

Reading Arendt in Caracas

by Elisabeth Young-Bruehl

Elisabeth Young-Bruehl in Caracas – mit Hannah Arendt im Gepäck

Im Sommer 2007 war Elisabeth Young-Bruehl zu einer Reihe von Vorträgen und zu Gesprächen mit Studenten und Professoren an drei venezolanischen Universitäten nach Caracas eingeladen worden -- zu einer Zeit, in der massive studentische Proteste gegen den Präsidenten Hugo Chávez die innenpolitische Situation kennzeichneten. Federführend für die Einladung war die 2005 ins Leben gerufene Gruppe "Hannah Arendt Observatorio" (Leiter: Heinz Sonntag). In einem Artikel für das Magazin The Nation, der am 17. August 2007 unter dem Titel "Reading Arendt in Caracas" ins Internet gestellt wurde, berichtete Young-Bruehl von der politischen Lage im Land, ihren Gesprächen und Eindrücken. Auf Bitten eines Mitglieds von „Hannah Arendt Observatorio“, Oskar Reyes, schrieb sie einen Nachtrag zu diesem Bericht ("Behind the Student Movement's Victory"), in dem sie die Ergebnisse des Referendums vom Dezember 2007 zu der von Chávez angestrebten Verfassungsreform analysierte. Mit freundlicher Genehmigung der Autorin veröffentlichen wir im folgenden beide Artikel in ihrer Internet-Version. Reaktionen auf ihre Ausführungen sind zu finden unter „thenation.org“.

1. Reading Arendt in Caracas (*The Nation*, online version of August 17, 2007)
2. Behind the Student Movement's Victory (Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, online version of December 6, 2007)

I Reading Arendt in Caracas

The year 2006 was the centenary of Hannah Arendt's birth. Conferences and colloquia marked it all around the Western world, from Berlin to Belgrade, from Paris to Prague. Radio and TV documentaries aired on every continent, and new editions and translations of Arendt's books poured into bookstores as her reputation globalized. Clearly, three decades after her death in 1975, Arendt's writings are as compelling as they were to student rebels in America and Western Europe in the late 1960s and to the velvet revolutionaries of Eastern Europe in the 1980s.

As Arendt's biographer, I received many invitations to speak and write about her. But an especially intriguing one came at the year's end, introducing a study group I had never heard of before: the Hannah Arendt Observatorio, based in Caracas, Venezuela. From the home of the Bolivarian Revolution, launched in 1998 by Hugo Chávez, came a plea: Will

you come to Caracas for a week and talk with us about Hannah Arendt's theories of totalitarianism and revolution? Chávez was just then, in December 2006, winning his second term as president by a decisive majority--some 60 percent of the electorate.

On June 10 of this year, I set out for Caracas, having educated myself as best I could about the enormously complex political situation there. Everything contemporary that I (a Spanishless reader) found in NYU's library or on the Internet had a point of view, Chavista or anti-Chavista (although there was thoughtful political analysis from, for example, Moises Naim, the Venezuelan-born editor of *Foreign Policy*). The polarization is as intense in the American media as it is in the Venezuelan, with the *New York Times* consistently criticizing Chávez editorially-- even applauding the 2002 coup attempt against him--while many in the left blogosphere and on the news site venezuelanalysis.com hail him.

In Venezuela and in America, the war of words had ratcheted up the week before I left. Demonstrations had broken out in Caracas to protest Chavez's decision not to renew the license of an anti-Chavista TV station (RCTV) where, as at all private TV stations in Venezuela, in between the soap operas and the talk-show fare, the coup against him had been promoted and his downfall devoutly desired ever since. But for the first time, the protest marches were organized not by disaffected middle-class opposition party supporters but by students from a dozen public and private universities, including the three--Central University, Catholic University and Simon Bolivar University--where I had been asked to speak. After nearly a decade of little action by students, a movement is emerging.

