the cities and capturing the state, after the popular revolution, as it was called, the left ruled the strategic heights of power. Now they would win the battle for production.

An urban counterpart of the Florentino enterprise, Ojeda received visits from foreign delegations and guests and it was a showpiece of socialist industry. The Venezuelan leadership was starting up new industries that could make use of raw materials drawn from inside the country and the large supply of available labor and Ojeda was the first of what were later hundreds of endogenous nuclei designed to make use of the massive labor surplus generated by the rise of petroleum and the restructuring of agriculture sector. The nucleus was composed of two factories making uniforms and shoes for school children and civil servants, items that required limited skills, technology, and capital. The plan was to start with a simple value added
industry and work up to more complex systems of production.

President Chávez described the plant as an example of the autarchic model of development favored by his government and as opposed to the neoliberal market based on free trade and unequal terms of exchange. With its internal market orientation, the endogenous nucleus was the opposite of the petroleum industry, which was outwardly focused and oriented toward export markets. In step with past projects, the model of development envisioned the gradual replacement or substitution of imports with local products fabricated with ever more sophisticated technology.

President Chávez acknowledged this was an old idea in Latin America and the project was not especially innovative in this regard, but new conditions seemed to augur a more favorable conclusion to efforts (Bruce 2009). The record high petroleum prices meant the Venezuelan government had to take out fewer loans from foreign creditors to finance the construction of these sites and the new state enterprises were not as capital intensive as the projects of the past. Ojeda was still a project of state directed development funded with petroleum revenue and foreign capital. But the public-private partnerships of the 1970s which required profits for the private investor, and were financed with private capital from the global north and international aid banks, were in many cases replaced by state-to-state agreements with other nations in the region (Brazil, Argentina) or the global south/east (Iran, Russia, China). It was hoped this strategy would allow Venezuela to steer a more politically and economically independent course than under previous regimes and the Venezuelan leadership publicized its efforts by distributing hundreds of thousands of free copies of El Proyecto Nacional Simon Bolívar (2007). The plan described the role the endogenous development nuclei would play in the reconstruction of the nation in enthusiastic, but measured tones.
Set to take place over five years, the plan was reminiscent of the industrialization programs of the Soviet Union, but also of AD governments in the 1970s. The plan underscored a move away from mining and natural resource extraction toward a more diversified and balanced model of growth, including agriculture and manufacturing. The program also called for a shift in the relative proportions of the state and private sectors, enlarging the former at the expense of the latter while instituting a new category of ownership known as “social property.” The latter category comprised cooperatives and collective enterprises funded with public revenue designed to involve larger sections of the society in productive labor.

Yet instead of risky exposure to heavy industrial projects that might not be completed before a drop in oil prices, the plan called for a sober rebalancing of the national economy, as Venezuela slowly weaned itself off key imports that could be fabricated domestically. The plan was more modest than the breakneck pace of industrialization advocated in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and was designed to let the nation catch its breath during times of low energy prices and resume development once conditions were more favorable. This strategy would allow the nation to progressively improve its position and survive periods of economic downturn. But why this plan would be effective when other versions of the strategy had failed was not discussed in any great depth. Nor did it specify exactly what kind of ‘socialism’ the leadership envisioned.

Whereas the AD governments of the 1970s had been virulently anti-communist, cutting off trade and diplomatic relations with Cuba and the Soviet Union, these development projects drew on Cuban aid and support. Yet whether the leadership was striving for social democracy or Soviet-style socialism, and just how radical the reforms would be, was unclear. This plan would transform society in step with the vision of progress put forward in the 1970s, but against the vision of the twentieth century where hopes for modernization had been embodied in petroleum,
this time round, the aspirations and desires for progress would be incarnated in the figure of the cow.

Entry gates of the Fabricio Ojeda Endogenous Development Nucleus in Caracas.

The Bovine Mystique Redux

In 2007, INTI experts explained to me that the Florentino enterprise was on the cutting edge of scientific research in agriculture in Venezuela, stating rather matter-of-factly that they were “working with semen.” Expecting me to know what they meant, but reading the confused look on my face, they quickly added “of the bull” to be sure I did not think anything strange was going on, or that they were making a dirty joke (which was a frequent practice of rural experts). Yet upon closer inspection, there was something unusual going on in the center. The objectives of the breeding project, which were crystal clear to those involved, were far from self-evident to me and the unpacking of the mystery of the project became a major goal of my research.
The objectives of the Florentino enterprise were very similar to those of the Thaba-Tseka project studied by Ferguson (1991). The Thaba-Tseka project aimed to facilitate the commercialization of livestock and the conversion of “traditional” cattle herders into more entrepreneurial actors. Likewise, a core objective of Florentino was to increase the productivity of herds and market an improved breed to Venezuelan ranchers. Both projects aimed to intensify the output of meat, crops, hay and fodder, and to increase the value produced per hectare over previous, less intensive methods (traditional rotational grazing in Lesotho, and massive, under-utilized *latifundia*, in the case of Venezuela). Yet unlike Thaba-Tseka where international development experts had no legal authority to enclose land or compel herders to join a grazing association with Lesotho’s courts overruling their efforts, Florentino had the full weight of the Ministry of Agriculture behind it. The land had been paid for with a government bond and experts were free to deploy it to its “optimal technical use” (Florentino pamphlet 2009). The Ministry of Agriculture was also providing all the necessary funds to realize its vision of developing improved agro-technology to raise yields.

Although the cattle breeding project was not initially a focus for my research, I found that I could not avoid it. The enterprise insignia, printed on t-shirts, stationary and the pickup trucks of the center, showed a cow flanked on one side by a stalk of corn and by a double helix on the other, symbolizing the genetic research in the center. It appeared to me that the cow was eating the corn, which I thought was a bad symbol for productivity, especially when the leadership above all was concerned with preserving an image of industrial efficiency; nevertheless, the insignia seemed to work, as it was widely recognized by people in the local area.
Florentino insignia on an enterprise truck.

The other side of this ready recognition was the fact the center was under regular scrutiny from the media and the managers were focused on portraying Florentino in a positive, read productive, light. The farm received regular visits from students, military, and other guests, and the general manager’s speeches routinely highlighted the successes of the Florentino project and attempted to counter assertions made by the political opposition. “The opposition says we don’t produce. Well, you can see here that is a lie. We produce.”

However, from 2007 to 2010, the opposition media ran a series of sensational stories and tabloid specials to frighten the Venezuelan people with the specter of starvation. The faulty agriculture policies of the Venezuelan government, they suggested, would induce an artificial famine and the population would be caught between a mismanaged state food sector and declining imports. This fear was embodied in the figure of la vaca flaca or “the skinny calf,” which the nation would soon come to resemble. Official speeches and nightly news coverage drove home the point that cows were an index of the health, wealth and wellbeing of society and they provided social insurance and security, not just for individuals, but also for the entire nation.
Thus the Florentino enterprise was devoted to the increase of this bovine population.

One part of the cattle program in Florentino involved the artificial insemination of the animals of local producers to increase herd sizes. It was a relatively simple way to inject capital into the countryside and achieve rapid results without having to build infrastructure. The natural reproduction rates according to experts were around 10%, but the rate of pregnancy could be significantly increased with trained personnel performing artificial insemination with rates as high as 50%. The national insemination program delivered out of Florentino and other enterprises thus sought to help ranchers increase their herds and the production of milk and meat by providing the service at no cost.

Florentino paid teams of inseminators housed in the center to work with a variety of local producers in Barinas, including campesinos clustered in hamlets, agricultural cooperatives striving to modernize operations, medium-sized landholders who relied on their own labor but could be persuaded to increase productivity, and large capitalist farmers who employed wage labor to intensify production—a group a few of the técnicos were not wholly comfortable with aiding. The national insemination program had an historical precedent: in the 1930s, the Soviet Union enacted a mass insemination program of some 6,000,000 animals, making it the largest milk producer in the world (Johnson and Brooks 1983). The aspirations in Venezuela were less grandiose, but President Chávez suggested that once self-sufficiency in milk had been achieved, they would begin exporting and “penetrate the markets of the global north.” First, the goal was to reduce the importation of beef from the United States, Colombia and Brazil by strengthening internal markets and increasing the herds. But they weren’t just going to increase the herd—they were going to improve it.

Through a convenio or agreement with Cuba, Florentino was staffed with a team of
experts in *ganaderia* or cattle ranching and the team was tasked with creating a race of cow uniquely suited to the ecological and climactic conditions of Venezuela. Working alongside their Venezuelan counterparts, the team of Cuban experts was engaged in genetic research whose eventual goal was the end of dependency on foreign technology and the creation of more productive races. The technical rationale for the program was to breed animals that would be highly productive despite the lack of capital for infrastructure typical of ranching in the global south and as sloganeered, the marketing of this new breed of livestock would raise domestic production and ensure food security.

No longer would Venezuela depend on the monopolies of the global north and races designed by northern agribusiness for very different conditions. The new breed, which would produce both milk and meat, would benefit small and medium-sized producers and obviate much of the complexity connected with traditional animal husbandry. Producers would not have to select from among a wide range of breeds available, as the race would be specified to local conditions, and they would no longer have to sift among individuals whose genetic qualities were unclear. But the impediments to the realization of this vision of rural development and food sovereignty were serious.

*Técnicos* explained to me small producers often lacked “the knowledge,” read, intelligence, to maximize *rentabilidad* or income per animal and *campesinos* could not be relied upon to purchase the best animals. Small producers did not know how to select the right specimens, i.e. with the highest per diem output, and they were often reluctant to rid themselves of less efficient animals. They, therefore, required “technical assistance” from technical experts, a requirement explained to me with the air of condescension I came to expect from professionals in rural Venezuela. For these experts, there was only one valid logic for agriculture: the logic of
maximization and the increase of revenue through higher yields, a logic that ran counter to many of the practices of campesinos and latifundistas.

In Lesotho, as Ferguson described, the cow constituted a special form of wealth unlike other forms of property. The behavior of Basuto cattle owners, which was irrational in market terms, had a different social logic. The prestige complex of “big men” in the rural areas focused on the number of animals, not their efficiency, since the goal was to have animals to grant as gifts. In Venezuela, latifundistas and larger ranchers were notorious for gifting meat to workers on holidays as a means of keeping a pliant labor force. Thus, it was always useful to have a few extra cattle to slaughter.

This gift culture, in addition to unfavorable market conditions, often discouraged owners from adopting an absolute maximizing logic, dictating instead that at least part of the herd should not be of too high a value since it was destined for the tables of tenants. Campesinos and smaller owners, however, would not part with their cattle or replace the individuals with lower daily output for a different set of reasons. The major concern of campesinos in the local area was with reproducing the household, rather than commercial activity. Far from a trans-historical essence or essential feature of ‘peasant culture,’ the subsistence orientation of campesinos in Barinas had developed in response to the high risk for expanded cultivation and scarce credit for investment.

Without a guaranteed market, investing in herds was risky and smaller farmers often chose to use whatever surplus they had to fund consumption, rather than invest in more expensive animals. Small producers also had no incentive to rid themselves of less efficient animals, if the household could not consume the output. Thus it did not matter if the new breed could produce five liters of milk per day when they had no way to market the surplus. There was no incentive to seek out cows with higher per diem output or invest in more expensive breeds.
The development of a single breed and the creation of government markets would ostensibly obviate the need for this kind of intervention and take the subjective human element out of the problem.

While the técnicos worried about “the irrational habits” of the small producers with whom they worked and how their behaviors might negatively affect the agrarian reform until the breed could be introduced, I had the opposite concern: it was not the rationality of the small producers I could not understand, but rather the rationale of the technology they were supposed to use and how the creation of the new breed would solve problems of dependency and food insecurity.

The first Florentino bull grazing in a field adjacent to the headquarters

Although I listened attentively to the Florentino experts and the explanations, I could not make sense of the effort to create a new race of cow. The cow was not literally eating the corn of the center as the insignia inadvertently suggested, but the breeding work was eating up a considerable amount of money. Breeding a cow with a series of specific traits was a costly endeavor that required long hours of work for técnicos and I could not understand what justified
Técnicos explained to me the animals from which the desired traits would be obtained, the crosses which were required to isolate them, and the uses of the various traits. The desired cow would have a short coat to withstand the heat of the llanos, and feet that would not rot in fields, which were often waterlogged. The técnicos also described the issues presented by the local ecology and soil pH as factors shaping the interface of the animal with the pasture and the eventual quality (and quantity) of output. “We need a race suitable for Venezuela. You have to understand that the soils of Venezuela are very acidic and we have poor quality pasture. We need an animal with a short coat because the weather is too hot and it stresses the animal. It produces less milk.” The more I listened to these descriptions, the more regular patterns began to emerge. Ecological factors, climactic conditions, and absence of capital and infrastructure were regularly cited. Yet there appeared to me to be logical gaps in these rationales.

Even accepting ecological criteria or the need to adapt to lack of infrastructure, the project did not seem to make sense. Why could they not just divide the national territory into ecological zones and import races suitable for each zone? Or make crosses that would provide a faster, and I thought, easier solution to the problem? Why was the center investing so much time and energy in a race of cow that would take at least twenty-five years to stabilize? And why did they need a cow with so many traits in the first place? And, most importantly, was this cow even feasible?

After several weeks of interviewing on the project, I had yet to receive a satisfactory answer to my queries and my insistent probing seemed to touch a sensitive nerve, a sacred cow perhaps. The rationale of the project seemed self-evident to everyone involved, but I still had questions. When I asked who came up with the idea of the new race, técnicos responded, “We
did.” When I asked, “Who is we?” they typically responded, “Florentino” or “the enterprise.”
Yet I doubted very much that the enterprise staff had conceived of the project in a collective
fashion and I kept asking about the origins of the project in an effort to discern its overriding
logic.

