

Horizontal and vertical politics

Strategic uses of *abajo* and *arriba* in the construction of the Venezuelan socialist State

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Abstract: The spatial expressions of egalitarian and hierarchical political relations, respectively along the horizontal and vertical axis, are visually illustrated in a broad cross-cultural perspective. The dichotomy between *los de abajo* (those below) and *los de arriba* (those above) is explored in contemporary Venezuelan politics, using ethnographic and visual evidence. The socialist party, which presents itself as representative of *los de abajo*, has been increasingly criticized for being *los de arriba* both by the opposition and by grassroots PSUV (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela; United Socialist Party of Venezuela) activists who denounce the persistence of hierarchical dynamics through metaphors such as *paracaido* (para-shooter) and *poner la escalera* (holding the ladder).

Keywords: assemblies, comparative politics, horizontality, *los de abajo*, protests, PSUV, Venezuela, verticality

Space has a crucial role in culturally structuring and expressing relations. Political interactions are no exception, with the specificity that in political contexts what is ordered and revealed is often a statement about the value and power of the agents involved. The politics of space can indicate the peculiar value of each individual or collective party within an institutionalized hierarchy or the equal worth of the parties involved. Hierarchical and egalitarian organizations are associated to a preference for respectively vertical and horizontal dispositions of social elements.

The high/low opposition has been used in various cultural settings, in multiple domains

(army, clergy, the judiciary) and has also become a common analytical tool used, among other disciplines, in sociology and anthropology. For example, the notion of stratification and the Marxist distinction between base (or substructure) and superstructure rests on a value-loaded use of the vertical axis (Goudsblom 1986). Jean Lapouze (1981: 8) neglects horizontal organizations when he holds “the omnipresence of the vertical in our political perceptions is such that we can make it a law of politics that we are unable to explain sociopolitical phenomena without recourse to the up and down dimension.” Vertical symbolism dominates only



in hierarchical cultural contexts where it is used principally to indicate asymmetrical classification in relation to political, economic, and religious value systems. Social inequalities and political distinctions have often been rendered through the associations with high and low parts of the body; for example, the semantics of “head” in various languages suggests a body part and the notion of leader, as in head of state; the Veda associate the superior and inferior positions within the caste system to congruent parts of the body of Brahma (see Harvey 2007; Ossowski 1963: 20–22). Surprisingly little specific attention has been given to a broad comparative visual framing of the use of the vertical axis in politics and to the ethnographic exploration of its nuances and rhetorical applications in specific cultural settings.

In what follows, I illustrate horizontal and vertical uses of the space in structuring political relations. At first, I illustrate visually the recurrent cross-cultural predominance of one of the two axis in organizing and expressing political interactions: egalitarian cultural settings privilege equivalence in the form of horizontal circular assemblies; where power differentiation is institutionalized, value distinction is expressed in states’ vertical choreography. I then examine the ambivalent spatial dispositions of contemporary democracies that display a contradictory mix of egalitarian and hierarchical values. The ethnographic focus is on socialist Venezuela where since 1999 politics was supposed to be transformed from a top-down to a bottom-up process. I argue that this revolutionary conversion in horizontal, grassroots processes, which implies the demise of the vertical state, has yet to have a significant impact on the perception of political relations: popular discourses on politics still identify an opposition between *los de abajo* (those who stand below); *el pueblo* (the people), especially those of poor neighborhoods; and *los de arriba* (those who stand above), politicians and prominent public administrators. The ethnographic evidence shows that *chavista* leadership, since 2007 associated to the PSUV (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela; United

Socialist Party of Venezuela), has presented itself as *los de abajo*, but upon taking power has been increasingly perceived as having turned into *los de arriba*. As *chavista* egalitarian rhetoric is met with increasing skepticism, the transcendental distinction between politicians and *el pueblo* contributes to a widespread questioning of the socialist executives as the legitimate representative of the poor social sectors. In this context, both the opposition and PSUV grassroots militants have used the vertical metaphor to phrase subversive slogans that denounce the hierarchical elitism of the socialist state.