There are some 200,000 university students in Caracas, including those, mostly pro-Chavista, who attend the eight universities Chávez has created (with plans for more than twenty more). The majority of the students at Central, Catholic and Simon Bolivar are middle class and white--like the American and European students whose 1960s and '80s histories they know--but both the private and public universities have been opening more and more (as the government guarantees financial support and calls for an "open admissions" policy, without qualifying exams). At universities outside Caracas, like the University of the Andes, student organizing in recent years, before the RCTV issue, centered on questions of university governance and how students could have a voice in their own education. I began to think, over the week of my visit, that this movement might have the possibility of reminding the warring elders that a country in which the huge gulf between rich and poor shrinks is in the interests of all its citizens. The question is how this social justice goal should be achieved, and that, as Hannah Arendt always argued, is a political question, a question for political actors--like the students themselves.

Because the war of words and images is so intense, it was obvious to me from the moment I arrived that I was going to have a very Venezuelan experience: I was going to be caught in many crossfires of opinions no matter which way I turned, and I was going to end up watching my every word get swept up in the vortex of a nationwide general anxiety disorder. Everyone I met wanted me to write something about my impressions, "for the outside world" they all said, sounding like asylum inmates appealing to a visiting psychiatrist.

I did want to write this piece, but I had to remind myself (and now you, my reader) where my short-term observation post was located--that is, in and around predominantly anti-Chavista groups. My Observatorio hosts were all anti-Chavista to one degree or another, ranging from disillusioned former Chavistas to academics with ties to European center-left groups like the British Euston Manifesto signers. My association with the Observatorio was complicated by the fact that they had accepted an offer from the US Embassy's speaker's program to fund my visit. Although no pressure was put on me, the Embassy, of course, would have been glad to hear the word "totalitarian" applied to Chávez. Some of the anti-Chavista Observatorio members would also have been glad for Chávez to be called totalitarian, but they would not have wanted to be thought pro-American or in the Embassy's embrace, even though they are critics of the blanket anti-Americanism that is key to Chávez's rhetoric.

The Hannah Arendt Observatorio was formed in 2005, triggered into existence when Chávez reached out to embrace the president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as his revolutionary brother and then used the term "Christ-killers" in a speech. (As is usual in Venezuela, a debate followed the speech about whether Chávez had used the term for Jews or used it, ironically, for enemies among the oil-enriched Venezuelan elites who would like to kill *him*; and it should be noted that Chávez did not go on to imitate his revolutionary brother's habit of making undebatably anti-Semitic statements and indulging in Holocaust denial.) The Observatorio was led by Heinz Sonntag, an emeritus professor of sociology, German-born and educated, thus very sensitive to "the Jewish question." He had been teaching in Caracas since the late 1960s, when he had found the Venezuelan universities quite comfortably Marxist. In the 1950s, while Venezuela was stagnating under a military dictator, Gen. Marcos Perez Jimenez, the universities had become the seat of opposition, and they remained so even after Perez Jimenez was displaced in 1958 by a civilian democratic regime that inaugurated a forty-year period of relative stability and prosperity--for some. The public Central University, founded in 1721, where I gave my first talk, had opened its new campus as the welcome democracy began: an architecturally unified park studded with Henry Moore and Jean Arp sculptures, graced with a stained-glass mural made by Ferdinand Léger and an *aula magna* hung with acoustic panels from the atelier of Alexander Calder. Caracas was going to rival the postwar reconstructed European cities.

By the time the younger members of the Hannah Arendt Observatorio, now in their 40s, were students in the impressive autonomous universities like Central, the democratic regime was growing more and more rigid, unresponsive and oligarchic. It had come into being with a pact--called the Pacto de Punto Fijo--in which the three main democratic parties formed an alliance excluding the rest, among them the Communists who had also opposed Perez Jimenez. I noted in my lecture that they had made a grand coalition not unlike the one that had emerged in Germany during the 1960s, which Arendt had sharply labeled a "two-party dictatorship" and faulted for its tendency to rely on old friends of Hitler. Venezuela's Punto Fijo government eroded not just the political sphere, as the German one did, but the economic sphere as well. Rising oil prices brought a vast increase in petroleum wealth for the Venezuelan elites, with the corollary result that vast barrios sprang up precariously on the steep hillsides of Caracas, where millions of people had no

running water, little in the way of healthcare and limited access to education. American corporations from the Eisenhower era forward bought billions in cheap oil from the Venezuelan plantation instead of developing America's own energy sources, and to this day, more than half of Venezuela's total exports go to the States (and about a third of its imports come from the States).

