

**Public Rituals and Political Positioning:
Venezuelan Evangelicals and the Chávez Government**

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Introduction

This chapter differs from the other chapters in this book insofar as it looks not at the way ritual forms part of charismatic Christian practice at the micro level, in personal or interpersonal religiosity. Rather it will focus on the way ritual is utilized by Evangelical associations in Venezuela, in their efforts to publicly position themselves in a complex political field. Such an analysis of these ritual activities will help us not only understand Evangelical churches and associations, it will also help us understand some key issues in the study of Latin American politics and popular movements.

In the past ten years there has been considerable change in the political field in Latin America. While at the beginning of the 1990s most Latin American nations seemed to have relatively stable elite democracies in place that had largely converged behind the neoliberal prescriptions of what is now known as the “Washington Consensus,” the third millennium has, so far, brought about considerable diversity, in large part by the unexpected success of non-traditional political actors in gaining political power. There are several explanations of the success of these non-traditional political actors--such as the corruption and implosion of existing political parties--but one key dimension of their power is the accentuated cultural idioms they use to mobilize support. I will briefly mention three examples.

First, indigenous groups, marginalized from power for centuries have suddenly gained unprecedented power. In Mexico, the Zapatista movement has held the Mexican government at bay for over a decade. And in the Ecuador, indigenous groups have

become the key political player bringing down several presidents and becoming a key block of support for newly elected socialist president Rafael Correa. Needless to say, Bolivia, for the first time ever elected an indigenous president, former coca activist Evo Morales. Most interestingly, these indigenous groups did not gain this political power through by assimilating to modern society, but by accentuating their identities, coming together into pan-indigenous networks and taking advantage of global communications and networks (Pallares 2002, Brysk 2000, Olesen 2005).

Second, nationalist movements have also gained power. The clearest case, of course, is the Bolivarian movement in Venezuela. Hugo Chávez, a mid-ranking military officer in the 1980s led a coup and then a popular movement to power on the back of an accentuated nationalist discourse based on the ideas of nineteenth Century Venezuelan-born hero Simon Bolivar. In addition to his nationalist rhetoric he has freely mixed in elements of Christianity and socialism (Hellinger and Ellner 2003, Smilde and Hellinger, forthcoming).

Finally, religious organizations have become political actors in any number of Latin American countries. On the one hand, in many countries, a general institutional crisis combined with a continual flow of corruption scandals has raised the status of the Catholic Church, and the decline of political parties has thrust it into an important political role. On the other hand, the continued growth of Evangelical groups has translated, in some cases, into political success. But in even more cases, new social and political actors have reached out to Evangelical groups, adopted their discourses, and begun to pursue their interests as a means of combating traditional social elites. When

they do engage in political action, Catholic and Evangelical churches do so using Christian images, symbols and discourses (Smilde 2004a, 2004b).

Below I will discuss how this plays out in the Venezuelan context, but let us briefly look at the way social scientists have looked at the changes of the past five to ten years. The first thing to notice is that these developments really caught Latin America scholars by surprise. In the early 1990s if Latin America scholars did not believe they were witnessing Fukuyama's "end of history," they did work with the expectation that there would be slow consolidation of Latin American democratic states into fully liberal democracies. I think we can see why scholars were unprepared if we look at the analytic tools used. Most discussion of Latin American democracy has been based on the political pluralist model. On the one hand, this model focuses on the central institutions of the state including the congress, the presidency, political parties, and perhaps labor unions and local governments. On the other hand, it focuses on popular movements and associations through the lens of "civil society." This perspective tends to look at incipient movements and evaluate their potentials for contributing to a bourgeois public sphere along the lines of the modern West. Such research usually focuses on discrete, bounded, coherent social actors, looks at their values and dispositions, and evaluates what their contribution to democracy is likely to be (Dahl 1971, Huntington 1968, 1991).