Vertical and horizontal political spaces

Notwithstanding infinite hybrids and variations, one can identify two polarities in the political use of space expressing opposite intentions. A hierarchical social organization displays value differentiation by specifying the peculiar spatial positioning of each party within the symbolic representation of society as a whole (see Dumont 1980). Several pre-modern state rituals defined the location of groups and of their heads according to rank. The yam festival of the Asante, an empire that ruled over what is today Ghana and part of Ivory Coast during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is a choreographic exhibition of the cosmological, social, and political order: the parties involved in the performance have been called upon to manifest their history, prestige, and function within the overarching imperial structure. Thomas Edward Bowdich’s 1817 drawing titled *The First Day of the Yam Festival* represents the complex spatial association between the specific value of the individual and collective agents and the correspondent ritual disposition: those familiar with Asante symbolism can identify in the illustration subordinate chiefs with their attendants—linguists, executioners, soldiers, messengers, and drummers—representatives of foreign powers, and skulls of defeated enemies. Hierarchical political orders have an apex—the ruler. In Bowdich’s image, he is seated in the up-

per central part of the scene, under the umbrella surmounted with the elephant, symbol of power and authority (figure 1; see Bowdich 1819: 274–278 and McCaskie 1995: 203–212, 269–271). As David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins (2017) have explained, feeding on a well-established tradition in political anthropology, asymmetrical, vertical, earthly politics is projected into the cosmological order: kingship is often legitimized and sustained by “metahuman beings” (divinities, spirits, ancestors, or astrological elements, such as the Sun) conceived as standing above, in terms of both spatial disposition and power.

An egalitarian political use of space expresses inclusivity and parity of the parties involved. No one is permanently positioned in a prominent location or stands above others; those who speak may stand up to increase visibility but only temporarily before others address the gathering. The spatial outcome of egalitarian settings is often a circular, and at times somewhat chaotic, disposition of participants in the assembly (Boni 2015; Detienne 2003). This decision-making form is well conveyed by Ilya Repin’s *Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks to Sultan Mehmed IV of the Ottoman Empire* (painted 1880–1891 referring to a scene dated 1676), which renders the multiplicity of agents involved in terms of vivid diversity implying no disparity in value

(figure 2). Circular assemblies are documented in several egalitarian contexts such as eastern African herdsmen (Abélès [1983] 2012; Bassi 2005), gatherings of warriors outside the state’s organizational structure (such as the Cossacks up to the mid-nineteenth century, Lebedynsky 2003), and pirates during the early eighteenth century (Rediker 2004). The recent wave of social movements that have emerged since 2011 demanding direct and substantial democracy (the Occupy movement in the United States and Slovenia; the 15M in Spain; demonstrators in Greece and Bosnia’s *plenums*) have often taken care to ensure equality through circular spatial disposition and an explicit use of the term horizontality (Boni 2015; Juris 2008).

As many have noticed (Graeber 2001: 245; Remotti 1993: 49), hierarchical political institutions constantly insist in marking the distinction between legitimate office-holders and subjects (in monarchic hierarchies) or voters (in democratic ones). What is at stake is the cultural recognition of the transcendental character of governments and therefore the acknowledgment of the institutional monopoly of legitimate authority, and consequently citizens’ acceptance to give up their political agency. The value distinction between those who govern and those subject to/represented by political institutions is spatially expressed as a contrast in visibility.



FIGURE 1. *The First Day of the Yam Festival* (Bowdich 1819).



FIGURE 2. *Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks to Sultan Mehmed IV of the Ottoman Empire*, painted 1880–1891, Ilya Repin.

The ruler and others normally stand in a central location within the choreographic order—a recurrent cross-cultural symbolic expression of command rests on the high/low asymmetry.

The vertical dichotomy does not generate a value-neutral opposition as in structural anthropology: high and low are value-loaded positions that distinguish the representative from the represented, the ruler from the ruled, the institutional figure from the citizen.¹ Asymmetric opposition distinguishes identities in terms of worth, prestige, importance, and power at one level and at another level, they recombine the superior and inferior elements in a common collective identity in which the most valued element, associated with and promoted by the leadership, acts as the representative of the whole. Those who stand above are conceived as the representative of the collective identity produced by political subordination (Barraud 2005; Dumont 1980; Galey 1984; Kantorowicz 1957). For the collective identification of the subjects in the leader to be effective, the hierarchical political encompassment must be largely

uncontested: the distinction between high and low positions must be accepted as the appropriate moral arrangement; subordinates bow down when they meet dominant personalities. In the frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, drawn in 1651 by Abraham Bosse with creative input from the author, this dynamic is well depicted: the sovereign king is located at the figure's center; he stands above and watches over his domain; his *persona* is both literally and figuratively constituted by encompassing the bodies of the subjects (figure 3).