In the late 1960s, I told the students at Central, Arendt had identified coalition party oligarchies as the key problem of the Western European and American nation-states; political participation was stifled rather than erased, as it had been in the totalitarian regimes of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union under Stalin, which turned their bureaucrats into organizers of mass murder. In America, she had lamented, the Democrats and Republicans had converged on the political center and made common cause to support the illegal Vietnam War (a pattern they repeated in 2003 with Iraq). Protest did finally arise from outside the party system, energized by the student movement, but Arendt had warned in *Crises of the Republic* that the sclerotic party system (and associated declining civil service) would be hard to reform, as it was reinforced by America's dedication to a "permanent war economy" and to a habit of mistaking violence for power--that is, of resorting to military force to solve political problems. She had been a consistent critic of the use of the American military and CIA to establish spheres of influence--including, crucially, in Latin America--during the cold war.

In Venezuela popular (not student) protest against the political sclerosis and economic injustice of Puntofijismo did not come until 1989, the year the Berlin wall toppled. The trigger was a decision made by then-President Carlos Andres Perez, who, having spent the regime into dangerous inflation, called for austerity measures that fell most heavily on the poor, who were a large portion of the fast-expanding population. The barrios of Caracas exploded. People who had almost nothing rejected, as it were, taxation without representation, particularly when it came from a government that had grown rich and corrupt on the nationalization of the major oil company (known by its initials, PDVSA).

In 1989 the rioting, called the *Caracazo*, left several hundred people dead and set the stage for new political actors to emerge. What Arendt called a "revolutionary space" had been opened, but at first little happened (and the campuses were quiet). Hugo Chávez, then a lieutenant colonel in the military, took the opportunity to prepare himself for future leadership by enrolling for a graduate degree in political science, choosing as his mentor a future member of the Hannah Arendt Observatorio, Friedrich Welsch, another emigre from Germany, who remembered the earnest young man's first day of class well: "He came in uniform, with his pistol, and I told him either the pistol is left outside the door or he will be outside himself, along with the pistol. He told me he is an officer and cannot be without his pistol. But then, when I did not give in, he left, gave the pistol to his aide-de-camp and returned. After that, he was very attentive, a good student, in the top tenth of his classes." He wanted to write a thesis on what political scientists call "transitology," taking as his case study Spain in its transition away from Franco's Fascist government. But when the moment seemed right to attempt a coup, the thesis was put aside. "I obviously did not get him converted to democratic socialism or even to democratic methods," Welsch told me with his characteristic ironic smile, "although he

read a lot of democratic theorists--not, then, Hannah Arendt--and he was not, at the time, so interested in the Cuban model."

Under Chávez's leadership, a group of military officers made their coup attempt in February 1992, unsuccessfully. Another group, which some say was directed by Chávez from his prison cell, followed suit in November of that year, again unsuccessfully. The Punto Fijo government finally began to collapse from within when the Congress impeached Andres Perez on corruption charges--finally a triumph for democracy. Chávez returned to the scene as a presidential candidate and won handily in 1998. His calls for constitutional reform, for rooting out corruption and for empowerment of the people, reverberated through the barrios and brought many thousands into the streets to cheer him on. The Constitution his government adopted in 1999 proclaimed, in heady, hypertheoretical language, "participatory and protagonic democracy."

Some in the left-leaning universities voted for Chávez; many more were skeptical. Among the skeptics was Teodoro Petkoff, an economist and founder of the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS), to which most of the Hannah Arendt Observatorio members belonged in the 1990s. Petkoff had started off his political life under the Perez Jimenez military dictatorship, when he was a guerrilla fighter and did a few stints in prison. Those years made him permanently suspicious of military men in politics, even ones proclaiming participatory democracy, not state socialism. "They bring along their habit of hierarchy, of not listening, their love to give orders to followers who do not question," Petkoff told me when I met him after my Catholic University talk, which had taken place in a hall that bore a wonderful inscription above its door: "Use your ears here, that's why it's called an auditorium."