Finally, a senior agronomist who always seemed to provide reliable information, told me
the President of the Republic had come up with the idea himself, and he specified that he wanted
a breed from Barinas. “It was Chávez himself. The President is very regionalist and he wants to
have a breed from this area…” and he added, “It is a long term project and it has barely started
[nos y a iniciado todavía].” Whether or not the President was “a regionalist” was a matter of
debate (indeed, the President disputed this assertion on multiple occasions, denying he favored
any region of Venezuela above another, as any good nationalist should). But it was clear the
President placed special emphasis on the llanos and attached specific feeling to the region and its
inhabitants. Quoting the former Venezuelan President and poet Romulo Gallegos, Chávez stated
that the Venezuelan plains held “the force for great deeds” and that he felt this in his “bones from
the plains” and his “cowboy soul” [alma llanera]. Emphasizing the strides made in the region
over the course of several years, he also underscored what he viewed as “[t]he potential of these
lands to produce food for the entire nation and beyond.” Yet it was not simply these lands that
were utilized as part of the struggle, but a construction of the region’s subjects and history.

As the Venezuelan anthropologist Nelson Montiel Acosta (2014) has suggested, the
President Chávez used the culture of the llanos as part of “a symbolic arsenal” in his struggle
with “the oligarchy.” Writing that Chávez “…recovered the fiercely independent tradition of the
historical heroes of the llanos…the people with whom he was most affiliated…[and who were]
the owners of their own freedom and histories…” (my translation), Acosta suggests the image of
the cowboy on horseback played a special role in the building of consent for the efforts of the leadership to regain sovereignty and the investment of resources in erstwhile neglected areas.

Frequently appearing in the opening scenes of his television program, the herding of cattle and other pastoral imagery along with frequent references to ‘the people of llanos’ for whom the President reserved special praise, were a part of recasting the nation and its subjects. Extolling the virtues of the llaneros as the people who staffed the ranks of the army of Bolivar and won independence, Chávez signaled that his special affection for the region and the struggle for agrarian reform there was the latest iteration of a series of battles in which llaneros would play a decisive role.

Photo of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and his entourage on horseback in the opening scene of an episode of his weekly television program. Source: Alo Presidente

The Florentino race, an invention of the President of the Republic and the Minister of Agriculture, was certainly a project with strong historical and cultural resonance. But that still did not answer my question about the technical aspects of the breed. The manager of animal production told me the breed was designed for the llanos, but his subordinates often talked about
the project as if it was for the whole country. Which was it? I was baffled. After several months of investigation, I found someone who understood what I was saying and who could shed critical light on the project.

When I explained my confusion to the supervisor of the Florentino milk project, he instantly grasped my concerns. When he stated that in his opinion, the state of Apure was “worthless” for milk production due to its acidic soils and that there was little use in attempting to start the project there, I asked, “If Apure has acidic soils and it isn’t suitable for milk and it doesn’t have much infrastructure, why would you need a double purpose [i.e. milk and meat] cow? Why wouldn’t you just import beef cattle or make the crosses to get the herd more quickly? Why go through all the trouble?” A pained look came across his face and a nearby colleague winced, as he verified my suspicion that the scheme was motivated in large part by non-technical considerations: “Well, it’s so this government can say they did something. ‘Look, here, we did this.’”

The supervisor was a dedicated Chavista and I had heard his invective against the opposition on several occasions in both public and private, so I felt relatively sure this was not a case of bad faith or a person who had suddenly taken an opportunity to reveal his true feelings about the leadership. He was sincere in his support for the current government, yet he had doubts about the specific technical merits of the project. If he had doubts about the technical necessity of the project, I reasoned, there must be some other logics or rationales for it. I agreed with his assertion that governments “have to do something,” but why this in particular? And why was there such enthusiasm for the race?

The level of excitement connected with the breeding project seemed out of line with the concrete aspects of the project, which seemed to me relegated to a relatively narrow field of
intervention. The breed would certainly make a difference in the center and perhaps, the surrounding areas, but I felt the aspirations for the project were extreme. The social development manager was one of the people getting overly excited about the cow, and when I sat down to talk with him in his office about the project, hoping to grasp the social relevance of the breeding work, he dictated to me what amounted to a nationalist rant. “With the help of our Latin American comrades, Argentina, Brazil and Cuba, we will have our own race of cow. We should have had a faster path to development and capitalism, which would make the transition to socialism easier, but we were thoroughly exploited.”

The cattle breeding project was going to fix this situation, somehow. As he talked his voice rose to a crescendo, as if its volume would speed up the process of development and eradicate dependency. But over the course of the conversation, it became clear he was uneasy about an aspect of the project. He described the component races of the cow: Brahman, Sibboney, Holstein, and their respective national origins. He then paused for a brief moment, uneasy perhaps about the recognition that the constituent elements of the breed were hardly Venezuelan. “Well,” he said, “we’re recuperating the genes of the Carora. It was brought over to Venezuela by the Spaniards in the 16th century, so there is at least some Venezuelan in it.” Having reassured himself of the national bonafides of the breed, he settled back into his chair. What did it matter if the race was Venezuelan or not? And for that matter, what made a race of cow “national”? The answers to these questions started to get clearer when I started participating in the breeding work itself.

**A Laboratory of Socialism**

At the end of the twentieth century, neoliberal technocrats used Latin America as a laboratory for their policies. The Venezuelan President was fond of saying he had turned
Venezuela into “a laboratory of socialism.” Not surprisingly, the leading state enterprise of the new endogenous development program had a laboratory on the grounds. It was right next to the headquarters and I walked past it everyday on my way to the social development office, although its activities were largely a mystery to me. Florentino was the only fully equipped veterinary lab in the state of Barinas and the center offered a variety of services such as evaluation of animals, blood tests for parasites and selective breeding services. Local ranchers could call or visit the center and this provided part of the income of the center. But the major focus of the laboratory was genetic intervention.

Indeed the enterprise had originally included the word “genetic” in its title, but President Chávez had adjusted the name to reflect a “greater openness,” as he felt genetic research centers were typically closed facilities. Instead, he wanted the center to be open to the public, to showcase advances made on behalf of the nation. Yet the laboratory was still rather closed, and there were individuals who had worked in Florentino for many years who had never been inside it. The lab had its own security team to watch the entrance and serious efforts were made to preserve the sterility of the facility. Visitors had to step into white sanitizing powder before entering the lab to kill any bacteria they might track in on their shoes and this effort to preserve order joined with high modernist reliance on technology in the center led me to wonder what could be inside the lab. Could they be splicing genes?
In 2010, a North American laboratory succeeded in synthesizing the first, fully new biological organism from a constructed DNA sequence. The species was only a simple bacterium, but this genetic engineering feat effectively eradicated the distinction between first and second nature (O’Connor 1991, 1996, 1998) ushering in a whole new era in the history of science. As the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1991) has argued, nature is as much a social product as an ecology occurring outside the sphere of human activity. While nature has creative powers, it does not produce in the same way as human labor and thus it is the valorization of the creative powers of nature by way of the labor process—what he calls “the production of nature”—which is the necessary condition for the growth, expansion and reproduction of capitalist relations. This logic, moreover, governs the operation of most of the ecological systems in the world and the types of nature (see also Smith 1983).

In Lefebvre’s view original ecology or ‘first nature’ scarcely exists anymore and this nature predating society has largely been replaced by second nature or nature modified by human action. The systemic reproduction of capitalist social relations, he argues, depends upon and requires the creation of this type of nature and the conversion of natural resources, environments
and species into commodities is a central capitalist process. As it turned out, they were not soaring to heights as great as the global north in Florentino, but they were producing nature nevertheless. The second nature being created in the Florentino laboratory required a special caste of experts and a biopolitics to guide it.

The university-trained lab technicians referred to as doctoras (the technicians were mostly women) were responsible for evaluating and preparing the genetic material for insemination. In spite of the high credentials, I did not perceive the process to be especially complex. An adept North American high school student with strong marks in chemistry could easily replicate the process, which involved the preparation of test tubes and pipets for the extracted genetic material. The lab techs showed me how they sterilized the relevant glassware and invited me to look in the microscope to see the samples they had taken. The results appeared on the screens of nearby computers, which showed a mass of sperm in the form of wriggling purple pixels. The cattle semen extracted in the holding pen behind the laboratory was placed in a window connecting the pens with the lab and then transferred into vials. A slide was used to evaluate a sample to see if it had a suitable sperm count and motility. If the sperm count was high enough, the genetic material was added to a solution in a marked vial and placed in a refrigerator. When they were ready to prepare the material for storage, a machine imported from Germany injected the semen into tiny plastic tubes, which would be used for the insemination process. The tubes were then frozen in liquid nitrogen, so they could be carried into the field.

After I observed the process in the laboratory over the course of a morning, I went into the corrals and spent the rest of the afternoon working with the young men at the rear of the lab where the extraction was underway.

The young men led the bulls to the cows and caught the semen they generated in a large
funnel. The older or injured animals that could not generate material by way of ‘the natural method’ were taken into a stall where they were held in place by large manacles where the extraction process was performed electronically. This extraction process was a three-person operation. One person inserted an electrical probe in the rectum of the cow (which I won’t describe in any great detail); the second person placed a catchment device below the genitals of the animal; and the third person seated outside the pen was tasked with sending an electrical current from a small car battery to lines attached to the probe that would cause the bull to ejaculate. I was given the task of sending the current and the results were rapid and efficient.

Bull used for genetic work named “El Che,” after Argentinian-Cuban leader Ernesto Guevara

Talking with the men about their work at the end of the day, I asked where they had received their training and how they had come to work in this job. In total seriousness, one responded, “I learned about it in Florentino. Before I worked here, I wasn’t interested in semen.” I thought to myself “who is?” The conversation then turned rather unexpectedly to the recent
Miss Venezuela pageant and Miss Universe, a popular topic in this hyper-masculine environment. Nationally positioned as ‘a Canadian,’ the young man told me the Miss Universe in 2005 was a Canadian from a Russian family. He explained to me that this woman was “an F1” or a mixture of two pure breeds, drawing an explicit analogy between the racial mixing of the breeds of cattle and nationality or ethnicity. He went on to say that “In Venezuela, we are F1s” [a mixture of two ‘pure’ breeds],” in this case, European and indigenous, drawing what I interpreted as a kindred relationship between the imagined racial basis of my nationality and his own. I thought this was a curious metaphor to explain the differences among nation-states, but this would not be the last time I heard técnica equate bovine race with human race.

“F1 Venezuelans” Brahman plus Holstein

Although I learned how the insemination process was performed, I drew the line at participation. I would carry sacks of grain, swing a machete, and even lead a tour of the center, but I was not going to stick my hand in a cow’s rectum. To perform the procedure, the cow had
to be in estrus and the técnico had to insert his arm in the cavity of the cow up to the elbow, exerting downward pressure on the organs so that he or she could direct a loaded pipet with the other hand in the cervical cavity. Once inserted, the técnico would then be able to inject the genetic material and hopefully ensure fertilization. There was considerable masculine bravado and sexual innuendo associated with this practice and the técnicos said it required “instinct.” I was told that a veterinarian had “…to have the nose of a bull to know which one is ready for insemination.” I was told “it was easy once I had located the genitals”—with the added caveat “of the animal,” turning the statement into a vulgar joke.

After working with the técnicos for several weeks, I was acquainted with the mechanics of the procedure. But I was still figuring out the logic behind the selection of the genetic material. Why were certain breeds injected with certain material and not others? And how were the decisions connected with the Florentino breed they hoped to create? Having worked with the técnicos as part of their extension trips in the campo for the insemination program to increase herd size, I had started to get some idea of the logics for mixing certain breeds. I would stand with the técnicos in the field and watch as they examined the herds of the producers, evaluating their characteristics and recording the details in their notebooks. By inspecting the cattle, the técnicos claimed they could guess the racial parentage of the individuals and classify them according to coloration, assigning a percentage. “You see this one, Aaron? It’s 60% Pardo-Suizo, 40% Holstein.” I learned that cattle breeding work had a sort of raciological logic within it, and a rather direct form of biopolitics. The project addressed both a scientific problem and a political problem. It aimed to intervene in the bovine population at the genetic level in order to secure the wellbeing of the human population in Venezuela and it implied control over bodies, the regulation of heredity, and the selection of desirable traits by way of blood—all key techniques of biopower. The técnicos would decide which cattle should be mixed together as part of the
process of improving the overall fitness and productivity of the cattle population and they used racial proxies to isolate traits.

“This one should probably be mixed with Sibboney [a Cuban milk cow],” one of the técnicos told me as he inspected a herd of cows whose coloration and presumed parentage reflected a heritage skewed toward meat and which was likely not as strong for milk. The breeding decisions seemed to operate on the basis of a principle of averages. The individuals might deviate from the mean, but the total population had each of the desired traits within it and if the races were properly mixed, it would even out and reach an ideal average. But there were debates about which phenotypic traits should be used to ascertain the genotype of the individuals and which should be mixed together.

In the evenings I found myself reading trade journals on the breeding of cattle in an effort to better understand the process. The journals often included mathematical theorems and models to predict the traits inherited from the parents by offspring and the phenotypes that could ostensibly provide a sense of the genetic make-up of the individual. The magazines debated the utility of the correlation of particular presented characteristics with genetic composition and their validity as a proxy. Some articles criticized the use of skin color as a proxy and instead proposed the shape of the head as a more accurate indicator of the parentage of the individual. In cattle as with humans, color represents only a fraction of the genetic variance. Hence, color variations are not terribly reliable to discern milk output or the potential weight of the offspring, the traits most important to experts. Even individuals in the herd whose parentage was known, say a mix of two pure breeds, had disparate color patterns, and it was therefore a dubious practice to try to discern the output of the individual solely based on color patterns.