If we look at the literature on the political implications of the growth of Evangelical Protestantism in Latin America, we will see the same thing. We see case studies on Evangelical groups that look at their organization, their discourses and values, and then evaluate whether or not they could become viable social actors in the future. These conclusions are most often negative, arguing or empirically demonstrating that

Evangelical organizations are easily absorbed into clientalistic relationships, and are therefore not likely to be effective. Nevertheless, we have a clear resurgence of the importance of religion and religious rhetoric (along with nationalism and pan-indigenous movements) in politics (Smilde 2007). So where did analysis go wrong?

In my view Latin America scholars went wrong precisely by the exclusive focus on bounded, coherent social actors. To do better I think we need to rethink the way we go about analyzing civil society and popular movements and their contribution to the public sphere.

Publics and Networks in Popular Movements

Of course bounded, coherent social actors make intuitive starting points for analysis; their apparently independent ontological status and finding alternatives can be difficult. However, scholars influenced by new directions in “relational” social science have begun to develop alternatives. Historian Jeffrey Rubin, for example, uses concepts from post-structuralism to suggest that social movements have their impact not by directly gaining power but by putting forth discourses, fragments, exclusions and possibilities out of which new political subjects are made (Rubin 2006). Sociologist Eiko Ikegami (2005) provides another example. In her study of the origins of Japanese political culture, she uses network theory to rethink our understandings of the public sphere. She argues that Japan never developed the Bourgeois public sphere outlined by Habermas in which there was a discursive space free from the interference of the State and the Economy. In Tokugawa Japan, the Shogunate maintained a tight control on feudal society prohibiting the organization of any political parties or voluntary

associations that might end up challenging their rule. Nevertheless in the following Meiji period there were numerous democratic movements that built upon the clear existence of a democratic culture. To explain how this could happen she looks at the development of “aesthetic networks and publics.” By aesthetic publics she means social spaces in which prevailing network identities are suspended and free exchange of ideas can be had. It was in these aesthetic publics that the democratic aspects of Japanese culture developed, and a certain type of aesthetic culture germinated and gained considerable power.

In my analysis here, I use this perspective to understand the involvement of charismatic Christianity in contemporary Venezuelan politics. First, I use the term *networks* as a metaphor for social structure that emphasizes concrete social ties rather than categories such as “gender” “race” or “socio-economic status.” It has a tremendous advantage of being intuitively understandable and has shown itself to be a robust concept in understanding religion especially.

The term “public” does not refer to the masses. Rather it is a concept that serves as a counterpart to networks. Publics are relational contexts in which people from different networks come into contact and communicate. To do so they need to suspend, at least in relative terms, their established network identities. They adopt more abstract discourses, or public-specific discourse. This is a term through which classic liberal notions of the public sphere are being rethought. Rather than the idea of free social space, publics are thought to be shot through with power, but simply with a different kind of power from prevailing networks. Thus they provide alternative forums in which new discourses and identities can emerge. Put differently, they are spaces in which new culture emerges. Publics, of course, do not simply occur. They are most often explicitly

organized with the purpose of extending the influence of networks and their associated discourses, or with the purpose of modifying and deepening networks (Mische 2008, Smilde 2004).

You may have noticed a clear affinity between this theory of publics and the theory of ritual used in this book. Ikegami and others shy away from the concept of ritual seemingly because of its classical functionalist use. In this view, ritual is a part of the social structure; it is a formal apparatus for manifesting and reinforcing the established order. In the terms of Ikegami's theory, ritual is a form of social conduct more appropriate for consolidating and perpetuating networks, and since she wants to focus more on the agentic and creative side of publics, it is understandable that she steers clear of ritual.

But if we look at more recent theorizations of ritual we can more closely play the concepts of ritual and public off of each other. In *Interaction Ritual Chains*, Randall Collins (2004) takes off from the micro-sociological theory of Erving Goffman in which ritual is a main form micro-social action and these micro-social actions concatenate in to histories or trajectories—what Collins calls interaction ritual chains. Collins defines ritual as “a mechanism of mutually-focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and symbols of group membership.

I believe that this definition of ritual brings us close to the theory of publics as Ikegami defines it and in the empirical analysis of this chapter I am going to bring them closer until in the end I can talk about public rituals. In short, I think the theory of publics can modify some aspects of our theory of ritual, underlining an additional source of

power. And I think the theory of ritual can provide some substance to overly-liminal views of publics.