Unsurprisingly, political promotion is referred to as elevation, and rank is symbolically expressed through the control of high, dominant locations. Thrones are invariably located above the convention to render office holders visible throughout the ritual performances. Architecture reflects and reveals rulers' vertical prerogative: prominent figures often hold speeches or render themselves visible by appearing in high balconies. In Rome, this is true of both religious (the pope's balcony in St. Peter's square) and secular (Mussolini used to appear from a



FIGURE 3. *Leviathan*, 1651, Abraham Bosse, Front piece of Hobbes (1651)

balcony in Piazza Venezia) authorities. During the late eighteenth century, the Asante king controlled the castle that dominated over the city of Kumase but, when he exhibited himself on the streets, he placed himself at the top of a *sumpi*, one of the “elevated mounds of sun-baked clay

from where the *Asantehene* [king], seated in state, presided over many of the public rituals” (McCaskie 1995: 312) clearly visible in figure 4.

The social acceptance of the high/low asymmetry has rested on the ontological distinction between rulers and subjects normally ascribed



FIGURE 4. Coomassie, 1901 (Ridpath 1901).

to the political leader's extraordinary nature as a result of a special aristocratic genealogy or a privileged connection to the spiritual world or to the ancestors. The transition to democracy apparently espoused a notion of rule not resting on the leaders' transcendental nature but on the equivalence of rulers and ruled, expressed in the constitutions and confirmed by the voting systems. Even though democratic and apparently egalitarian conceptions of government spread throughout Europe and the Americas since the late eighteenth century, inequalities that could be rendered through the vertical symbolism clearly persisted. The capitalist system has often been depicted as a pyramid in which access to wealth and power are distributed according to a class-based structure corresponding to vertical layers, as in this socialist propaganda (figure 5).

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, social injustices were not contained

to the point of rendering the vertical metaphor insignificant, but the legitimacy of inequalities that had been presented as natural, were increasingly questioned. The hierarchical symbolism inscribed in spatial organization requires the parties to position themselves according to their status. Attempts to upset the social ladder, climbing up from below, turning the social structure upside-down or demanding horizontal leveling have implied in different geographical and historical settings a subversion of the political and economic order. European history has witnessed various forms of ritual and symbolic temporary subversions of the established order in carnivalesque festivities with an ambivalent impact on existing hierarchies, as well as more explicitly revolutionary attempts. The protagonists of the attempted British social revolution of the mid-seventeenth century were tellingly called

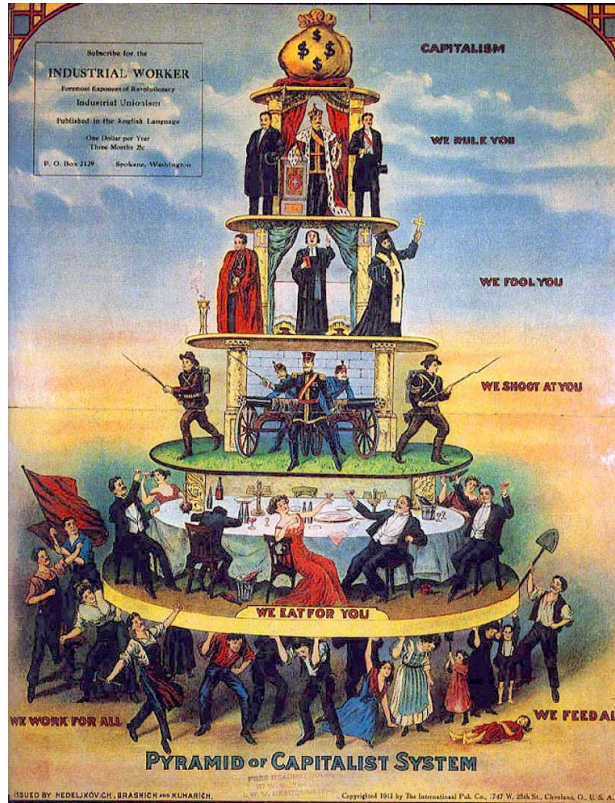


FIGURE 5. *Pyramid of Capitalist System*, in the 1911 edition of *Industrial Worker*.

the Levellers “for they intend to sett all things straight, and rayse a parity and community in the kingdom” as a contemporary source explains (Chisholm 1911: 506). The collapse of vertical inequality is represented as a liberating drive in the perspective of those who stand below and as a menacing upheaval from the standpoint of those who stand above as clearly rendered in the 1906 William Balfour’s print *From the Depths* (figure 6). The inferior stance often associated with poverty, oppression, and sufferance in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, has been increasingly depicted as the *loci* of a poetic and ecological re-birth in the opposition to the destructive neoliberal policies as conveyed in this poster sympathetic with Zapatista mobilization: “where those above destroy, we flourish below” (figure 7). Being underground has taken an ambivalent symbolism, combining marginality with the

capacity to elaborate hidden transcripts and envision egalitarian politics.