Listening to Petkoff's assessment, I kept remembering the handmade signs that the Catholic University students had put up all over their campus, a sampler of advice from luminaries as diverse as Gandhi and Nietzsche, Locke and Miguel de Unamuno. In the corridor outside the philosophy department, groups of students studied a series of exhibition panels telling the story of the White Rose, a student resistance group that had perished fighting the Nazis. This is a generation hungry for examples; its published statements about freedom of speech and participatory democracy quote the Port Huron Statement, the SDS manifesto of 1962.

"What you have said about Hannah Arendt's theory on how totalitarianism depends on the secret police and turns bureaucrats into murderers," Petkoff remarked as I questioned him about what the emergent student movement signals, "confirms me in my judgment that this regime is not, as you say, concentration camp totalitarianism of the twentieth-century sort, but I do think it is totalitarianism for the twenty-first century. I call it 'totalitarianism-lite.'" He went on to focus his concern on how the regime is taking over all areas of civil society, limiting dissent, sponsoring doctrinaire bureaucrats, many of them military officers, and now threatening the autonomy of the universities.

Petkoff was one of the few anti-Chavistas I met who was able to be witty about the man he kept calling Comandante, because Petkoff is one of the few who has publicly proclaimed a contrasting vision for Venezuelan "socialism in the twenty-first century." In the 2006 election campaign, he ran for president as a democratic socialist, someone whose policy preferences would make sense to people familiar with Poland's Solidarity,

except he knows that Venezuela has a poverty problem far more extreme than anything even the Eastern European social democrats have to face and that Venezuela has a legacy of being in an imperialist orbit that did not come to a crashing end as the Warsaw Pact did.

The students I met at the next stop on my university tour--which was at the beautiful Simon Bolivar University, a botanical oasis in the urban sprawl that is Caracas--did not seem very aware of the programs favored by Petkoff or by the opposition candidate, Manuel Rosales, to whom Petkoff gave his support in order not to split the anti-Chávez vote in 2006. The vice-rector of Simon Bolivar, a chemical engineer, explained to me that Rosales had suggested, for example, issuing low-income Venezuelans a ration card--called a "blackie," after the color of unrefined oil--that they could use only for food, healthcare and education rather than making direct money grants to them, as Chávez does. The idea was to redistribute petro-wealth through a system more rational, more immune to corruption and more likely to support--in combination with a microcredit program--the poor working their way out of poverty. But this proposal, like the opposition candidate himself, a man unfortunately associated with the 2002 coup against Chávez, which had hardly been a great moment for democracy, lacked the charisma of El Presidente and his munificence with government funds. "The opposition," I had been told by one of the idealistic student leaders--a young woman who would have cheered the heart of Dorothy Day--"is like you have in America: not strong, not taking risks, having too much money. The opposition here is not understanding that the poor people are angry at the people with money, and Chávez speaks this anger for them." She has no trouble with Chávez's ends, only with his means, which she described to me as "sacrificing our democracy to his socialism." We had quite an intense conversation about why Hannah Arendt had distrusted revolutions that try to solve problems of social injustice without first achieving a stable, constitutional republic. "But you have to tell," she challenged me, "what is the guarantee that people in a constitutional republic will be responsible to the poor?"

This student's good question came from her experience as the first child in her family to get to a university. But my impression was that her concern for social justice and her critique of the anti-Chavista opposition parties were widely shared; she had no party affiliation, and neither did any of the other students I met. They do not speak for the opposition but against media control and against any threat to the autonomy of the universities.

While the anti-Chavista students I met are not identified with party goals, most of the anti-Chavista adults I talked with are, and they are informed by an experience of personal security during the Punto Fijo regime followed by fear of the barbarians at the gates. I was told time and again that Chávez has his shirts and suits-- many, many suits ("like Imelda Marcos's shoes")--tailored on Savile Row, that he collects expensive watches, that his family has enriched itself with money and thousands upon thousands of hectares of land, that he has a slush fund for patronage purposes, that he is nepotistic (his brother Adan is the minister of education, his father a state governor, two more brothers hold high-ranking government positions). In short, I was told, Chávez is no different from the standard Latin American *caudillo*. Many such ad hominem commentaries about Chávez were offered to me, but I was also assured that Venezuelans do not gossip in the American

manner: "We do not care whether he has girlfriends or boyfriends or no friends, like you do when you make politicians into celebrities; but we care very much if he is a hypocrite or if he is crazy." These kinds of criticisms of American society--true as they may be--struck me as displacements, justifications for focusing on Chávez as a personality and not on the state of the state or the disorder of the opposition. None of the students I met go in for these kinds of struggles to control images of Chávez past or present or to write or rewrite history. Their focus is on right now, and the 2002 coup attempt against Chávez is something that happened when they were 15.