Although the science was weak, I found attributing traits to individuals on the basis of
their color permitted the técnicos to achieve their goals and this seemed to reinforce the use of the race concept beyond the sphere of cattle breeding. The race concept was in daily use in Venezuela and the two versions of the concept bled over into one another. The técnicos in Florentino often speculated as to whether the alleged proclivity of Venezuelans for violence could be found in the racial origins of the nation and one of the técnicos attributed his own bad temper to his “Indian blood.” The técnicos also speculated which cow looked like them personally and assigned the names of the various breeds to one another as nicknames. My friend Felipe, a truck driver of visible African descent was called “Sibboney” (a race of black cow from Cuba) by the técnicos and another worker in the center known for his long hair was referred to as pelusa or “fuzzy.”

It seemed bovine race was translated into human race and the project gave the staff of Florentino a way to discuss the nation and identity. The metaphor equating racial difference with animals translated the breeding project into the myth of mestizaje and the belief that the nation was composed of a mixture of pure original sources. It also suggested that like the process of racial mixing that formed the nation, the breeding project was not yet complete and that it would require several more generations before the project reached ‘perfection.’ The race of the cow was a way of talking about the unfinished nature of the national project, which gave meaning to the mission.

When there was no confusion among the técnicos as to whether I was in fact a fellow Latin American (in their defense “Canada” sounds like a Spanish word and the presence of Brazilian students in the local area made it logical to assume a person who looked like me might be Latino), the técnicos wanted to know about the nation-state where I lived and its place in the global hierarchy of nation-states. They asked if Canada was a “colony of the United States like
Puerto Rico” or if it was in the same neocolonial straits as Venezuela. I explained that trade with
the United States represented roughly 40% of the Canadian GDP and there was a certain
dependency of the nation. Based on this information, they reasoned that was the same kind of
dependency as Venezuela. “That’s not development!” they exclaimed. “How can you say Canada
is a developed country?” I heard variations on this theme from sociologists, técnicos and workers
earning their keep swinging a machete. Canada might have a higher standard of living than
Venezuela, but it was not a truly developed nation since it lacked a self-sustaining economy and
hence like Venezuela, the US had “colonized” it; it was not truly sovereign.

The predicament of dependency weighed heavily on the minds of the técnicos and they
articulated various trajectories of escape for the nation. Some of the técnicos espoused
evolutionary schema in which the stages of development corresponded to the consciousness of
the population. They asked me what stage I believed Venezuela had entered and if “the mentality
of the people changed” when they reached “a higher stage of development.” Some advanced
overtly racist theories asking if I believed “whites” were smarter than mestizos or if any of the
shortcomings of national development could be attributed to the racial composition of the nation.

I did my best to explain that the reasons for underdevelopment were historical rather than
racial and had nothing to do with the biological makeup of the nation. Poverty and illiteracy were
not the fault of individuals or the result of genetic differences, but rather of a particular unfolding
of history. I tried to counter these raciological discourses as best I could, but they were deeply
embedded in society and daily work in the cattle project. The reaction of the técnicos to my
explanations was often skeptical. I suspect they felt I was placating them or secretly harboring
feelings of racial superiority. They cleaved to the idea Venezuelans had a moral qua racial
defect, an explanation far more vivid than my abstract discussions of the interaction of state,
labor and capital.

Like the process of *mestizaje*, which had brought about the existence of the nation from the mixing of blood from multiple original sources, the cattle-breeding project in Florentino would likewise contribute to the improvement of a population and its productivity and efficiency, allowing the raciological categories of the breeding project to become a metaphor about the nation. This breeding project was going to end the tensions in the development of the society. It was the promise of a better nation which kept these actors involved.

**A Victory for the Patria**

Midway through my fieldwork in 2010, I met Miguel, a veterinarian working on the cattle-breeding project in Florentino. I had seen Miguel working in various parts of the enterprise for several months, but I had never spoken with him. The spitting image of an organic intellectual, Miguel interspersed conversation on socialist politics with streams of black juice from the *chimo* or smokeless tobacco he used, a sign of his bond with *el pueblo* and status as an ‘everyman.’ But in truth, he was only playing organic intellectual.

From a relatively affluent family in the state of Trujillo, Miguel had studied veterinary science at the local university and was now a full-time employee of the Florentino enterprise. He was one of the experts in the center tasked with breeding the new race of cow, a relatively prestigious assignment. His family had a storied political history and Miguel perceived his work in Florentino as an extension of this legacy. His uncle had been a militant of the Venezuelan Communist Party and had fought with the guerillas of the FALN in the 1960s and 70s. The rest of his family members were also party militants and long time opponents of the Fourth Republic, which he described as a “pseudo-democracy.” Miguel was the Venezuelan equivalent of “a red
diaper baby” and his family was part of the wider left aligned with the ruling party, struggling to “deepen” the revolution into socialism. But I did not know any of this the night we met or how critical he would be to my unpacking of the bovine mystique in Florentino.

One night I was relaxing with “the boys” of the security team near the Florentino headquarters after a long day of work, when Miguel rode up on a motorcycle and sat down with us. One of the guards was checking the headlines from the local newspaper and he told us that General Motors Corporation had gone bankrupt. The security guards were eager to know my opinion about the bankruptcy, and asked me about the state of labor in the United States. I stated that I was not especially worried for the future of the corporation, since this was not the first time it had gone bankrupt, even in my lifetime, and I predicted that although the corporation would be bailed out by the US government, the workers would suffer a great deal. As I predicted, the US government did eventually bail out the corporation, handing over millions of dollars worth of public funds, but this did not stave off a much larger crisis.

We were just starting to talk about “the crisis of capitalism,” as it was referred to in the Venezuelan news, when Miguel chimed in describing how the tendency of monopoly capital is toward stagnation. Hence, it was not surprising that General Motors had gone bankrupt. This tendency meant sudden increases in rates of unemployment and he speculated that we might be reaching the end of “imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism.” The knowledge he revealed to us that night betrayed a certain ideological preparation and background and I asked him, “Where did you learn that?”

Up until this point, I had seen several expositions of the technical activities of the center. But I had not had many of what you could call “deeply Marxist” conversations. By contrast, however, Miguel’s remark revealed a familiarity with the writings of Lenin, in addition to his
knowledge in the field of technical production, a rarity among the experts in the center. That night, Miguel revealed himself to be one of the most ideologically dedicated Chavistas in the center and one of the red experts unafraid to candidly discuss the problems of the agrarian reform. That evening we talked long into the night about the history of Venezuela and AD, the ruling party for most of the twentieth century. According to Miguel, AD had been a socialist party, at least in name, but it had betrayed its mission and while some honorable individuals had stayed in the party after the 1970s, it had largely betrayed Venezuela and the goal of national development.

While he supported the current government, Miguel did not discount the problems with its program and openly stated that he had his doubts about the Minister of Agriculture, a former member of the political party Bandera Roja, which he thought was “more fascist than socialist.” In spite of his skepticism about the Minister, Miguel still had faith in “the supreme leader of the revolution,” recounting a conversation with Chávez when he visited Florentino. “The comandante was just like everyone else” Miguel said and he expressed his loyalty to his leadership and frustration with experts whom he felt to be less sincere in their motivations.

Miguel explained to me angrily that technical experts in the state enterprises were not above fabricating data on projects to make themselves look better. He detailed inefficiencies in the Florentino enterprise and suggested that actual production increases in the local milk plant were well below the reported figures. He also asserted that the functionaries were revising the figures upwards to “deceive the President.” In spite of his frustration with the project in Florentino, he was dedicated to the idea that breeding a new race of cattle could liberate Venezuela from dependency and he imbued his work with affective meaning. “Every pregnant cow is a victory for the patria,” he told me in an effort to convey the idea that they were
overcoming the dependency of the nation on an everyday basis. Each successful procedure brought the nation one step closer to sovereignty and whatever their day-to-day struggles, they had to keep working.

One of Miguel’s major complaints: underweight cattle in Florentino enterprise.

When I got to know some of the other técnicos with whom Miguel worked, I sensed that there was a shared vision at least with regard to the nature of their work. When I asked the técnicos what the breeding project meant to them, the response was nearly always: food for the patria and el pueblo. These true believers in the process wanted basic necessities like food, water, and shelter to be met for all, clearly taking pride in their work and the idea that they were protecting the nation from starvation and hunger. One of Miguel’s coworkers told me that milk was petroleo blanco or “white oil,” not because of the price it could bring on the market or the gains it might represent for the center, but because it would “nourish the next generation of Venezuelans.” In this metaphor, milk replaced oil as the basis of the sovereignty and wellbeing of the nation, and improving the genetics of the cow was a way to increase this source of wealth and to protect vulnerable subjects. Some of the breeding decisions designed to increase this
source of wealth did not make sense from a technical standpoint, however.

As I have said, the future Florentino breed was composed of several races of cattle drawn from various regions of the world. Yet the center did not have entirely pure breed herds, which would have allowed them to start breeding the race directly. Instead, they had to sift through the genetic catalog of traits in the herds they owned, selecting the desired traits and isolating the genes from those to be left out of the next generation. This was a kind of organizing process in which they bred out the “imperfections” or genetic “noise” in the herds, setting up a clean matrix from which they could begin the product.

To isolate the genes of the Carora, for example, the técnicos had to use the genetic material of a pure blood individual to separate the traits out of the mixed race herds. The center produced a pamphlet using some of my pictures to illustrate the work to other employees in the center. But the genetic chart, which looked like a classic kinship tree, showed that the work arrived right back at where the work had started, a pure blood Carora. The technique was a tactic to augment the numbers of the breed in the center so they could later be mixed with other animals. But several of the técnicos and employees wondered why the center had not just purchased a pure herd on the market. Portraying the isolation of the traits for the next generation as a technical feat was somewhat disingenuous, and it did not make sense to employees why this should be celebrated as a triumph. What was the logic of these practices of genetic segregation, if not pure, technical necessity?

Uneven Development

The theorist of dependency, Andre Gunder Frank (1981), once wrote sardonically that orthodox developers were aghast at the culture of the third world because they “worshipped the
cow instead of the dollar” (8). In Florentino, these two fetishes were more closely related than such developers might have realized. It may have been cheaper to isolate traits from individuals than buying entirely new herds of pure animals, but there were other considerations that were affecting the speed of the program and its progress.

The official discourse in the enterprise held that small and medium sized producers were the beneficiaries of the breeding project, but the reaction of these actors to the sale price of the F1 (or first generation) was that the price was too high. These specimens created by crossing two pure breeds were only a step on the way to the Florentino race, but at 5000 Bolivares Fuertes apiece, even these animals were an expensive investment. Visitors may have thought the animal was “beautiful” and marveled at the sophistication of the center, but many producers just couldn’t afford it. Less “beautiful” cattle cost 3000 Bolivares Fuertes, more than the monthly salary of the university-educated agronomists in the center. The ranchers who purchased the first cross (F1) were better off farmers and large estate owners, the very people sectors of the Venezuelan leadership claimed they were actively struggling against.

In a few years, Florentino would no longer receive cash infusions from the Venezuelan government and the department of commercialization was starting to price its goods accordingly. Independence was the stated goal and the Florentino enterprise had to consider its budget in addition to what it called “the social profit.” It had to seek a return on the capital invested in the infrastructure and labor of its employees. But the return was mediated by the realization of profit from the sale of the breed and the pursuit of the exchange-value of this commodity tended to get in the way of its designated use-value. While the breeding project had a biopolitical/governmental logic (i.e. maximize the availability of locally produced beef and milk to ensure food security and raise standards of living for producers), the Florentino breed was
nevertheless a manifestation of the logic of uneven capitalist development. The aspiration of aiding the average producer with the breed was unrealistic when it was only the prosperous producers who could afford the cow. The first few crosses on the way to the final breed were technically successful in that they yielded higher per diem averages of milk and also meat, but from the standpoint of the market they were a failure. The market was limited and the enterprise sought ways to expand the market in various ways.

The department of publicity made radio advertisements for the center in various other states throughout the country and one of the women who worked in the department confessed to me rather frankly that the state enterprises in other areas resented the competition from Florentino. The heads of the other state enterprises had begun to complain to the upper levels of the Ministry of Agriculture about the lack of “cooperation” in the public sector, which was supposed to be the foundation of the endogenous development program.

During my travels around various states in Venezuela, I saw advertisements for the Florentino breed in places as far away as the Machiques district in Zulia on the border with Colombia and the state of Apure in the south. It seemed the breed was being marketed across the nation and efforts to find buyers had little to do with socialist practice or the technical specifications of the project. The search for exchange-value, a crucial determinant of the relation between capital and nature in capitalist society, was driving the downstream aspects of the breeding project in spite of the populist or socialist rhetoric. The need to make a profit (whether ‘social’ or not) mediated the circulation of the use-value of the cow, as the price deciding who could access it. The fact that small producers in the local area could not afford the breed encouraged the department of marketing to seek out other avenues of sale and the search for profit drove the enterprise to sell its cow outside the area of technical specification.
The cow may have had specific use criteria coded for the geography of the central plains, but the Florentino enterprise was going to sell the breed anywhere it could. The biopolitical aspirations of the project, to improve the health, wealth and welfare of the rural population were contradicted by the need to recoup the investment of capital in the breeding work, which found its expression in the price of the commodity. The idea of simply placing an improved technology in the hands of llaneros and campesinos was rendered impossible by the price. The project reflected the logic of capitalist development, not only in its unevenness with regard to use-value and exchange-value, but with regard to the geographies and practices which enabled the production of the commodity.

Veterinary interns taking blood samples from cattle.