Evangelicals and Politics in Venezuela

Before proceeding to the empirical analysis, we need some background on Venezuelan Evangelicals, their varying political stances, and some of the public rituals they have carried out as ways to position themselves in a complex political field. First let us take a look at Evangelicals in Venezuela during the presidency of Hugo Chávez Frias. Hugo Chávez's rise to power is a story that has been told elsewhere and I will not go into here other than to mention that as a populist, political outsider one of his strategies to take power in the mid-1990s was to reach out to aspects of civil society including Evangelical Protestants. He did this during the mobilization period before his 1998 election and has continued to do so since, using policy initiatives to breakdown the social hegemony of the Catholic Church and favor Evangelical Protestants. He has also tried to include the Evangelical movement in various aspects of the governments program of participatory democracy (Smilde 2004a, 2004b).

The response of Evangelicals to this initiative has been complex. On the one hand, among the majority of average Evangelicals belonging to classic Pentecostal churches such as the Assembly of God, Hugo Chávez's public mentions of Evangelicals and attempts to reach out to them have been wildly popular. They have interpreted these outreaches as evidence that God is working through Hugo Chávez. Nevertheless, the majority response among the leaders of these sectors has been one of reserve and caution. The principal Evangelical associations in the country have consistently maintained that

they are a-political. They welcome the government's initiatives on their behalf and have participated in various aspects of the government's participatory democracy, serving on commissions and nominations boards, but shy away from open support for or opposition to the government.

A secondary response that has existed from the beginning but among a small minority is the response we would expect from Evangelical groups from the middle and upper-middle classes. Among these groups whose form of Evangelical practice is closest to historical Protestantism, Evangelical religiosity is tied up with a conservative socio-political point of view that emphasizes the individual and liberal democracy and capitalism. From the beginning of the Chávez administration there have been Evangelical critics saying he represents Castro Communism or a form of totalitarianism incompatible with the Bible. Former Evangelical congressman Godofredo Marin represented this perspective through 1999 before he disappeared from the political scene (Smilde 2004b).

A final, more recent, but highly-visible response has come from Neo-Pentecostal groups. These are groups that existed long before Chávez' rise to power and which increasingly became aligned with the government through period of intense social conflict of 2002-04. This relationship is quite surprising because members of these Neo-Pentecostal groups do not generally come from the lower classes as do most Chávez supporters, but from the rising middle-classes. These are young aspiring white collar workers from non-elite background attracted by NeoPentecostal theology's mix of Christianity with entrepreneurial positive thinking and elements of New Age thought. NeoPentecostal leaders are themselves quite entrepreneurial as we shall see, and have taken advantage of funding opportunities from the government to open substance abuse

centers as well as facilitate networks of microentrepreneurs. However, this is not necessarily a simple case of self-interest. NeoPentecostal churches in Venezuela, long before Chávez's arrival on the scene, practiced a form of Dominion Theology in which they see themselves as key facilitators of God taking over human society and bringing it to an era of grandeur. One of the key federations of Neopentecostal churches in Venezuela is called the Christ for all Nations federation. Their particular form of dominion theology grafts, in a very unforced way, onto Hugo Chávez's particular brand of populist nationalism. They both emphasize that the Venezuelan crisis of the 1980s and 90s came from moral degradation; they both see a return to true values and beliefs as key to Venezuela becoming a developed nation with a leadership role in the world (Smilde 2004b, Smilde and Pagan 2004).

In this chapter I look at the way these groups position themselves in the political field through public ritual, through public assemblies of members proclaiming certain definitions of the world. I am going to present data from three different public rituals, supplemented by data from others, as they play out in each of these three political trends.

Three Political Tendencies, Three Public Rituals

To structure my analysis of these rituals I will be working with concepts from Randall Collins' framework. The strength of Collins' conceptualization is that it can understand ritual both in the classic sense of an act in which existing cultural structures, beliefs and practices are reaffirmed and reproduced, as well as in the sense emphasized in this book: as a creative act in which new ways of being, thinking and interacting are created. He articulates four basic characteristics of rituals.