Some of the students did think Chávez is a bit crazy, however-- but like a fox. The students, of a generation ever alert to "performativity," see the enormous appeal of the story Chávez tells, a pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps tale of being a child of poverty who was boarded out to his grandmother (the sainted Mama Rosinas) and then worked his way up through high school (playing an excellent game of baseball on the way) and into the military, suffering depressing setbacks along the way (like his failed coup and the coup attempt against him) but persevering while helping others, like himself, to rise. He is a mirror for the wretched of the earth, and they are joyous when he succeeds at being the vulnerable ideal he projects. This is not plain-old populist machismo; it is vulnerable, folksy, charming machismo. When Chávez returned to Venezuela after one of his many trips to Cuba--where he seems to go to consult his mentor, Fidel Castro, whenever he has suffered a setback, as he did when the students demonstrated so effectively against him--he portrayed Fidel, too, as both invincible and vulnerable. I read in the *Daily Journal*, a pro-Chávez English-language paper, that he had announced: "Fidel is recovering well--he could not go out on the diamond and throw his old fastball, but he is back in the game."

After his 1992 coup attempt failed, Chávez went on TV for a moment that became legendary among his followers--a moment of vulnerability and strength. He made a concession speech, but he inserted into it two words of defiance: "for now" the coup is finished, he said, before he went off to jail. Friedrich Welsch told me that Chávez had thought about trying to write his thesis in prison, but when that plan proved impossible he went on an eclectic reading program that added to his theoretical vocabulary a lot of words of wisdom from the classic socialist and Communist tracts and prison memoirs. To this day, fifteen years later, Chávez quotes a library of brother revolutionaries, from his number-one historical hero, Simon Bolivar, to his number-one contemporary hero, Fidel Castro, along with an odd assortment of American and European leftists. On the day of my arrival at Simon Bolivar University, El Presidente discoursed on TV for an interminable half-hour on Antonio Gramsci before turning to a mixture of grandiose self-reference and policy wonkese.

The hodgepodge of quotations that Chávez disseminates in his regular addresses (which all the networks are obliged by law to air) and his weekly television appearance--a call-in show known as *Alo, Presidente!*--is symptomatic of the hodgepodge of his policies. His is a type of revolution not anticipated in Hannah Arendt's 1963 book *On Revolution*, I suggested to my audience at the Simon Bolivar University, one of the most active outposts of the emergent student movement. (The campus has huge parking lots full of Minis with their back windows painted playfully "I am free speech!" and "I am the spirit of liberty!") When Chávez and his followers won the 1998 election, they produced a truly remarkable

American-style Constitution based on checks and balances, which calls for five branches of government, one of which is dedicated to oversight of the government through an ombudsman and a general prosecutor. But the Constitution did not put as effective a check on executive power as it might have, and almost as soon as it was printed in little portable editions to be distributed free to millions of Venezuelans, who took to carrying it at all times and quoting it, Chávez began to obscure it with decrees and laws that are never challenged as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, which was itself unconstitutionally expanded so that it could be packed with his appointees. Not satisfied to control the court, in 2000 Chávez got the unicameral Assembly to, in effect, erase its power by granting him a year of non-consultative decision-making (in European history this kind of antidemocratic achievement is known as an enabling law, or *Ermächtigungsgesetz*). Chávez's political critics in the universities are alarmed that the Bolivarian Constitution is being ignored or undermined, and the constitutional lawyer who did most of the drafting has turned anti-Chavista.