The goal of endogenous development was to divorce the sphere of capital circulation from the sphere of production, and allow new forms of value creation to emerge in the economy, and once having stabilized these systems of production and exchange, to reintegrate the state enterprises into the market. This aim could only be accomplished with the intervention of the
Venezuelan government, which not only provided the funds for the construction of such enterprises and technological development, but also protected them from foreign competition.

The broad restructuring of the interior of the nation to absorb the capital resources over-accumulated in the energy sector implied the deliberate restructuring of land tenure relations and property regimes as well as the forcible separation of owners from their means of production. This act of “accumulation by dispossession” was the condition for the expanded reproduction of capital and the production of new landscapes like Florentino, with the state seizure of land and investment of petrodollars enabling the growth of new forms of value and nature (see Lefebvre 1991, Harvey 2010, 1996).

This form of accumulation was not entirely based on profit from the market, but the investment of petroleum revenue in infrastructure and technology was a way to attempt to secure the reproduction of capital in a fixed form outside the energy sector. The breeding project was a nexus which it was hoped could bring together relations that lessened the dependency of Venezuela on petroleum, and support internal markets for its manufactured and consumer goods. In keeping with the Keynesian logic of effective demand, reducing the percentage of income Venezuelans devoted to food would free up money to purchase domestic manufactures and perhaps secure the reproduction of state enterprises.

At present however, this goal was hard to realize when only part of the Venezuelan economy was protected from the market and the state enterprises were not competitive in terms of their prices and output. The only way to overcome this tension was to use ‘other than economic means’ to force the prices in the various sectors of the economy to come into alignment with the controlled market.
Underdevelopment or Revolution?

In the twentieth century, Latin America saw the rise and rapid decline of a variety of progressive and popular nationalisms. These regimes targeted at promoting growth and development and in some instances, erasing inequality, were diverse, ranging from the rule of Peron in Argentina to the military regimes of Torrijos in Panama and Velasco in Peru and the socialism of Allende’s Chile and Cardenas in Mexico. All attempted to carve out a space for autonomous development. All failed.

Fascists and social democrats alike tried to harmonize the interests of landed capital and industry, effecting a “marriage of iron and rye” (Frank 1981). But this marriage was fitful and ended nearly as soon as it began. Opposing what they saw as a threat to their traditional power and authority, the populist regimes of the twentieth century earned the hatred of the caste of elites invested in dependent growth based on the export of agricultural products and minerals, import flows and forms of land tenure designed to capture rent rather than produce. These elites overthrew the populist governments. Reversals brought an end to these projects and revealed a weakness at the heart of dependency theory.

The less radical dependency theorists always believed social reforms would erode the structure of peripheral captivity and domestic elites would be brought on board with the project of development. More radical theorists, however, argued external dependency was “indissolubly linked to internal class structure” (Frank 1972) and suggested elites would only pursue industrialization if it was in their direct material interests. In most cases, it was not. Founded on the export of labor, raw materials and agricultural products to the global north, the dependent nation-states of Latin America had formed in concert with “imperialism” and their national elites reaped the benefits of unequal terms of trade. Their interests, in other words, were
underdevelopment and radical dependency theorists argued Latin America did not need industrialization to revolutionize itself: it needed a revolution to industrialize (ibid). An effective development strategy, in this view, was necessarily a political strategy and in the twentieth century, two major strategies emerged from this problematic.

One strategy—the united front—suggested “a democratic national bourgeoisie” would lead a revolution against “imperialism” and extirpate any vestiges of feudalism in the countryside. New national leaderships would complete the liberal revolution by way of an agrarian reform and free society from the relations of production that were retarding development. The other strategy held there was no meaningful difference between the ‘patriotic’ national bourgeoisie and the class of vendepatrias that controlled the import/export trade and together these elites constituted a lumpenbourgeoisie incapable of social reform. This class preserved its power through violence, rigged elections and sabotage. True development required revolt against this class of elites and the pursuit of “socialism.” This perspective was stated perhaps most clearly in The Second Declaration of Havana (Castro 1970 [1962]):

“In the present conditions of Latin America, the national bourgeoisie cannot lead the anti-feudal and anti-imperialist struggle. Experience shows that in our nations that class, even when its interests are in contradiction to those of Yankee imperialism, has been incapable of confronting it, for it is paralyzed by fear of social revolution and frightened by the cry of the exploited masses.”

In this vision, the workers, peasants and students of Latin America would defend the sovereignty and dignity of the nations of the region, realizing the project of development by severing ties with the metropole and displacing their own elites. For most of the twentieth century, the left debate in Latin America vacillated between one of these two poles, with few projects ever
achieving the near utopian visions of these discourses.

At the start of the twenty-first century, Venezuela appeared to be headed in much the same direction. After a series of social reforms targeted at ameliorating the worst conditions, the efforts had effectively stalled. The reforms taken did not challenge the status quo in any serious way and it appeared to many the revolution might have been pretense. Yet as President Chávez was fond of saying “every revolution needs the whip of counter-revolution to drive it forward” and this came in the form of a coup on April 11th, 2002.

Fearing the populist policies of the new Venezuelan leadership would “spread the poverty around” and reduce everyone in the society to the lowest common denominator, a section of the military colluding with media and social elites tried to overthrow the Venezuelan President. Repeating the stale platitude that Latin America was “capital poor” and required foreign investment to develop, the opponents of the Venezuelan leadership attacked measures taken that menaced this investment and in a few cases, severed the foreign markets upon which comprador elites relied. These elites could not be persuaded to take part in the social reforms offered by the new leadership with mere appeals to the interests of the nation and indeed this caste, in the eyes of the Florentino workers, was opposed to popular sovereignty.

The laborers of Florentino talked frequently about the coup and raged about the violation of democracy it represented. “You know they played cartoons [on television] during the coup so the people wouldn’t know what was happening?!?” one of the workers stated when we discussed the events. His outrage was in part a result of the feeling that the political process had been usurped by elites who felt they could supersede the will of the people. Elites had cynically manipulated the population with false reports that the President had resigned or left the country and tried to convince them to accept a fait accompli. But the periurban regions erupted as they
had in 1989, and the coup was defeated by mass action and loyal segments of the armed forces.

With a President from the llanos, their region and their home state, the workers of Florentino supported Chávez and articulated the populist identification of the leader with the mass. As one of them to said to me, “With this President, the people have power.” Sovereignty was ostensibly embodied in projects like Florentino and the restoration of the vision of development leading to an independent nation with high standards of living issuing from its industrial economy.

The endogenous development program put forward by the leadership was striving to alter the position of Venezuela in the international division of labor and redirect flows of capital to realize this vision. Like all significant changes in the pattern of circulation of capital and production, installing this regime of accumulation entailed a social struggle and in this case, a rupture in the social formation. As neoliberals in the global north were congratulating themselves on their successes and the victory of their worldview, Hugo Chávez led his revolt in the name of development and began the process of creating a constituency that could carry forward this vision.

At the start of the early 1980s, Venezuela was the least unequal society in Latin America with a standard of living far higher than many other nation-states. It was arguably the most prosperous and one of the most developed societies in the global south. What caused the explosion of the Caracazo and the subsequent revolution, I would argue, was the failure of the state to satisfy the expectations of the nation with regard to modernization and the reversal of its fortunes making it one of the most insecure societies in the hemisphere. For decades Venezuelans had been fed developmental utopias and modernization projects and they had
witnessed some progress. Yet not only had the dream of transition to first world status failed to materialize, conditions had actually become worse.

In the span of a decade, Venezuela went from a society with a large middle class and the highest per capita income in the region, to a society where more than 40% of the nation suffered from food insecurity (Ellner and Hellinger 2003). The Venezuelan state proved incapable of addressing the basic needs even as it exported a strategic resource. It was the radical disjuncture between “the expectations of modernity” called forth by petroleum and the redistributive policies of the 1970s (see Ferguson 1994) and the stark reality faced by Venezuelans at the start of the 1990s, which caused the rupture. It was relative deprivation and the absolute ruin of large sectors of the nation that made dependency a problem and revolution the road to recovery.

Faced with the choice of perpetual underdevelopment or revolution, Venezuelans chose the latter and to grasp the iteration of development adopted by the current leadership, modernist visions have to be taken seriously. The bar for development was set very high in Venezuela as a result of the history of the petrostate, and far from mere artifice, the stagist vision of progress leading to a societal transformation was embraced by Venezuelans and retained after it was abandoned in the global north. In light of this fact, Venezuelans are unlikely to be satisfied with anything less than the standards of living enjoyed by the global north and the type of economy that could protect the nation in periods of economic downturn.

The new leadership, responding to and itself desiring this form of epochal change, started to forge a path to development that could set the conditions for this type of growth. To get them to this stage of growth, however, required investment in a part of the nation that had long been neglected and the revival of an image of social actors who had long been denigrated as part of refocusing he energies of the state on the part of the nation where they resided. Thus the hope for
development at the start of the twenty-first century—however improbably—was the *llanero* and a cow.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I explored the cattle-breeding project in the Florentino enterprise and its intersection with a host of cultural, biopolitical and economic logics. The breeding project drew upon a series of images with strong associations in Venezuelan history, as well as technical practices of improvement designed to take advantage of a region which was underdeveloped from the standpoint of capital accumulation. The objectives of improving standards of living, ensuring the food security of the nation, and eradicating poverty in this ‘backward region’—all key aspects of territorial mastery—were naturally complemented by the *llanero* image and its link with sovereignty.

For many Venezuelans, the *llanero* was the archetypal figure of the nation and the basis of its sovereignty. Having formed the backbone of the armies of Bolivar during the war for independence, the *llanero* was an image of freedom and sovereignty, which the elected leadership could deploy as part of its efforts to underscore the role of the region in present struggles. Like the pastoral mythologies of nations around the world, the bovine mystique in Florentino was an extension of the image of a rugged, masculine figure whose lifestyle was ostensibly self-supporting and the embodiment of the sovereignty of the nation. The investment of resources in the region in turn was construed as an effort to re-establish the interface of the nation with its soil by way of the agency of *llaneros*. Yet this pastoral imagery and the governmental logic associated with it blended with another type of biopolitics—the techno-scientific problem of genetic selection and race.
The work of the técnicos in Florentino involved the race concept and not surprisingly, they were able to adopt the idiom of mestizaje to explain the developmental aspirations of the project. Cattle breeding, like the project of racial mixing, sought to mix the genetic material of various races to reach a state of perfection and imagined harmony. But there were aspirations for modernity, which the cattle sign could not effectively host.

The pastoral imagery centering on cattle and llaneros was challenged by images of progress drawn from the urban experience of Venezuela in the twentieth century. For the vast majority of urban Venezuelans, the bulk of whom were unaware of the existence of the project, the new race of cow was unlikely to serve as a symbol of modernity, progress or development. The breed was far removed from daily life in the city where most Venezuelans lived and although the race intersected the logic of mestizaje and the idea of mixing to improve a population, it was unclear how images of a past sovereignty related to the present, or how they could interpellate subjects shaped by an alternative modernity. Indeed, when I referenced the race as a potential symbol of the nation to a friend who lived in an urban area, she rejected the idea out of hand, replying rather derisively that it might be a potent symbol “for them,” i.e. the residents of rural areas and those associated with state agriculture projects, but it would never be a compelling symbol for her. The sign clashed with her overtly liberal notions of progress and belief that the urban centers in Venezuela were the locus of development.

The ideologically red experts in Florentino like Miguel, by contrast, were considerably more enthusiastic about the project and viewed it as a means of meeting the needs of the nation. The project utilized their talents and gave them a sense of prestige. But it was more than prestige that kept them involved in the project. What kept the técnicos going in spite of the setbacks the project faced was the idea they were protecting the health, wealth, and welfare of a new
generation of Venezuelans and getting the breed into hands that could increase yields and secure
the long-term progress of the nation. But for Venezuelans who held onto the Rostowian dream of
the total uplift of the nation, the breeding project was rather passé, or to use the local creole,
pavoso.

A sector of Florentino experts desired the types of visible progress which portended the
total transformation of society and these actors were unlikely to be satisfied with anything less
than the lifestyles they saw in the global media. These Venezuelans wanted development in step
with the idea of “catching up” with the global north and a model that would bring about a total
revolution of their society. As I heard one person phrase it, they would not be happy “until they
had the type of development” that would give them “shopping malls like in Miami.” While this
did not typify all the staff in the headquarters or even all the técnicos (several of whom felt
sincere affection for llaneros) the aspirations of a large portion of the staff did not accord with
the rhetoric of Venezuelans as llaneros or the future of the nation as depending on cattle.

As I have said, young interns, técnicos and manual laborers in Florentino did not
generally want to be ranch hands and only those who had known animal husbandry their entire
lives were in any way content to be llaneros. Yet this did not mean the young técnicos were
always at odds with the populism of Florentino. Rather, they saw their place as distinct from the
social actors the enterprise was designed to aid. The manual laborers of the Florentino
enterprise—whatever their age—were pleased with the gains afforded by the center. Their
standard of living had improved and state enterprises like Florentino fulfilled many of their status
aspirations. The construction of houses, social security and healthcare were evidence of progress
and their consent only wavered when wages or benefits arrived late. But the internal divisions in
the project, and the creation of a cow the average person could not afford, raised questions about
whose vision of progress was enacted.

As evidenced by salaries and prestige in the center, the development model seemed to reward the university-educated técnicos more than the campesinos and llaneros who were supposed to be its beneficiaries. Placing these experts in charge of state enterprise and obliging them to turn a profit put the project in tension with the leveling impulses of the social base. The state enterprises were contradictory spaces from the standpoint of the social actors whose sovereignty they ostensibly embodied. It was difficult to tell whether the técnicos, the favored ranks of the enterprise, or the manual laborers, truck drivers and llaneros were the greatest beneficiaries of endogenous development. Often it seemed as if the classic struggle between labor and capital was growing in the state enterprise and I heard a few workers make the charge that “the oligarchy” had reproduced itself “inside the revolution.” Yet in spite of these misgivings, by and large, the workers of Florentino still voted for the ruling party.