Bodily copresence: Two or more people are physically assembled in the same place, so that they affect each other by their bodily presence, whether it is in the foreground of their conscious attention or not.

Social barriers: There are boundaries to outsiders so that participants have a sense of who is taking part and who is excluded.

Mutual focus: People focus their attention upon a common object or activity, and by communicating this focus to each other become mutually aware of each other's focus of attention.

Shared mood: Participants share a common mood or emotional experience (Collins 2004).

Through these mechanisms, rituals generate sentiments and symbols that endure after the ritual experience is over. These rituals are always creative. In some cases they may simply reaffirm existing cultural discourses, beliefs and practices. But this reaffirmation also amounts to a value-added process of adding something that wasn't there previously. More commonly, these rituals create cultural discourses, beliefs and practices that might not have existed in the same way before. Of course they don't do so *de novo*, they always build up from existing discourses, beliefs and practices, selectively accentuating certain aspects and stretching them in new directions.

This is what we will see here since we will look at three different directions deriving from one theological tradition—Evangelical Protestantism. In the first two cases we will see public rituals with clear political tendencies. In each case there is an attempt to create a clear boundary and generate a concrete mutual focus. In the last case we will see a public ritual dramatizing political neutrality through a quite different focus.

1. Pro-Chávez Evangelicals: “A Million Prayers for Peace in Venezuela” (July 31—August 1, 2004)

The period of intense political conflict in Venezuela had at its center a recall referendum that was held in August 2004. In the month before that referendum there was a continuous flow of public rallies in favor or against recalling President Hugo Chávez. One of these events, called “A Million Prayers for Peace in Venezuela” was carried out by a coalition of neopentecostal groups and churches, and was openly supportive of the government of Hugo Chávez. So much was this the case that it received government financial support and included an appearance and forty minute speech by the president.

During the Chávez government several Evangelicals have held important political positions, such as Edgar Hernandez Behrens who has held several different positions in state financial institutions. In 2004 he was president of Banfoandes, a state bank. Like all profit-generating corporations in Venezuela it has to give a certain percentage of its budget to social causes. When, in June 2004, Banfoandes was approached by the leaders of several neopentecostal churches with a project that included a couple of events for peace in Venezuela, these openly-pro-Chávez churches were granted around \$400 thousand dollars. With ample funding, this coalition was able to organize a series of events in a roofed Coliseum in Eastern Caracas. The last of these was attended by Chávez and members of his government. Chávez began his speech with that National Anthem and saying that “Christ is the true Commandante of all of this” referring to his government. He began by saying:

I want to thank God, our Lord, for the cause he has given us. He has prepared us as soldiers in Christ's army, fighting for true justice as the only path to true peace.

I am grateful for these blessings and I carry them here in my soul, my brothers, for this daily battle, this daily challenge, above all at this moment, a moment in which we are engaged in a battle for the dignity of the human being, for the independence of our homeland, for the sovereignty of Venezuela, to defend, in addition to everything we have done, to defend the road ahead of us. We cannot permit them to rob our future, we can't permit the forces of evil, pushed from Washington. We cannot permit imperialism to take control of Venezuela.

We can see here Christian images of clear right and wrong, of a struggle for justice, and how this is grafted on to nationalism and anti-imperialism. He went on further to say that the whole world was watching Venezuela and that God had given them this role to play among nations. He ended by saying:

This government that I have the honor of presiding over is a government surrendered to Christ. It is fundamentally a Christian government. And I am a simple human being, a soldier of the people, a soldier of Christ. Yes, I am a Christian and will always be a Christian. And I give my life over to Christ the Redeemer and with him I will walk my whole life, full of love, of faith and hope.
Long live Christians! Long live Venezuela!

Chávez in effect ends by anchoring his government and himself in Christianity through the Christian notion of surrender. At another point in his speech he says "When God is with us, who can oppose us?"

Some of these same images are present in what the pastor of the Christ for all Nations Church said about the event the week following.