This seems to be a type of revolution that progresses--or actually regresses--by two main means. First, the laws of the land change constantly, so that no one knows what the law is--you have to tune in to the president's briefings for news. The most serious changes are the decrees challenging the Constitution itself, which have altered the legislative, judiciary, executive and citizens-support branches, filling up the government with Chavistas. This is a process that could end in one-party dictatorship, because Chávez is now insisting that all the Chavista parties combine into one, a grand coalition like the ones Arendt warned about, which will be stifling even for his own followers--a potentially disastrous blocking of new life in the revolution itself. He has proposed a constitutional amendment that would allow him to run for election in 2012, bypassing a previously established term limit.

Along with this regression from the political ideal--the Constitution--goes the possibility that economic policies, formulated by the government, will circumscribe political action by the citizens, controlling them not with overt or covert violence, as happens in most revolutions that start rigidifying, but with money. This is not to say that the regime avoids violence--the first big student demonstration in May was met with tear gas and plastic bullets, very brutally. The vice-rector of Simon Bolivar University described to me in horrified detail how one of her students had been shot at close range: A policeman put his gun right to the downed student's hand and then to his leg so that both were shattered from within by plastic bullets designed to be used at a distance. Arms importation is booming, and there are huge numbers of small arms in militia hands (and, of course, this means that many weapons make their way into the growing criminal arena, where thefts and homicides are on the rise). But on a day-to-day basis, the danger is more that the Bolivarian Revolution will operate increasingly like a perverse bank; it is, like Iran's, what might be called a Resources Revolution, one keyed to the world-historical moment in which those who control natural resources can spend independently of the wealthy elites they have overthrown. Chávez, the petro-revolutionary, does not have to pay any attention to people who grew wealthy--or even just got technically and professionally educated--under the Punto Fijo regime.

Much of the money has gone into the creation of a kind of alternative society, and more controversy surrounds this development than any other, making it the hardest dimension of the revolution for an outsider to assess. The government directly funds hundreds of so-called *misiones* in communities. The missions do provide employment and bring food (delivered in military trucks), healthcare (aided by Cuban doctors) and education directly to the people, which is surely a good thing; but they are not like the revolutionary councils that have sprung up, Arendt noted, in all revolutions, constituting the people's forums for ongoing political participation (until they were, time and again, crushed by parties aspiring to total control). Despite a lot of rhetoric about participatory democracy, the missions are not political formations that could reform local, city and provincial governments, making them more responsive to the grassroots, and they have alienated rather than inspired the country's labor unions because they are run and firmly controlled from the center, often quite literally from Chávez's office. No totalitarian military and secret police bureaucracy has been built up in Venezuela, but a controlled service sector has, and a rerun of centralized state socialism will ensue unless the political problem is grasped by the Chavistas, by the anti-Chavistas or, more likely, by the students, who are grassroots political actors and not caught up in haggling about whether the missions have, in statistical terms, benefited the poor or not, at what cost and how efficiently or inefficiently.

Several university economists told me that oil production is now declining and the government is moving into a period of deficit spending--with the consequent inflation. PDVSA has continued to generate sufficient wealth for Chávez to hope to pay down Venezuela's debts, seeking to free it from the "neoliberal imperialism" of the United States and the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. He has the money to set up trade agreements with Latin American neighbors, without the Free Trade Area of the Americas. All of this is undoubtedly good (and appreciated by the neighbors who share the vision of a more independent Latin America), but it raises questions about whether and how the economic alliances are going to influence the political alliances among equals that will be needed if some form of Latin American Union is ever to be born.

The students with whom I talked about Arendt's praise in *On Violence* for the American and European student movements of the 1960s--and her staunch critique of the worship of economic solutions and of the violence that marred the movement--were very interested in her views on how a protest movement could become a movement for lasting change. I portrayed Arendt as an advocate of genuine power-creating participatory democracy, which she thought fostered a kind of immunity to violence and to the confusion of power and violence, and this struck a chord. The students go out to demonstrate in black T-shirts with white handprints front and back, and they paint their palms white so they can hold them up to the police and the military, signifying "don't attack us, we're not attacking you." (Chávez certainly gets this, as he has among his aides a professional semiologist!) I met a young woman, an art student making her political debut as a T-shirt designer, who told me, tearfully, that she is so "hurt in my heart" because Chávez says the students are spoiled rich white kids who are "puppets of imperialism." "What do I do? I do not want my parents to think I cannot act for myself!"