In the electoral arena, the rule of the Venezuelan socialist party was unchallenged with workers, peasants, technical experts forming a potent alliance forged by dedication to this vision of development. But the question of whose state and whose development it was began to emerge ever more forcefully among the public sector workforce whenever the pace of social leveling seemed to slow and in the case of campesinos when the rate of land redistribution slackened. The manual laborers and red experts in Florentino questioned when, or if, “real socialism” would come, and they suspected the leaders might be delaying the decisive rupture in favor of preserving their own power.

Like the breeding project, the construction of socialism was discussed as un proyecto de largo plazo, a long term project, whose date of completion was likely still far in the future. The goal of socialism also seemed to play an ambiguous role in the project. I did not see a clear
relationship between breeding a new race of cow, the desire for profit to guide the enterprise and
the aim of establishing more egalitarian social relations or relations of production. The objectives
of territorial integrity, food sovereignty and rural development might be served by the project.
But if socialism meant greater equality among the social actors in the campo and eventual
dissolution of private property, the project seemed at variance with these goals and indeed these
goals could only be achieved if the logic of profit were held in abeyance and the fraught reliance
of the center on petroleum were renewed.

When I left the field in April 2010, the breeding project was still being tinkered with and
the race was far from complete. Yet in spite of the incongruence of the various logics of the
project and the uncertainty with regard to its eventual success, the recipe for sovereignty in
Venezuela was clear—one nation, one government, one cow.
Conclusion

This dissertation has explored the terms upon which the struggle for sovereignty was waged in Venezuela at the start of the twenty-first century as well as the process of state formation it unleashed. The analysis situated the struggle for sovereignty in the history of the nation and the dynamics of its peripheral capitalism, using the Florentino enterprise as a lens. The first chapter explored the historical construction of peasants and petroleum as contradictory bases and images of sovereignty. The chapter showed how the Venezuelan peasantry, which was displaced with the rise of the petrostate in the twentieth century, became an image of sovereignty in the guise of the campesino at the start of the twenty-first as a result of the tensions set in motion by the rentier economy. The integration of these actors into a popular coalition was a major goal of the leadership and its struggle for sovereignty, but the agrarian reform it led did not entirely rely upon the actors its rhetoric valorized.

The second chapter explored the efforts of the Venezuelan leadership to restructure a cultural narrative from the llanos to support its claims to moral authority. The narrative castigated a sector of elites associated with the petroleum industry and the capture of rent, as well as a regime of accumulation which sapped the will of the population to labor. It also portrayed these actors as defective subjects who had betrayed the nation and who had to be displaced to achieve sovereignty. This rhetorical strategy supported the efforts of the leadership to coalesce a subject capable of challenging the oligarchy and its grip on the state, but the narrative could only partially disguise the tensions associated with the formation of the coalition and the social reforms that were reproducing dependency and alienated forms of labor.
The third chapter tackled the division of labor in the Florentino enterprise and the ways in which technical experts sought to restructure the agriculture system in Venezuela using social knowledge of the rural population and ostensibly neutral practices of improvement. These practices were targeted at increasing yields and orderly supervision of the agriculture sector. But the systems of knowledge deployed by technical and social experts could not entirely restrict the agency of the groups they targeted, nor were they always the most effective means of working with the local ecology. The lackluster results achieved by Florentino experts thus generated friction that allowed social groups both within and outside the enterprise to level criticism at the project and its hierarchical nature.

The fourth chapter explored efforts to ensure the food security of the nation and create an endogenous food system capable of erasing the precarity associated with resource export. It explored the various government food programs designed to improve food security, amid a significant shift in trade policy as well as efforts to raise domestic output. But the chapter also showed how the two objectives were not entirely compatible, as attempts to ensure the food security of the nation in the short term impeded the longer-term work of creating a self-supporting agricultural economy. The new food system was not based on the peasantry as agrarian populists desired, and instead of supporting local growers and popular sovereignty over land, the state food security programs appeared to weaken efforts to expand local cultivation.

The fifth and final chapter addressed the destabilization of the stagist vision of progress in Venezuela with the social and economic crisis of the late twentieth century and the revival of this vision as part of the Florentino cattle-breeding project. The project drew on a form of biopolitics which targeted the genetics of cattle as a way to intervene in the human population and protect it from hunger. It also sought to unify the subjects of the nation with its territory in a
bid to increase their wealth. Based on a vision of progress derived from the history of the global north, this development project was part of creating a self-sustaining industrial economy which could produce the bulk of what the nation needed and export a surplus. Yet this vision of development was also based on cultural grist in Venezuela. The project drew upon the cultural image of the *llanero* as part of the rationale for lifting up this backward area. The effort to restore sovereignty also drew upon the ideas of previous leaderships in the twentieth century as part of a syncretic mixture which characterized ruling party politics in general.

The twenty-first century socialism of the Venezuelan leadership drew heavily upon existing ideas such as the policies of AD which centered on sowing of oil wealth into alternative development projects, the positivist militarism of the 1950s which sought to transform the military into an instrument of national development, the 19th century Republican ideals of Simon Bolivar which endorsed a centralized state based on a strong executive, as well as Cuban-style socialism, which in spite of decades of slander at the hands of elites, still held a certain allure for sectors of Venezuelan society. As much as the reform agenda of the leadership sought to rupture with the past and usher in a new era of progress, its agenda could also be presented as a return to previous norms in a new century. The ability of the leadership to cloak its agenda in the signs of the history of Venezuela allowed it to obtain a remarkable degree of consent for this project from middle and subaltern sectors of society.

While the new leadership faced fierce opposition from the mercantile and comprador elites who regarded aspects of its social reform program as a threat to their interests, the vast majority of the rural and urban population supported its initiatives. The reforms enacted by the new leadership were also at least partially in step with the history of modernization in Venezuela
and thus they were able to obtain a degree of support from technical experts and state bureaucrats who were able to readily enact its policies based on existing knowledge sets.

The farm where I worked was effectively an extension of the project of rural industrialization started in the 1950s by the military and Florentino was not remarkably different in structure from the agro-industrial enterprises created in previous generations. The new enterprise was hierarchically organized and relied upon the authority of technical experts and managers as well as fixed capital investment to achieve more productive outcomes. Yet a key difference between the two projects was the form of property endorsed by the Venezuelan leadership and the actors selected for dislocation.

Whereas the agricultural enterprises created by the military were built on the ruins of public land settlements and the suppression of campesino organizations, the new enterprises were built on the ruins of the latifundio complex and the seizure of private property. Under the military regime, campesinos were targeted as the actors ostensibly holding back progress. Under the populist leadership, it was the latifundista who was declared the most socially harmful agent and the actor targeted for erasure. In spite of the hostility of latifundistas to its agenda, however, the new Venezuelan leadership was able to win support in rural areas, due to the benefits it provided to workers, peasants and experts. Indeed, when I left the field in 2010, the ruling party seemed to be more popular than ever.

Under the leadership of President Hugo Chávez, the war for the countryside was affecting nearly every region and the agrarian reform was advancing on all fronts. There was an intense struggle for the governorships of several states, sparking violence both ‘from above’ and ‘from below.’ Yet in spite of the intense nature of the social conflicts surrounding the reform and its effect on the elections, the ruling party appeared to have the upper hand, as even traditional
strongholds of the old elites fell to its candidates. Yet the type of state the new leadership sought
to create from this process was not always clear, even to the caste of experts who were closely
involved in erecting it.

**What is the State?**

In 2010, I was working one lazy afternoon in the social development office when a friend seated
next to me asked, “Aaron, do you believe in the state [el estado]?” The question caught me off
 guard not only because I had been lost in thought, but also because we rarely talked about
politics. This friend was not a person I believed to be especially interested in ideology and I did
not expect her to ask such an abstract question. Moreover, with the recent debates on the
anthropology of the state fresh in my mind, I did not exactly know how to answer her question
about my “belief in the state.” Did she mean to ask an ontological question about the nature of
the state, i.e. was it an agency or structure with a real material basis or a social fiction we all
agreed upon? Or perhaps did she mean to ask whether I supported the current Venezuelan
leadership and its efforts to capture the state as a way of restructuring society? Unsure as to
exactly what she wanted to know, I responded it depended upon what she meant by the word
“believe.” Did she mean I supported the state or did she mean to ask whether I believed in its
existence?\[^vii\] Clarifying herself, she replied, “Do you think you have to have the state to have a
revolution? Or that the state can be revolutionary?” This “clarification” confounded the issue
even further for me and I found myself asking what it meant for “the state to be revolutionary.”

Not knowing exactly how to respond, I replied I thought the state could be
“revolutionary,” if by that she meant it could embody the will of actors who were trying to
displace social elites or that a society could be radically restructured from above. “So, you’re not
an anarchist?” she reasoned. “No,” I replied, describing my own politics, but still doubting very
much that we were on the same page. “So the state can be revolutionary,” she said, “…if the state is *del pueblo*? [literally ‘of the people’]?” Still unsure as to what valence she gave to the word “revolution,” I instead focused on her use of the category of *el pueblo*. Feeling that the specific social content of the state was obscured by the use of this category, I replied with what in retrospect was likely the most orthodox Marxist answer I could have given: “The state is a class institution. *El pueblo* is not a class.”

Justifying my divergence from orthodox discourse in Florentino, I explained that ‘the people’ consisted of multiple class fractions and that *el pueblo* was not internally coherent. A state based on its sovereignty would therefore reflect the tensions of the social groups in the coalition and the interests of one or a few groups would inevitably come out on top. I went on to define the state, much as I have here, as a system of institutions which creates and enacts law, secures and defines territory and social resources, and regulates subjects by way of a claim to the monopoly on violence, and I suggested the character of the state in Venezuela was very much in question; in other words, it was not entirely clear which social groups held power. After taking a few seconds to consider my reply, she answered thoughtfully, “Hmm, when you say ‘the state’ [el estado] I think of government [el gobierno]. When I say ‘the state’ [el estado] I think of the land, the territory, the people, the nation, those things—Do you know what I mean?” And now I did understand her.

The conversation underscored for me the fact that actors deeply involved in projects of nation building with intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the state often grapple with the same issues as anthropologists. Such actors often struggle to find categories adequate to the social relations in which they are involved and which make sense of the tensions that are part of their working lives. The spectral figure of the state as a fount of justice or right which stands
above society and regulates its subjects by way of the various protections it provides is an image which often stands in stark contrast with the logics and activities of its actors (Corrigan and Sayer 1985). The existence of this ‘gap’ between the idea of the state—and what Abrams (1988) calls its “providential hue”—and the reality of the state system, which is less ideal, often causes social actors to draw upon certain images to invest the state with meaning in the face of these tensions. In the case of Florentino, the caste of experts in the enterprise along with the elected leadership had a tendency to draw upon images of the nation [la patria] to invest the project with purpose.

I witnessed this practice throughout my fieldwork and this conversation with my friend was yet another instance of this rhetorical sleight of hand, eliding the distinction between state and nation. But the conversation also underscored for me the extent to which the Venezuelan leadership had succeeded in establishing a particular vision of the state—a seamless unity of nation, territory and citizenry—as a legitimate goal and themselves as the agents capable of achieving it. The object of the struggle in Venezuela was to re-unify the nation with the state by way of the agency of el pueblo, a subject whose sovereignty already existed in an inchoate form. As the leadership grasped it, sovereignty was both a means and an end, and this unity could be achieved by bringing the political system into line with the will of this subject, thereby closing the gap.

Underscoring the critical interface of el pueblo with el gobierno, the vision of the state [el estado] articulated by my friend and other Chavistas invested the political-bureaucratic apparatus with the metacapital to create proper order. In this reading of governance, el estado was the name of the totality which would put an end to Venezuela’s trials and tribulations and it was the goal which not only justified the travails of experts, but also the tensions unleashed by efforts to
extirpate government opponents. Reflecting the circularity of sovereignty (Foucault 1991a), the vision of “a communal state” articulated by the Venezuelan leadership would eradicate the gap between el pueblo and el gobierno by erasing the boundary between political and civil society and other key forms of institutional mediation, such as the multi-party electoral system which gave an opening to ‘the oligarchy.’

In spite of the controversy associated with the formation of this type of state, the Venezuelan leadership seemed to have gained consent for the project, at least among the sector of public workers my friend represented, and at the end of our dialog, she stated she did in fact “believe in the state,” regarding it as a necessary part of restoring sovereignty. Yet the ideological construction of the state as an incarnation of the will of el pueblo obscured very real tensions in the Bolivarian project, not least of which the tension between the productivist goals of the state enterprises and the leveling instincts of the social base.

The subject of el pueblo was traversed by fault lines which belied the formal unity of the category, and posed a threat to the new state. The dissolution of the people was a constant threat to the project, and the goal of the leadership thus was to align the interests of these diverse actors to the extent possible, without diverting the revolution from its objectives. Which social groups would staff the ranks of the new systems of production or handle the surplus created were rarely if ever discussed by the leadership and even less explicitly discussed was the chance for these systems of production to replace the existing political structures as systems of governance. The leadership discussed the creation of new territorial units, known as comunas, integrating state enterprises and collective forms of property, as part of “the fight against the oligarchy.” But the tensions in these units based on differential access to the means of production and surplus as well as tensions between the existing political system and these units reflected not a war with rentier
elites, but a war within the heart of the political bureaucratic apparatus. In spite of their status as social property, these sites brought together conflictive social relations, which suggested the new state form was not just contested by the oligarchy, but also by groups in the ruling historic bloc.