“the President of Venezuela, Hugo Rafael Chávez Frias attended the event. We prayed for him, we anointed him and blessed him. The environment was electrified with the presence of God. The Commander and chief of this whole process of change that we are experiencing in this country confessed that it had been a long time since he had been in an event where it was he that was ministered to. He received our prayers and blessings and declared that he has Christ in his heart and that he is the Lord of his life. I remembered that God is a God with a plan for nations, for families, for individuals and that we cannot do anything with out God’s help. And when we are within God’s plan, those actions we take (such as the event on the 31st of July) are also marked by God.

Bodily co-presence: Now let us look at some of the ritual characteristics of this event. The organizers of this event brought Evangelicals from all over the country in buses to this one location. The buses generally were decorated saying where they were from, and the discharged passengers on the shoulder of the highway, creating a traffic jam. All of this created a sense of masses of people. The event took place in what is called the La Urbina Coliseum which is used mainly for basketball games.

Social barriers: The event was public in the sense that theoretically anybody could enter. Nevertheless, it was in an arena that nobody would simply happen upon without intending to be there. However, it was televised by state television.

Mutual focus: The Coliseum is an arena built for sports events such as basketball or gymnastics. As such, inside, the seats form a complete circle with the rows of seats highly inclined—although in this case the stage was set up at one end with the result that about one quarter of the seats were behind it, unoccupied. Nevertheless, even with this set-up, from any given seat you can not only see the whole floor, also all of the other attendees—many of who appear closer to you than does the event taking place down on the floor. Those who attend usually sit in groups according to region, with banners saying where they are from. They compete with cheers to see who is the loudest. The entire coliseum is made of cement and other hard surfaces and the noise that is created by 5,000 people is deafening.

Shared mood: The total effect of the buses lining up to discharge passengers, a coliseum used for sporting events, everyone looking at everyone else and the deafening noise create an atmosphere of power, grandeur and triumph.

Conflict and debate

This event resulted in an unusually clear demonstration of division among Venezuelan Evangelicals. As they are still a small religious minority, in public Evangelicals generally try to overcome their differences and project a common front. The Venezuelan Evangelical Council put out a press release covered in the local press in which they rejected the fact that the leaders of these events had spoken on the part of the “Evangelical people” as if they represented everyone. CEV president Samuel Olson argued that the member churches of the CEV are officially apolitical, and asserted that the churches that organized these two events “have forgotten the healthy separation of

Church and State.” Elias Rincón, the president of Unicristiana, one of the organizers of the events responded that the CEV only represents a small percentage of Venezuela’s Evangelical population and has no more right than they do, to speak on behalf of the Evangelical population. Speaking directly to Olson, Rincón said “We are living in a different age from when you and I were formed as Christians. It’s not true that the Church is completely apolitical. It never has been. I know this from the sixty-one years I have been part of it and the 43 years I have been a minister” (Agencia Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Comunicación. August 18, 2004).

2. Evangelicals Against Chávez: Partido Solución

In the 2006 electoral cycle that concluded with a landslide victory for President Hugo Chávez, a group of Evangelicals that had previously declared themselves in opposition to the government in congressional elections held a series of private meetings to evaluate the possibility of openly supporting opposition candidate Manuel Rosales. They decided positively and held a public meeting on September 22, 2006 in the Caracas Civic Center. The meeting was organized by an Evangelical political party called Solución. The slogan of the meeting was “a vote for peace,” and approximately forty people attended the meeting.

During his speech, Lorenzo Tovar said the decision to form a party that would support Manuel Rosales was based on the leaders’ evaluation of the situation of Venezuela. They decided that they had a commitment to God in seeking, following and preserving peace and rejecting all violence.

“Jesus has charged us with taking God’s plan and converting it into reality. We are called to rid ourselves of our personal interests and, in a serious, responsible and respectful way, begin to express ourselves and contribute to the reestablishment of our country. We can’t just stay at home or in our churches preaching a gospel that we don’t preach out in the street. We can’t close our eyes before what is happening in our country (Santiso 2006, p.2).