And we want the Chavistas to believe us, to unite with us--because we want to help them, too. We are all socialists."

Chávez does indeed want to discredit and control the students-- and their universities-- lest they erode his popular base, for many of the nation's TV watchers agree with the students that the government should not control the media or make assaults on free speech. Many want a constructive revolution, not an opposition-bashing one or one designed to perpetuate class warfare. Some polls taken in recent weeks show Chávez's approval ratings declining slightly, reflecting the widespread appreciation of the student's protests. But El Presidente has responded by announcing on TV--Chávez does not disguise his intentions--that he is going to "neutralize" the three main sources of opposition to the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela: the media, the church and the schools and universities. Closing down RCTV was step one. Undoing longstanding programs in the very secular schools that allow a limited amount of religious education for those parents who want it for their children will be step two. And step three will be to continue asserting control over school curriculums (where military instruction is mandatory) and taking away the autonomy of the universities that still have it. As Teodoro Petkoff notes in his daily column for the newspaper *Tal Cual*, there is a general attack on independent social institutions, including (and this will be very unpopular) the sports federation sponsoring the Americas Cup soccer matches, where the students continued their protest in very low-key, nondisruptive forms.

I asked Dr. Benjamin Scharifker, the distinguished chemist who is now rector of Simon Bolivar University, a calm and judicious man, what he intended to do to protect the students and the autonomy of the universities. He told me that he sent university lawyers to help the students who were arrested in the early June demonstrations, that he protested the violence used against his students, that he met with the students to discuss their plans and support their nonviolent tactics. He is regularly convening with the other autonomous university rectors to make an alliance and issue statements. I asked him if he thought the students were being manipulated by any non-student groups, as charged by Chávez, who speaks of a "soft coup." Scharifker laughed: "It may be that the opposition parties in Venezuela are inefficient and disorganized, but our students--we train the future petroleum engineers as well as the future philosophers here--are completely practical. They want a country that runs well, for all the people, and that encourages all the people to participate; it is that simple."

His description accorded completely with my impression when, after my lecture at his university, a political science graduate student came up to me and said in slow, careful English what he had heard and what he thought of it: "You tell why Hannah Arendt admires the American Constitution in her book *On Revolution*, except she worries a lot about what happens between elections, when the people are letting their representatives look after things for them. Then you say later she came to worry even more about the executive branch becoming too powerful, not checked enough by those representatives. But I think that in Venezuela you have to worry even more stronger than she did because you have a president who wants to kill the Constitution that created him!" I assured him that many people in America were worrying even more stronger than Hannah Arendt did about the American President being an autocrat but that it was the task of students

everywhere to speak and act freely, as they do naturally, because, in her words, "they are new beginnings."

II Behind the Student Movement's Victory

After visiting Caracas in June, I wrote a report for The Nation's website in which I stressed how significant the emergence of a student movement was in the protests that arose as Chávez revoked the license of RCTV. The student protests in June were not about Chávez's programs to provide the Venezuelan poor with healthcare, education and loans, or about his general (vaguely articulated) vision of "socialism for the twenty-first century." Most of the students identified as socialists and were critical of those anti-Chavista leaders who seemed to them to represent business elites and international corporations. They had no affinity for the "Washington consensus" or neoliberal economic policy. Most of the students I spoke with, and all of the student proclamations, were concerned chiefly with political questions. They were evaluating whether the Chávez government was becoming authoritarian, not just in its attitude toward free speech and the right of assembly but in its intolerance of an independent judiciary and its penchant for legislation that eroded the Constitution. Even then it was rumored that Chávez wanted to amend the constitutional provision restricting the president to two successive elected terms.

Over the summer, the emergent student movement receded from the tactic of mounting large demonstrations, although many marched and leafleted during the Copa América soccer matches. But the organizational energy that had made the June demonstrations so effective that Chávez resorted to claiming that the students were stooges of an American "destabilization" strategy continued strongly offstage. When they returned to their campuses in September, the students prepared to protest the "constitutional reform project" that Chávez abruptly announced (giving the people only three months to consider an intricate, sixty-nine-item document that ranged over almost every area of national policy and even invoked a future organization of Latin American states).