**A Future Sovereign?**

Two years after I left the field, the manual laborers in Florentino went on strike. Although they were not represented by any formal union organization (indeed such organizations were banned in the state enterprises and the socialist labor committees were little more than paper institutions) they nevertheless managed to organize a wildcat action in protest over the late receipt of wages and benefits. Participation in the strike was spotty at first, but eventually the strike expanded to include truck drivers, security guards and the laborers in the center. The strike disrupted the activities of the center and any pretense to unity among the managers and workforce. In the words of one of the social development experts, the strike “created a very tense atmosphere in the enterprise,” dividing the caste of experts into pro-worker and pro-manager camps.

The strike was looked upon with approval by many of the social development experts who had long noted the indignities suffered by the manual laborers and a few of the técnicos who although they did not join the strike, nevertheless found it justified. Yet the majority of the headquarters employees, who saw themselves as distinct from the laborers outside the office, decried the strike and its effects. The strike lasted just short of two weeks, ending after the receipt of back pay and a pledge to deliver social benefits in a more timely fashion. Yet the factors that led to the strike would also affect the office employees.
In September 2012, all the workers of the center were affected by a budgetary crisis in which Florentino appeared on the verge of collapse. Describing the situation as “a total disaster,” a friend told me there were rumors the social development unit, long disfavored by the office of the General Manager, would be closed to ease the pressure on the budget. Although the department was able to stave off the threat of closure, the fiscal status of the enterprise was objectively dire. The manual laborers of Florentino lacked money to buy food and office workers were in a similarly dismal situation. The trouble was not confined to the Florentino enterprise either.

A wave of strikes in the region affected several other state enterprises and the strikers’ calls were quite revealing. Among the demands put forward by the workers were regular pay, higher wages, timely delivery of social benefits, and an end to the abusive style of managers. The strikes also revealed the extent to which the process had created a tricky dynamic for leaders to manage. Serving in its traditional role as the engine of growth and development, the Venezuelan state had been used to create public enterprises, which could expand the economy and provide jobs. But the leadership had effectively united groups of proletarian workers who otherwise would have had far less power in the social formation and situated them to exercise direct leverage over the state. Once again, the revenue of the petroleum industry was the safety valve in this system.

The crisis was an instance of a basic tension that had been in play since the time of my fieldwork: the enterprise was supposed to be self-supporting and pay for itself, but it could not do so without threatening labor peace. In response to the budget crunch and the threat of bankruptcy, the Venezuelan President allocated more money to Florentino and other enterprises, temporarily averting the crisis. Yet this tactic ran counter to the fiscal aims of the projects. The
failure to turn a profit meant the state enterprise was stalked by bankruptcy or the renewal of dependency on oil to avoid unrest. This tension was also reflected in another contradiction the leadership was actively deferring.

The tension between popular sovereignty and the state bureaucracy was expressed in the structure of management and concretized in the tug of war between the social bent of the state enterprises and efforts to introduce market logics into such operations. This tension could also be scaled up to the nation-state as a whole. The ruling party was divided on whether to base its power on the organized workers and peasants in the communal councils and labor committees in state enterprises or base itself on the technocratic caste in the existing state bureaucracy and existing political structures like the executive, judiciary and legislature. True to its populist roots, the Venezuelan leadership seemed to be avoiding any policy which could split its coalition of “the people.” President Chávez spoke of classic Marxist formulas like “the dictatorship of the proletariat” as a road Venezuela could not follow. Instead, he spoke of the need for “a socialism of the whole people” and the prevention of the emergence of factions in the ruling party (2005).

Whatever his vision for the future of the existing state and popular structures might have been, Chávez would not play a decisive role in creating the official policy with regard to the state enterprises, their goals or their intersection with claims to popular sovereignty.

In March 2011, the Venezuelan President was diagnosed with cancer, but he vowed he would beat the disease and still perform his duties. After several months of treatment, he claimed the cancer had gone into remission and he was fully recovered. Having appeared weak for several months, the return of his color, weight and hair led many Venezuelans to believe in the President’s claims of recovery. Although severely fatigued, he succeeded in his election
campaign against a much younger and more energetic opponent in the 2012 elections. Yet this victory would prove to be illusory.

On December 8th 2012, Chávez revealed his cancer had returned and for the first time he publically acknowledged the chance of his death and the need to designate a successor. From a short list of candidates, he selected the former Foreign Minister and newly elevated Vice President, Nicolas Maduro, as his successor, stating his operations entailed “serious risks” and that if the surgery should incapacitate him, not only should Maduro finish his term in office, but Venezuelans should also elect him president. Nearly two years after completing my fieldwork, the man workers in Florentino told me they hoped would be “President for life” or “lead for another forty or fifty years,” died.

In light of the recent catastrophic illness of its charismatic leader, the Bolivarian Revolution has appeared increasingly tenuous. The long months of treatment outside the country required as part of his battle with cancer exposed the vulnerability of the project and the extent to which the revolution depended upon the force of Chávez and his personality. His death in turn has only magnified questions that were already part of the debate. To what extent is the project reliant upon a figure like Chávez to catalyze its mass base? Can the leadership survive the several decades likely required to transform the Venezuelan economy and overcome centuries of dependency? Have the social reforms of the new leadership sufficiently diversified the economy, creating sustainable livelihoods for the marginalized sectors of society? Or are these forms of employment themselves dependent upon the revenue of petroleum, embodying negotiated forms of dependency, rather than ‘true sovereignty’?

These and other questions are likely to go unanswered in the near term, as the Venezuelan leadership struggles to find its footing in the wake of his death and to establish its
legitimacy. What the future of the political opposition will be is very much open to debate. Whether the revolution has succeeded in creating a form of participatory democracy which can avoid the pitfalls of the socialist projects of the twentieth century, is also quite open. There are admirable works dealing with these issues, which give us some clue as to the future orientation of the individuals in charge of the government (e.g. Ciccariello-Maher 2013, Lebowitz 2010, Carroll 2012), but these were not the main questions posed by this investigation.

The People After Chávez

The extent to which Hugo Chávez supported the cult of personality around him during his life will likely be a subject of debate for years to come. Yet in the wake of his death, it is clear that the cult around the leader has reached even greater heights. In keeping with the ritual practices of the socialist states of the twentieth century (see Verdery 1991, Yurchak 2005), the Venezuelan leadership has sought to turn Chávez into a secular saint in an effort to appeal to existing state cults (Coronil 1997, Skurski 1994). The leadership has frequently drawn upon Christian iconography to consecrate its rule and the sentiments of the deeply religious nation allowing Chávez to take on a sacral aura.lviii

In a discourse not wholly unlike the eulogy of Lenin offered by Stalin, Chávez’s successor has led the way, calling the late President “the redeemer Christ of the Americas” and his followers “apostles.” Drawing an explicit parallel between Chávez and Simon Bolivar, Maduro asserted he had no doubt “…that if any man who walked this earth did what was needed so that Christ the redeemer would give him a seat at his side, it was our redeemer-liberator of the 21st century, the comandante Hugo Chávez.” A short spot aired on state television further drove home the point by showing Chávez walking the western plains of Venezuela before meeting Juan Peron, the Chilean President Salvador Allende and Ernesto Che Guevara. The TV spot
confirmed that Chávez had joined the ranks of canonized martyrs of Latin American
independence, and that he would be turned into a sacred figure in the nationalist pantheon. His
image would serve as a rallying cry in subsequent battles and successor leaders have adopted his
rhetorical pose. The new Venezuelan President followed his stance of rhetorical hostility toward
the United States, calling the US President Barack Obama “the chief of devils” and faulting “the
empire” for the martyrdom of Chávez. But the veneration reserved for Chávez was not so easily
transferred to the rest of the leadership.

Following his instructions, the vast majority of Chavista voters cast their ballots for
Maduro in the 2012 Presidential elections. Yet the percentage of the vote garnered by the ruling
party candidate was far less than the percentage garnered by Chávez. In one of the closest
elections in recent history, Nicolas Maduro defeated his challenger Enrique Capriles by less than
three percent of the vote, a margin of victory inconceivable even a few years earlier. Indeed by
the start of 2014, it seemed the base of the ruling party had eroded significantly and there were
growing signs of discontent among the ranks of Chavismo. Friends of mine who had complained
of shortages in years past, but treated them as a product of “the capitalist crisis in the global
north” were now able to see the negative effects that official policies were having on their
standard of living.

In January 2014, rising food prices and shortages of consumer goods sparked opposition
protests across the country. Leading to a crisis of consent, the ruling party charged the opposition
with sabotage and efforts to disrupt the national economy. The charges of sabotage by the private
sector on the part of the ruling party were not insubstantial. But the state sector was also having
trouble making up for the shortfall and failures at the point of production led to a growing
skepticism among government supporters. There was truth to the allegation that the private
sector was disrupting the economy, but the state sector was also not operating at optimal levels and yields in enterprises like Florentino fell far short of the output required to feed the nation. As a result, the leadership was forced to turn to food imports yet again in order to preserve the standard of living of its supporters.

The Dutch Disease was making itself felt in various arenas of social life, as the need to save capital reserves for extraction radically limited the amount of revenue which could be devoted to pay for consumer imports or invest in new ventures. This made failures at the point of production like the ones I witnessed in Florentino all the more troubling. Yet in spite of these failures, the state enterprises appeared to have the full support of the ruling party as Florentino and other enterprises succeeded in acquiring new lands. The Ministry of Agriculture was investing in “units of socialist production” across the country, eschewing the peasant populism of earlier years as part of an anti-populist turn that appeared to be giving new life to old enemies.

In May 2014, the Venezuelan Supreme Court ruled that a group of campesinos who had been occupying the Santa Rita estate in Barinas for twelve years were holding the land illegally. They would have to vacate the land immediately and return the estate to its former owner. Campesino organizations around the country rallied against the ruling and called upon the executive to take action to prevent the eviction (Dutka 2014a, 2014b). Yet despite the professed support of the ruling party for the right to occupy underutilized land and respect for the dignity of the campesino, the executive was conspicuously silent with regard to the ruling. The leadership appeared to retreat from the precedent set at El Charcote ten years earlier, fueling speculation that “the peasant revolution” was a cynical ploy to win the favor of rural residents. And there was further evidence the desires of the residents were not being met.
Driving on the highway between the state capital and Florentino, one could see the ranchos of the rural poor flying the red flags of the ruling party and signs on squatter settlements on the outskirts of the capital scrawled with messages to the governor of the state asking for regularization of their land claims. The leadership claimed to have dethroned the latifundista class and to have “given the land to the people.” Yet the persistence of such squatter settlements in Barinas and the ruling by the Supreme Court raised the question as to what place these actors held in the ruling coalition and whether the new state, having partially displaced landowners from their traditional place, yet not having shared out all the land, might now have shared interests with its former opponents.

When I talked with the social development manager about the seizure of land for Florentino in 2009, he dismissed the idea that the former owned posed any threat and said “he went away,” as he put a finger to his lips and gestured with another hand to convey that Azpurura had been given hush money. Yet the latifundista did not go away. The former owner was still on the other half of the farm and he was now seeking ways to reach an accord with “the process.” As the threat of a US invasion subsided, and prospects for the return of his farm faded, the winds shifted and the former owner was now describing himself as “a Chavista.” Irate at this display of audacity on the part of the former owner, the general manager of Florentino told the entire staff in a meeting that the latifundista was un sin verguenza—a shameless person, who would say anything for his own advantage. Yet he was not the only one lobbying for a détente. There were also voices inside the ruling party which advocated a truce with the opposition, among them the former Vice President, Jose Vicente Rangel. The revolution, they believed, had gone far enough, and it was now time to reach an agreement which would allow the tension to subside, and a process of reconciliation to start. This reconciliation would pave the way for normalization of politics and a return to more conventional methods of governance.
While he was alive, President Chávez vigorously denied the existence of any such “pact with the oligarchy,” saying he would push the revolution forward to “its ultimate conclusion.” Yet after his death, there were real questions as to how far the ruling party would go in meeting the desires of its social base, and how far the existing political apparatus could be bent in its favor. Amid growing signs of inertia, there was also evidence of conflict between the existing organs of power and the popular base of the ruling party.

Cleaving to its coalition of workers, peasants and technical experts, the Venezuelan leadership often deferred critical tensions instead of reconciling them, as leaders tried to placate a vacillating national bourgeoisie both frightened and intrigued by their policies, and to demonize a rentier bourgeoisie that was always useful to castigate in an election. In spite of the hostility of these groups, there was also a sense in which the ruling party was dependent upon the oligarchy for its existence and the removal of its antagonists meant the loss of its raison d’être. Thus a certain détente existed between the two sides. Indeed, it seemed social peace among the classes was the order of the day for part of the leadership and sections of the ruling party hoped a truce would bring about a resolution of the stalemate and an end to the violence. Yet this was not a new idea in Venezuela. Indeed it had been the hope five years earlier when I started fieldwork.

Sowing the State

As I stated at the outset of this narrative, there was a constant flow of people in and out of Florentino and I learned a great deal from these interactions. One group proved to be especially critical, as it had a direct impact on my research in its opening stages and providing a thread that would run through the entire fieldwork. One day the center received a visit from a professor of law and practicing attorney who specialized in agrarian issues, together with his students. Like other delegations, they were to receive a tour of the center grounds. But the group was more
intimate due to its size and I had the chance to converse with them at length. The professor was
taken with my presence in the center and we quickly became engrossed in an in-depth
conversation about the history of Venezuela and its politics. Conveying his hopes for the future
and for peace after years of turmoil, the professor firmly supported the government stating, “We
have had ten years of blood. Now we can have development.” In his view, the struggle to achieve
a national consensus had been decided in favor of the populist camp and he hoped the peaceful
reconstruction of the nation might now begin in earnest.