In his speech, Tovar spoke of the events surrounding the expulsión of the New Tribes Missions from their work with indigenous groups in Venezuela’s interior, as well a situation that was occurring that month in which one of Caracas’s municipalities—controlled by Chávez’s party was forceably evicting a Church from the space it had occupied for eleven years, and which had been purchased by the municipality. Tovar maintained: “When [the government] acts in this way, of course we cannot remain passive” (Sansito 2006)

Tovar went on to explain that the political commitment they were assuming was not with Rosales but with God “who has always guided us towards success, reconciliation, and understanding” (Sansito 2006).

Tovar also said that they would not use the pulpit to speak badly of the government but rather they would work through conscience and heart to defend human rights. “We need to help our country progress, and we are the only ones that can change our country’s destiny” (Santiso 2006).

Bodily Copresence. This meeting was relatively small, with about forty people attending. However, it was held in a relatively small space and so seemed well attended.

The actual space that was used is in Caracas's main cultural complex and these auditoriums are frequently used for meeting of aspiring social and political actors, including women's groups, political parties, etc.

Social Barriers. The meeting was open to the public and advertised as such. However, this is not a space that people just happen by. This space is in downtown Caracas. It is frequently used by aspiring social and political actors is well known and easily accessed by the media. Lorenzo Tovar told me that they chose this space because it was well known to the media and is a well known point of reference, but is much cheaper than the conference rooms at high profile hotels in Caracas (Interview Lorenzo Tovar 2007). It seemed to be calculated then not so much to make bridges to non-Evangelicals so much as to make an impact on the media and political elites.

Mutual Focus. There was, of course, copresence. But those in attendance were oriented towards the front where the main speakers were talking. In other words, the focus was centralized and not mutual.

Shared Mood. Nevertheless, there seemed to be a clear common position. Those in attendance applauded and cheered, interspersing "Amen" in the speeches of Lorenzo Tovar.

Conflict and Debate

Solución's public event was not terribly successful insofar as it received virtually no media coverage and generated little discussion or notice of any kind. Nevertheless, Tovar says it led into an even that occurred roughly two months later in which candidate Manuel Rosales asked to meet with Evangelical leaders including those of Solución and

the Venezuelan Evangelical Council. Indeed one member of Solución was a member of the Rosales campaign. This meeting received widespread attention and was transmitted by several media outlets. In this meeting Rosales promised to include Evangelicals in his government after his victory. The meeting was held in the auditorium of the Maranatha Church, with the presence of the main leaders of the VEC as well as other representatives of the Evangelical movement. Lorenzo Tovar had a prominent place in this meeting and spoke to the press afterwards. While there was no open support expressed by VEC directors, he openly tried to turn this into support for Rosales. He said that it was an important sign that the VEC, an organization that has traditionally stayed on the sidelines of political debate, had been visited by a political candidate. He went on to say “Rosales’s message of unity is consistent with Christian principles and values that are written in the Gospel. And this message unites all Venezuelans in the same goal: to construct a system in which there is truth, justice, and peace for all Venezuelans.”

This meeting produced discord within the VEC because of the public political commitment that was implied by this meeting of the CEV with an opposition candidate. Indeed the Pentecostal Evangelical Confederation of Venezuela had also been invited but rejected the invitation.

3. Evangelicals and Political Neutrality: The March for Jesus

The March for Jesus is an international, interdenominational evangelical event that has spread around the World since its beginning in 1987 in England. The fundamental idea is that Christians from a given city or region march from one point to another where they meet and for singing and preaching.

In Venezuela, the organizers maintain that the event has four important symbolic points.

Prophetic symbolism

Marching for Jesus is a prophetic act that gives spiritual conscience to people.

Moses raised his staff and the Red Sea opened so that the Jews could march to the promised land. Joshua mobilized the people of Israel to march around the walls of Jerico. Josaphat marched through the desert singing praise to God. Nehemia organized a march around the walls of Jerusalem. For this reason, when we march we are acting prophetically and ask God to spill the Holy Spirit and bring saintliness to our society.