Chávez handed the students and the older opposition a possibility for victory when he forwarded this huge list of disparate items for quick popular vote. Some propositions, particularly in the economic domain, had widespread popular support; they represented continuations and extensions of the programs that had galvanized the Chavista movement. But it looks to me like the political propositions divided Chávez's followers and sent many into alliance with the student movement (if not with the opposition parties). Politically, Chávez overplayed his hand.

Most commentators agree that the opposition parties did not significantly increase their numbers at the polls. The defeat came about because so many Chavistas simply did not vote (it is estimated that 3 million of the poor did not go to the polls) and a significant number voted no. So within the Chávez camp, analysis of the defeat has focused on the key question of why Chávez did not get his usual 60 percent or so of the electorate. Three main explanations have emerged. First, there are conspiracy theories and alleged evidence of the CIA or the US Embassy destabilizing support for the opposition's (and the Catholic hierarchy's) most vicious propaganda, which is said to have frightened many of

the rank-and-file Chavistas with false claims that Chávez intended to take houses, cars and even newborn children away from the people. (One element of the conspiracy theory had it that food shortages were engineered before the vote in order to discourage the people and make them feel that the revolution was not working or was corrupt.)

Second, there is the fifth-column theory that Chávez's government and movement is being sabotaged from within by no-voting bureaucrats and careerists who want to slow down the Bolivarian revolution, converting it from a radical revolution into one that favors bureaucrats and careerists. Among those being blamed are regional governors and mayors and some within the military, including Gen. Raúl Baduel, once Chávez's trusted comrade, who has emerged as a new leader in the opposition. The bureaucrats are said to cling to the 1999 Constitution because it favors them and their bourgeois ideals, while true Chavistas think the Constitution is not radical enough. Calls have been made by Chavista hardliners for purging the reactionaries within the Chavista movement.

Third, there is the theory that many of the Chavista masses are tired, apathetic or even resentful because the revolution has not been completed--they have not been relieved of their poverty and their misery. Perhaps, to counter this kind of discouragement, the referendum should have concentrated on socioeconomic initiatives and not tried to accomplish so confusingly many goals at once. Perhaps there should have been more time for debate and education, so that the people might have understood better the importance of the vote and the meaning of the propositions. Perhaps, as the president said, the defeat was a matter of timing: "Por ahora no pudimos" (For now we could not), he said, repeating the phrase he made famous in 1992 after his failed attempt at a military coup.

In all of this analysis, it seems to me there was only one thread that got to the core of the problem with the referendum. Some in the Chavista camp recognized that they might have won more if it had been possible for voters to vote item by item (preferably on a shorter list). Chavistas also recognized that the items they might have won were those that could have been legislated at an appropriate level of detail by elected parliamentarians--although these would not have gotten the more direct endorsement of the people. Commentators on all points of the political spectrum agree that there was widespread support for the propositions (particularly in Section III of the thirty-one-page "constitutional reform project") that would have guaranteed social security for workers in the informal economy; lowered the voting age from 18 to 16, changed the workweek from forty-four to thirty-six hours, ended discrimination based on disability or sexual preference and required gender parity in political parties. Also popular were provisions to give some tax revenues directly to the community councils in the states, guarantee free education through university graduation to all Venezuelans, support organic agriculture and so forth.

The observation that item-by-item voting might have given the Chavistas a partial victory rather than complete defeat is, implicitly, a recognition that it was the political propositions that turned off so many people--including Chavistas. Extending the presidential term and abolishing restrictions on re-election, making recall referendums more difficult, assigning the president the right to make emergency laws without term, putting control of the (now autonomous) central bank in the president's hands without any requirement of transparency about government expenditures, letting the president

designate civilian "development regions" and military regions and directly control their governance--these were all propositions that obviously strengthened the executive so much that it would have been hard to call such a Venezuela a Bolivarian republic. It would have continued the revolution from the top down--that is, it would have brought to an end the people's revolution, from the bottom up. Isn't it possible that the political concerns of the students, who are not the old-guard opposition, were quite persuasive among the Chavistas--even among those who are deeply grateful to Hugo Chávez for the end of the ancien régime?