    I was skeptical then, as I am now, that this was a realistic appraisal of the situation and
that there was any chance for a peaceful reconciliation of the antagonistic social forces in
Venezuela. I could not see any way to negotiate the tensions of peripheral capitalism in a fashion
that would allow for transition to a de-politicized process of improvement. I felt this skepticism
from my first days in the Florentino enterprise and this skepticism put me in a awkward position
in relation to supporters of the agrarian reform, a process which I supported, but of which I also
had serious criticisms. I agreed with the goals of my co-workers and I shared their concerns, but
I did not feel the technical solutions offered by enterprise experts or appeals to will of the people
would negate the contradictions they faced.

In spite of my skepticism with regard to his reading of the agrarian reform, I found the professor
very perceptive with regard to the methods of analysis I used to grasp the social relationships
created. When he asked me about my studies, I explained what I hoped to achieve with the
project as well as my particular approach. As he listened intently to my description of the
research, he showed he had an appreciation for the discipline of anthropology and what I was
trying to achieve. After I finished, he then smiled wryly and said, “the details are the reality.” He
was right. The details are the reality, and the details of the Florentino enterprise reflect a social
reality in which technical practices of improvement and popular sovereignty frequently came
into conflict with one another, creating new sets of tensions and conflicts. I have done my best to
present the details of that reality here as well as the terms upon which these relations were
enacted. The subject formed in the course of the revolution in Venezuela is still making its
agency felt and this subject will likely shape the future of the struggle for sovereignty. As the
general manager stated, Florentino was sowing the land, it was sowing a new generation of
Venezuelans—and it was sowing the state.
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Notes

Introduction

1 The word ‘semillero’ is a complex term with multiple meanings. The term can be translated in English as “greenhouse,” “seeder,” “sower,” or “hotbed,” as in the phrase “a hotbed of crime.” The term can refer to the agent which conducts the sowing process, i.e. a machine or a person, or the location where the sowing takes place. I suspect the term was selected precisely because of its intersecting meanings. It integrates both subjects and the soil in an organic unity, the ultimate objective of agrarian reform as part of the wider sovereignty project.

2 In the late twentieth century, a variety of writers spoke of the death of the social and the end of state-based regulation (Baudrillard 1983, 1992, Fukuyama 1993, cf. Rose 1999). Early critics of neoliberalism tended to write as if the social had entirely vanished from the ideology of elites. Yet as Andrea Muehelbach (2012) has argued, neoliberalism has always been a social project and its supporters have not only made normative claims with regard to the economy, but also with regard to social relations. Neoliberals have actively sought “non-state” forms of social regulation using moral incentives to achieve their objectives; hence, the social has not disappeared under neoliberal rule. Instead, it has been transformed by practices of neoliberalization and these new forms of the social have been taken up in surprising ways (see Peck and Tickell 2002, Hetherington 2011, Harvey 2005, cf. Nonini 2008).

3 The populist leaderships which have taken hold in Latin America over the past twenty years have sought to reclaim effective control over their territories, borders and populations, to create states less beholden to foreign interests. The reassertion of these rights and claims on the part of state actors in concert with social movements has allowed for the adoption of new strategies of governance. Fueled by the recent boom in primary commodities, the nations of Latin America have begun to pursue distinct paths to regain the sovereignty they putatively lost over the course of the previous century. Forging ahead with economic models that defy the neoliberal orthodoxy, these leaderships have favored development strategies that envision a central role for the state in the regulation of markets and even participation in the sphere of production (see Petras and Veltmeyer 2010, Bebbington 2009).

4 Weber was writing in a moment in which this form of nation-state may have seemed plausible to him as Germany was finally starting to achieve its unity. This was an aspirational political project for him in much the same way that
it is for the ruling party in Venezuela. Thus it is not entirely surprising that their ways of talking about sovereignty overlap.

v The United States is a settler colonial society founded on the genocide of its indigenous population. The genocide against the indigenous in Venezuela was quite thorough and the indigenous to invoke Jean Jackson’s term, are “a micro-minority,” constituting less than five percent of the population, roughly the same proportion as in the United States. The problem of centralism and federalism arose in Venezuela in the 19th century much as it did in the United States, and the US Civil War finds a neat parallel in the Federal War, which started two years earlier, sparked by virtually the same issues—free trade vs. protectionism, slavery or bonded labor vs. free wage labor, and tensions between proto-industrial classes in the north and landed elites in the south. But unlike the US, the Federal War in Venezuela did not result in the emergence of a state system tied to the interests of productive capital, seeking to placate a growing working class; instead, it resulted in a compromise solution in which the liberal party’s agrarian reform was rolled back and no meaningful protections for domestic industry were established. Consequently, Venezuela was never quite able to develop the home market for agriculture and industrial products which Lenin points to as the key diagnostic for the growth of the capitalist mode of production and Venezuela’s economy remained outwardly focused, importing most of its consumer goods and a significant portion of its food—even before the rise of petroleum. This form of capitalist development which Roseberry analyses, and which I discuss at length in Chapter 1, supported a different kind of state with a different kind of relationship to its society.

vi While part of this broader trend, the response of actors in Venezuela has been unique, shaped as it is by the history of the petrostate. Unlike other nations in the global south, in Venezuela, the average citizen believed that the end of the social welfare state was the end of the nation, and the failure of the state to award social benefits was a violation of popular sovereignty. Likewise, technocratic castes in the state were threatened by the liberalization of social reproduction, and these groups feared privatization of the state oil company and other industries would entail the loss of Venezuela’s autonomy in the global system. These beliefs in turn converted ‘sovereignty’ into a claim, which allowed for the relatively rapid coalescing of a leadership capable of aligning its interests with the base of the state and reviving these logics.

vii Indeed this was thought of as a reversal of this state of siege and an instance of “nation against state.” For examples of this rhetoric, see the discussion of Chávez’s Presidential acceptance speech (Brading 2013: 59).
As scholars inspired by the writings of Carl Schmitt (1985) have suggested (e.g. Agamben 1998, 2004, Alonso 2005, Das and Poole 2004, Ong 2006), the true mark of the sovereign is the ability to suspend law in the name of specific social objectives or political ends. The coup launched by Chávez against other sectors of the state in 1992 is an example of this logic. Equally, the coup in 2004 against his government can be considered an example of this dynamic.

At the start of the twenty-first century, Latin America has witnessed a resurgence of social logics deployed by states to mitigate the precarity associated with neoliberalization (see Woolford 2010, Radcliffe 2010, Postero 2006). The further integration of the region into global trade markets and financial systems has destabilized relations critical to social reproduction, sparking a counter-movement. This counter-movement has taken a variety of forms (see Wallerstein 2010, Casteñeda and Morales 2000, Sader 2008). Yet what unites these diverse projects is the effort to regain control of resources and establish a more independent model of growth and development.

For a discussion of this image of the nation-state, see the edited work Sociology for the Twenty-First Century: Continuities and Cutting Edges by Janet Abu-Lughod 2000.

In liberal theory, the sovereignty of the state is established by way of a sleight of hand in which the state is legitimate by virtue of its status as the incarnation of the populus and the fact that any other agency cannot embody that will (otherwise it would already be the sovereign) means the state has the right to suppress challenges to its rule. The classic example of this mystification is the legal construction of judicial proceedings: “The people vs. John Doe.” This image in turn gives rise to the idea of the state as a center of power which extends its sway across territory and regulates subjects with legitimate violence (see also Allen 2003). Yet this image of the state, Foucault argues, is deceptive.

In his writings on sovereignty, Foucault was concerned with creating a new language to talk about the specific form of state as a mode of governance. Yet he also wanted to avoid the emic self-understanding of juridico-legal concepts. For Foucault (1975), the state and its structures were “…merely the terminal forms power takes” (92) and scholars should therefore be concerned not only with the formal political apparatus, but also with the social relations and forms of power, which articulate together and reach apotheosis in the state apparatus. For a discussion of the role of the term “apparatus” in Foucault’s thought, see Agamben 2008.
One category which deserves special consideration in discussions of sovereignty is land. Once established, the nexus of territory, wealth and population brings this and other sets of categories into view which in turn become the basis of law and practices of governance. As the basis of territorial sovereignty, land is the practical and theoretical basis of the modern state. Land and by extension, agriculture, therefore, is a critical site for the investigation of sovereignty and state-making practices (Moore 2005, Li 2007, Eilenberg 2014). Yet it is seldom invoked in analytical discussions of sovereignty or serves only as the implicit referent in a variety of discussions about trade, borders and security (e.g. Alonso 2005, Das and Poole 2004, Baitenmann 2005). The category, however, cannot be taken at face value or treated as an object. Not merely a locus for social relations or a place where “things happen,” land is a form of crystallized social power, which reflects the labor and property relations that structure society and the environment. When Marx (1895) used the term ‘land’ for example, he used it to refer to all the social actors and agents involved in mediating the metabolic relationship of society with the environment, including the extractors of minerals and natural resources as well as agriculturalists working the soil (see also Lefebvre 1991, Coronil 1997, Foster 1999, Li 2014). The notion of land entails a whole series of conceptual categories and logics such as credit, rent, debt, wages, and divisions of labor, which governed the status of the actors engaged in various activities. These relations are historically specific and reflect the character of the state and the wider social formation.

In this sense, Florentino exhibits “the circularity of logic” Foucault suggests is characteristic of sovereignty. Sovereign violence created the center and the center in turn serves to legitimate the state as sovereign.

Perhaps the most profligate example of this model of land tenure was the La Vergareña ranch in the state of Bolivar, which was one-third the size of Rhode Island and used its acreage to graze a few hundred cattle.

The baseball diamond a few meters from my house where the enterprise team played, also doubled as a landing pad for President Chávez’s helicopter when he visited.

Scholars such as Lefebvre 2000, Bloch 1934 and Mannheim 1929 have all theorized the concept of utopia suggesting such ideologies pledge to end to social contradiction. The populist leadership in Venezuela certainly aspired for the Florentino enterprise to put an end to key contradictions.
This assertion is not without peril. The equation of populism with irrationality is so strong that some prefer to avoid characterizing the region as populist. I, however, assign no pejorative connotation to the term, and believe it can illuminate more than it occludes.

This antipathy is perhaps best captured in its slogan, *Con Chávez, el pueblo es el gobierno*, “With Chávez, the People are the Government.”

It is also at variance with some of the anthropological literature. The recent literature has drawn heavily on post-structural theory in an effort to decenter the Cartesian subject and the rationalist basis of liberal state theory (Taussig 1992, 1997, 1999, Asad 1999, for critique, see Spencer 2004, Nugent 2012, Vincent 1978). These efforts have been salutary in that they have de-objectified what had in many ways become the supreme fetish. Yet such approaches can inadvertently downplay the extent to which the state is a set of real institutions with a specific social content, not simply a product of semiosis. As Bruce Kapferer (2005) notes, approaches that de-materialize the state can inadvertently replicate the Hegelian idea of the state as an ethical ideal, eschewing rigorous analysis of institutions in favor of free floating signs. While the creation of signs is central to any state and it is often by way of affective imagery that actors invest in statecraft, it would be a mistake to lose sight of the fact that state regulation, while not always narrowly economic (e.g. stimulating growth, regulating trade, ensuring capital accumulation), still reflects the balance of forces and classes in society and the interests of the actors staffing the apparatus. The state is a condensation of relations and economic forces that is relatively independent of the ideas associated with it (Poulantzas 1974, Althusser 1971, cf. Milliband 1969).

Following Abrams (1988), this study investigates the state as a material system and an ideological project. While Abrams suggested we should study the idea of the state and the way in which it circulates in wider society, he also suggested we should not lose sight of the fact that the state is a series of institutions which key social groups are able to use to impose their vision of society on others. The ability of actors to regulate social relations derives in part from an image of the state as a neutral body separate from societal conflict (Mitchell 1999, Jessop 1999). If the state system can be effectively presented as embodying the interests of society as a whole, it can be said to enjoy a high degree of hegemonic consent. But states do not require consent from all social groups; consent is often selective. In so far as some actors are able to force their vision of society on other groups, it does not matter whether all groups accept their legitimacy or the idea their rule is based in justice. State actors are able to create facts on the ground
in a way that belie counterclaims. The extent to which ruling elites can impose their vision of order above and beyond the wishes of other groups in society can serve to strengthen the state. Yet the exercise of certain types of sovereign power can be perilous. It does not even have to be such dramatic instances of violent upheaval as the Caracazo for the partial character of state to be exposed. Such exercises can reveal the partial character of sovereignty as well as the gap between the idea of the state and the reality of the system which is less ideal.

This dynamic is characteristic of the dual power situations studied by Lenin (1915). These situations likely represent a minority of political revolutions, however. As James Scott (1995) suggests, ‘the local version of the revolution’ often differs substantially from the official version at the political center and rural actors interacting with new state institutions often contest official policies, while still conceiving of themselves as “part of the revolution.” A major part of the work of revolution after the seizure of power thus is the creation of a shared hegemonic framework which allows the leadership to accomplish its goals and neutralize resistance. Moreover, it is also clear that most revolutions do not ‘smash the state’ in the way rhetoric suggests and they enlist agents of the previous regime. When I returned to Venezuela in 2009, there was hardly a clear division between ‘the revolution’ and the ancien regime with regard to the state bureaucracy.

The categories used in a revolution may suggest return to a previous order, while what is actually created may be relatively new (Wolf 1969, Wolf and Mintz 1957, Thomassen 2012).

During such periods, actors often struggle to find words to describe what has occurred. If social relations have shifted rapidly, change can outpace the ability of actors to come up with new categories. Or out of reflex or habit, actors may use old ways of talking about new relationships, engaging in old practices under new names. This can be an indication that very little has changed or that existing cultural categories have been filled with radically new content. As the historian Eric Hobsbawm (1986) argued, the distinction between reform and revolution may be less clear cut than scholars have historically imagined and the traditions of rural people may be as radical in content as modernist ideologies seeking to make a clean break with the ancien regime.