Rescuing spaces

When we march for Jesus, there is a natural sensation that we are rescuing the places over which we are waling. We let loose in the spiritual world what God wants: “I have delivered to you all the places that the soles of your feet touch (Joshua 1:3) Why does the Enemy have to remain the owner of our barrios, of our neighborhoods, of our cities and even of our nation? Let us rescue for the Lord Jesus everything we touch with soles of our feet in Caracas.

Public Repentance

Every time that Israel repented for its sins, God came and cured the people and their land (2 Chronicles 7:14: “If my people humble themselves, and my name is invoced, and they pray and seek me, and convert from their sinful path; then I will hear them from the heavens, pardon their sins and sanctify the land”. When we

march, we are raised up like intercessors, closing the breach left by the impious acts of our nation.

Destroying fortresses

In 2 Corinthians 10, Paul speaks of enemy spiritual fortresses. As our focus is exalting Christ and praising God, we are destroying the fortresses raised by the enemy in certain areas of our cities and regions, declaring with faith that the Lord Jesus Christ is the LORD OF VENEZUELA.

(<http://www.marchaparaJesus.com.ve>).

In Venezuela, the 2006 MPJ took on special importance since it took place less than two weeks before the national election in a country that had seen considerable political instability during the previous years. In contrast to the events described above, its political position was officially and aggressively neutral, focusing on the idea of God taking over Venezuela rather than supporting any given political project. The location of the march in an avenue that the week before had been home to a massive political march for the opposition candidate was also indicative that they were providing something different, turning politics on its head. El Universal, a Caracas newspaper with national circulation ran a story with the title “Political March Gives Way to ‘Demonstration for Christ’”.

One pastor that spoke from the stage proclaimed:

Pastor: “We have the authority to undo the work of the Devil... against Caracas and all of Venezuela, and in the name of God, against any diabolic plan against this country and this city.

“We come with the power of the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus in order to undo the work of Satan. We pull up, we ruin, we pull down, we destroy, we undo all of the Enemy’s works. We break his evil work and all of his curses. We destroy all works of darkness to enthrone Jesus as the Lord and sovereign King of Venezuela

“We speak, to enthrone Jesus

“Jesus is the Lord of Venezuela

Jesus is the Lord of Venezuela

Jesus is the Lord of Venezuela

Jesus is the Lord of Venezuela

Jesus is the Lord of Venezuela

Jesus is the Lord of Venezuela

Jesus is the Lord, applause for the King.

Host: I want everyone to say at the same time: Jesus is the Lord of Venezuela

Crowd: Jesus is the Lord of Venezuela.

Components of Public Ritual.

Bodily Copresence. The 2006 march was the largest ever in Venezuela with participation estimated at eighty thousand people. As can be seen in the information provided above from the organizers web page, such a march as this is highly reflexive. The idea of masses of people walking together through some of the main avenues of Caracas has a central symbolism of pilgrimage, of being in the world but not of it, of

commitment and sacrifice. This is important symbolism for a march that tried to demonstrate its absence of political position.

Social Barriers. An interesting contrast to the other cases is presented by the spatial aspects of this meeting. The MPJ began in two different places in Caracas, from one direction it came from the relatively well-to-do areas of Eastern Caracas. From the other direction it came from one of the poorer areas of Western Caracas. In each case the MPJ walked several kilometers to its destination: the Avenida Libertador, a main thoroughfare in downtown Caracas, closed by permit, but open to pedestrian traffic. Rather than distinguish who was participating and who wasn't, the march seemed to maximize contact with non-participants.

Mutual Focus. Here, as in the Solution meeting, the crowd was oriented towards the stage in front of them, not towards each other. Nevertheless, there were other aspects that facilitated mutual focus. The final meeting spaces had impressive views of each of the marches' arrival, for those already there. I got to the meeting place early. The MPJ that originated in Eastern Caracas came down the Ave Libertador going up and then down an elevated section of the street. The march became visible as it came down towards the final meeting place. When it appeared people let loose hoots and hollers of joy. The arrival of the other march was even more impressive. This march came from the West down the Avenida Andres Bello and when it was parallel to the Avenida Libertador, came down two blocks on a sidestreet. The narrowness of the street and the inclination gave this march a feeling that it was unstoppable and powerful. It too brought screams, whistles and exclamations of "wow!" Nevertheless in the meeting place itself,

there was less mutual focus than in the other events. In this case the march itself was the most important part.