The vacuum of sovereignty created by revolution can be greeted as an opening of society and a chance to gain new freedoms. While others regard it as a time of insecurity filled with danger. The feeling of unease among diverse sectors of the society is palpable and the liminal space of revolution is filled
with all sorts of silences and incoherences. The old rules no longer apply and people are often unsure of the consequences of certain utterances and behaviors. As a result, they are often afraid to convey opinions for fear of falling on the wrong side of an issue. Rather than run afoul of newly powerful groups in society, some find it safer to dissimulate or conceal their true feelings while others find it safer to say nothing at all (Scott 1992, Donham 1999: 36 et passim, cf. Smith 1991: 180-181). This can be a challenging setting in which to conduct fieldwork (and one for which the discipline of anthropology may not have developed entirely adequate tools, see Thomassen 2012). Yet even with actors who feel able to speak to a researcher, there is still a problem of translation.

xxv The categories I use were often deployed in the field and this affected my own reading of them. Yet they often differed in terms of the content and thus I have not started with the idea they are the same as my usage or reflect the social relations the leadership suggests. Instead of adopting a normative reading of ‘revolution’ either based on the historical experience of the twentieth century or the criteria of the political leadership, I prefer to ask why this rupture can be understood as revolution by Venezuelans, and whether these images are adequate to analyze it.

xxvi This resistance reflects the contested character of the relations the agrarian reform sought to embed in the countryside. Although the capacity of this resistance to shape the trajectory of the reform was often extremely limited, I saw this friction and backtalk adding up to a process of hegemonic struggle which was taking place at a variety of scales (cf. Scott 1985).

xxvii The global left is responsible for much of this writing with various sectors attaching their aspirations to it, often without direct evidence. In my view, writers have been overeager to see their own ideas in practice and descriptions of the revolution in these debates often clash with direct observation. It seems to me this writing is more geared toward branding the process with a stamp of approval, rather than investigating its impact on social actors. I am surprised at the extent to which writers are willing to quote Venezuelan officials and treat their utterances as true, taking at face value appraisals they would never accept from their own governments. Such a stance is perhaps due to the fact that the left has long waited for a revolution to study and writers are afraid to criticize it too harshly. I also suspect this reflects real tensions in Venezuela itself.

xxviii While I sympathize with writers engaged in this type of ‘defense of the revolution,’ I find the self-censorship it entails unlikely to advance the cause of social justice. The successes of the Venezuelan
revolution are very much open to interpretation and ignoring the challenges it faces cannot bring any real knowledge of the threats it faces. We cannot assume the leadership is pursuing a royal road to sovereignty or “socialism” or that its motives are always “pure.”

The problem of how to conduct criticism within the revolution surfaced in my fieldwork as actors struggled to find ways to support the process, while criticizing aspects of official policy.

xxix There are certainly critics of the Venezuelan government who describe themselves as part of “the left” (e.g. Douglas Bravo, Teodoro Petkoff, Roland Denis, Alberto Domingo Rangel). These critics often come under attack from the elected leadership, but there are also reasons to question the motivations of these actors, just as there are reasons to question the government.

xxx Two tensions which merit attention, but which are not dealt with directly in the dissertation are race and gender. At present, these tensions appear in various places throughout the narrative, surfacing much as they did in my fieldwork, in brief flashes before vanishing under the weight of established prerogatives. The actors negatively affected by these systems of power were usually left to nourish grudges as traditional prejudices survived largely intact. Efforts to press claims on the basis of race and gender were frequently ignored or diverted by other logics. In many cases, subaltern actors also seemed unable to articulate what they were enduring as racism or gender discrimination. This is due in part to the myth of 
\textit{mestizaje} referenced in Chapter 5 and an almost ubiquitous heterosexism. I hope to address these issues directly in future work on 
\textit{mestizaje} and the integration of women into the state labor force as part of the struggle for sovereignty.

xxxi Indeed, the analysis suggests the very terms of success are constantly being redefined.

xxxii The category of \textit{campesino/a} must be distinguished from the analytical category of peasant. The word ‘\textit{campesino/a}’ usually denotes a rural person of low social standing who makes his or her living from agriculture. Yet the word is also a geographical marker and/or description of the set of values which arise from this use of land. A well-rehearsed example of this use of the term is the case of a person who leaves the \textit{campo}, but never entirely adjusts to his or her new surroundings. It is said this person “will always be a \textit{campesino/a}.” To clear up any confusion arising from the use of these two related words, I use the more precise term ‘peasant’ when referring to the class of petty commodity producers who own their own land or access it with a fund of rent, and the term \textit{campesino}, when referring to local usage, and the meanings
described above, which are generally broader. All the images used in this dissertation are the work of the author, unless otherwise noted. All quotes from informants are drawn from fieldnotes recorded in 2007 and 2009-2010. All references include the year. A few of the personal details of informants have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

Chapter 1

xxxiii The literatures on peasants and petroleum are so extensive as to make it virtually impossible to detail every aspect of their possible interaction (see for example Gomez 2000, Mommer 1988, Baptista 1997, Petras et al, 1977, Pérez 1961, Woodhouse 2010). Thus, I have focused on a description of the rentier form of capitalism, which characterized the early phases of national development in Venezuela and the efforts of successive Venezuelan governments to transition from a regime of rent capture to a more productive economy.

xxxiv Oil has been a major impetus for internecine wars in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The untapped reserves of Latin America have made the region a key zone of extraction in recent years (see Sawyer 2004, Valdivia 2008, Schiller 2012, Cepek 2013).

xxxv La Via Campesina has campaigned for the de-linking of global agriculture from oil to save the peasantry and the fertility of the soil as well as the ecologies upon which they are based. These discourses often set up a clear antagonism between peasants and petroleum or soil and oil, invoking language of consumption, greed and destruction (see La Vía Campesina 2013). These populist discourses, however, tend to ignore the extent to which the use of fossil fuels and machinery has permitted small and medium-scale farmers to self-exploit in new ways, making them more competitive in capitalized markets due to savings on labor. Ideas of peasant led agro-ecology standing in opposition to global climate change and industrial agriculture have also recently gained ground (see Altieri and Koohafkan 2008, Borron 2006).

xxxvi The Venezuelan leadership was always worried about the future: a future without petroleum. Estimates varied as to how long that would take. Some estimates suggested it would take fifty years; others said it would take a hundred years. Still others suggested it would take perhaps one hundred and fifty years. But at some point, the oil would run out. The leadership had to take measures before it ran out and the nation had to have an alternative basis for the economy by then. Yet the discovery of significant reserves in the interior of the nation always pushed that date even further into the future and the
calculations were revised upwards (see Rowling 2012, Salazar-Carillo and West 2004). This generated a kind of ‘double consciousness.’ At once aware that the resource has material limits (i.e. it replenishes itself on geological, rather than human timescales), but that the price of the resource fluctuates on the global market, extraction zones which were not previously profitable could suddenly become viable. The exigencies of financing exploration also tended to reinforce extraction and use of the revenue of the resource. The peak oil concept suggested that one day the petroleum era would come to an end in Venezuela, and that the day was fast approaching. But the Venezuelan state kept reinvesting in the extraction process and deploying the revenue of the resource, sowing it into development projects that could free the nation from dependency.

xxxvii Much of the land grabbing in the global south, and Latin America in particular, is motivated by a desire to create large agro-industrial export farms. Yet what distinguishes these units from the type of unit I am describing here is the role of the state and the general focus on national development as opposed to external markets and profit. The general focus of development agencies has turned to smallholder agriculture in many cases, while the neoliberalization of agriculture in the global south has encouraged the formation of new types of monopolies. The Florentino enterprise bucks both trends as a state owned and operated industrial operation geared toward national development and internal consumption.

xxxviii It seemed to me that technical experts began to ignore these less productive cooperatives, making fewer and fewer trips to them. While it would be difficult to make an argument based solely on anecdotal observations over the course of fieldwork, it is my suspicion that focus has shifted in many areas to these state enterprises with attention paid only to cooperatives raising production.

xxxix Indeed when one stepped back, it was as if the Venezuelan government was trying to turn the entire country into a peasant. The type of market relations and market economy they envisioned was not remarkably different from the simple commodity producer: the nation should be able to derive income from the sale of a resource it extracted from land with its labor, but retreat to a portion of the land held for subsistence in times where such activities were no longer profitable. This I argue is in part why the image of the campesino as a symbol of sovereignty was so effective. The association between the peasant and petroleum were natural in this iteration.

Chapter 2
These attempts to portray Chávez as insane continued up until and even after his death (see Soltis 2013 and New York Post 2013 for examples).

Venezuelan scholars have suggested that the rise of this usage can be located in the late 1970s and 1980s when the price of oil rose and then declined dramatically (Coronil 1997, Vargas 2006).

The woman was responsible for cleaning the area outside my house. I greeted her every morning as she raked up the leaves before going to the headquarters. A photo of the young woman with her mother at the scene of the slaying ran in local newspapers making it a subject of gossip in Florentino with many people noting the contrast between the mild personality of the young woman and the brother involved in criminal activity.

In fact, the largest oil refinery in the world is located in Paraguana, Venezuela.

Michael Taussig (1980) has argued ‘the man who sets himself apart from the rest of society’ is often regarded as a harbinger or servant of the devil (xvii). Average Venezuelans often use the devil symbol to attack transnational elites with intimate ties to global capital or those who in some cases, live outside the nation in Miami and other cosmopolitan centers.

Some Venezuelan writers attribute this term to local indigenous groups. It is difficult to verify this claim, but it is conceivable the term is a product of the colonial encounter and the ensuing remolding of pre-Colombian cosmologies suggested by scholars Nash (1979) and Taussig (1980).

In his speeches, Chávez drew an explicit parallel between the apocalyptic Christian vision of the return of Christ’s kingdom on earth, a form of sovereignty which would put an end to social strife, and his own project of socialist agrarian reform. In a direct challenge to the authority of the Catholic Church, Chávez stated in reference to the Pope that “Christ doesn’t need an ambassador,” suggesting there is no need to mediate this sovereignty and indeed that his sovereignty was “in the people.”

The title of this section takes its inspiration from the analysis of Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra (2004) and his concept of “the spiritual plantation.”

Three agronomists from China supervised this portion of the farm as part of an agreement signed with the Venezuelan government. The agronomists were tasked with educating the Venezuelan tecnicos on the
most efficient methods for the crop. These agreements were a part of investing in the human capital required to run the enterprises.

xlvi The resource curse is now a global discourse propagated by cosmopolitan intellectuals and elites. But it also has local variants which take on different inflections according to the context.

1 Although I tend to underscore material relations as the basis upon which “different cultures can collaborate” rather than her more ethereal vision of “shared imaginaries and dispositions,” I agree with Visweswaran’s assertion that “the new culturalism” has succeeded in reinforcing the race concept and supported forms of ethno-racial essentialism which prevent the emergence of historical subjects based on class.

Chapter 3

li During my 14 months of fieldwork in Florentino, the socialist labor committees never met. Officially, the committees were part of a co-management scheme, but in practice they were nothing more than paper institutions. It was made quite clear to me that the committees could only meet at the risk of the jobs of all in attendance.

lii The question of the division of labor and its ability to create both interdependence and antagonism has been dealt with by a variety of classic scholars including Marx (1867), Tonnies (1887), Durkheim (1893), Mauss (1898) and Wolf (1982) to name just a few. For a more recent discussion of these issues, see Smith (2014).

Chapter 4

liii Under its status as part of the national patrimony, the music of Ali Primera can be freely distributed and it is no longer under copyright.

lv A few years prior to the nationalization of the petroleum industry Primera wrote a song entitled Esclavos de Esclavos or “Slaves of Slaves.” The song addressed the neocolonial character of the Venezuelan society and the multiple ironies of life in a nation-state with a nominal claim to sovereignty, but which lacked real independence. The song critiqued the creation of a modern disposable society in
which life was value like any other commodity and a portion of the nation was cast aside as waste or refuse. In another song written in the same period, Primera referenced the techos de carton or “roofs of cardboard” sheltering the residents of the ranchos and the callous attitudes of Venezuelan elites who identified more with the US than their fellow countrymen. Subservient to foreign elites and suppressing popular sovereignty, the Venezuelan people effectively had “two masters.” Venezuelan elites traded relative privilege in “the colony” for allegiance to foreign masters. Lamenting that “our owner has an owner,” he made a plaintive call for elites to abandon their sectional interests and identify with el pueblo.

According to Primera the slaves of the colonial period were freer than modern Venezuelans because in spite of having adopted the religion of their masters, these slaves did not worship capital. Primera suggested the worldview of these elites was akin to a form of mental slavery in which they believed if they pursued the lifestyles in the global north, they would “lighten their skin.” This status could only be achieved by forsaking the sovereignty of the nation, and he suggested the Venezuelan people had to confront this neocolonial elite along with foreign capital to achieve independence.

Chapter 5

Cattle-breeding in the global north has moved in essentially the opposite direction. Most breeds are designed either to maximize the output of milk or meat, not both. This reflects a general tendency in capitalist agriculture discussed in Chapter 3, i.e. the increase in the division of labor and the division of nature. In this regard, Florentino could be said to work against one of the logics of capital, while reinforcing others.

Conclusion

The Spanish verb creer like the verb “to believe” in English is used to affirm the substance or existence of something as well as its basic goodness or virtue. The word is used in Spanish to express faith in the existence of a divine transcendent subject and his righteousness. That is was also used in reference to the state—another transcendental entity—is quite telling.
Conflicts between the Catholic Church and populist government have continued. Unwilling to see their monopoly on sacred ritual challenged, Church leaders have called the folk prayer “Chávez Nuestro” offered by Chavistas an example of ‘idolatry.’