Common mood. The rally focused on contemporary Christian music with very little by way of sermons. The environment was one of joy and enjoyment. The messages that were given were relatively abstract.

Conflict and Debate. The MPJ did not itself generate any division and debate. All of the media coverage was positive and the event was seen as an unmitigated success. Nevertheless, just a couple of weeks afterwards a very similar event did generate a conflict. This event was also organized in a public space and was also oriented towards the nation as a whole in its evangelization. It was organized by the Pentecostal Evangelical Confederation of Venezuela with the title “Clamor por Venezuela.” The planners had hoped that 100 thousand people would attend, but in the end only around five thousand did so. The poor attendance was mainly due to the fact the VEC refused, until the last moment, to participate in the event since they suspected the event was being supported by the government for political purposes. This information was proven false, but it was too late for the VEC to participate by calling on their members to attend.

Interestingly, this event occurred just a couple of days after the meeting with Manuel Rosales, a meeting which the CEPV had declined to attend. The rally was also planned for the space where President Chávez was to hold his final campaign rally.

Discusión

Public rituals such as these do not simply reflect shared realities, they create them. Through them organizers actively try to create shared realities that are not necessarily in robust existence. This is more clearly the case with the first two politicized positions. Evangelical Christians do not have a history of political engagement in Venezuela and leaders who try to develop and express one are always on questionable terrain. However, even the stance of the MPJ, while consistent with the historical political position of Venezuelan Evangelicals as political neutral, at this particular historical juncture it represented a truly innovative stance as the larger society was profoundly polarized.

If we systematically compare the three public rituals (see Figure 1) we can see that the one event that does not have a political tendency is different from the two that do on two counts. First, each of these events has a public dimension insofar as there is no strict boundary maintenance between those who are involved and those who are not. However one, the MPJ without a political tendency is much more open to the public. It seems to have engagement of non-participants as one of its central goals. Unsurprisingly, the common mood it generated is much more abstract and diffuse. It would seem that the two events with clear political agendas have a tighter control of the ritual event in order to have a tighter control over the shared reality that is being created. Put differently, these rituals differ in their degrees of “publicness.” All three are public; but they differ in how open-ended and open to contingency they are.

This portrait helps us understand the wave of popular, cultural mobilization in Latin America in the past ten to fifteen years. Collins idea of ritual *chains* underlies the temporality and causality of ritual. He sees individual biographies as temporal chains or

interaction rituals that lead to path dependent outcomes. The series of interactions a person has been through in his or her life determines the path his or her social psychology and personality take into the future. The same can be said for organizations, movements and populations. These type of public rituals put shared realities into collective discourse that then provide the resources through which new political subjects are created. If we want to understand the transition towards cultural forms of political cleavage and discourse, we need to, among other things, to look at the type of public rituals marginalized groups solidify and extend their networks and associated discourses and identities.

Figure 1: Characteristics of Three Public Evangelical Rituals

	Thousand Prayers	Solution	March for Jesus
Political Engagement	Pro-Chávez	Anti-Chávez	Neutral
Bodily Co-presence	Five thousand people gathered within a small space.	Forty people meeting together	Eighty thousand people in one space
Social Barriers	Open to the public but a confined space not in a high traffic pedestrian zone.	Open to public but in a confined space not in a high traffic pedestrian zone.	Completely open space in a high traffic, central area.
Mutual Focus	Circular, steep coliseum 3/4s occupied by people looking at each other and at the stage	Seats oriented towards the speaker in front.	Crowd oriented towards the front, apart from when marches arrived
Shared Mood	Music, mutual focus, cheers, deafening sound.	Everyone engaged with what is going on	People are engaged in music, but messages are abstract.

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