The symbolic and practical use of the vertical axis in contemporary democracies is particularly interesting as elective governments attempt to combine, often in a contradictory fashion, hierarchical and egalitarian spatial arrangements (see Graeber 2007). Parliaments, for example, are often circular in shape evoking equality but, in contrast to coherently horizontal spatial politics, the circle is not a complete one as space must be reserved for the government benches and most importantly while egalitarian meeting places are characterized by open access in a public location, parliaments express elitist exclusiveness. Politicians need to appear as part of the undifferentiated citizenry and, at the same time, as its legitimate representatives, encompassing figures who stand out and are symbolically distinguished from the masses.

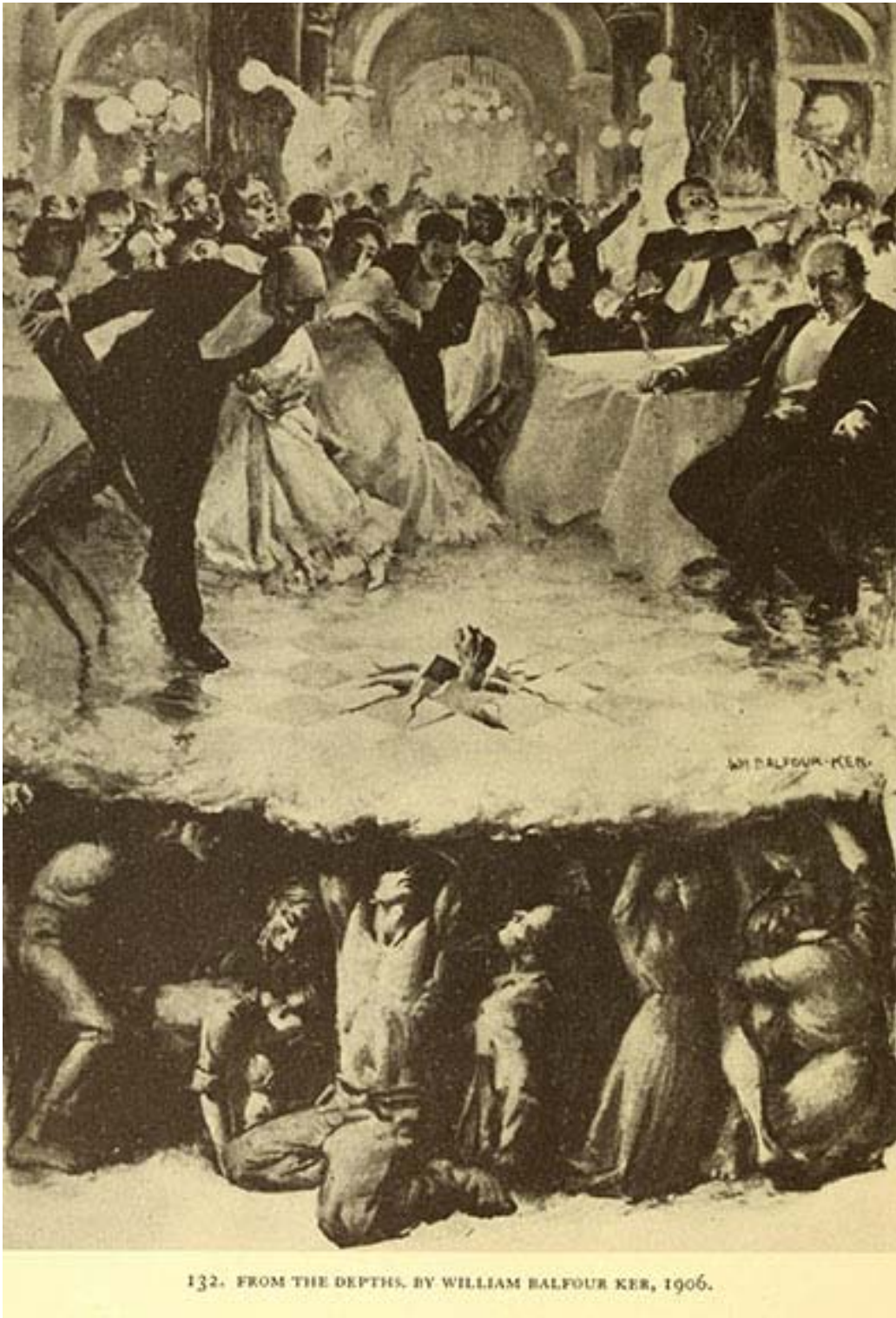


FIGURE 6. *From the Depths*, William Balfour Ker (Mitchell 1906).

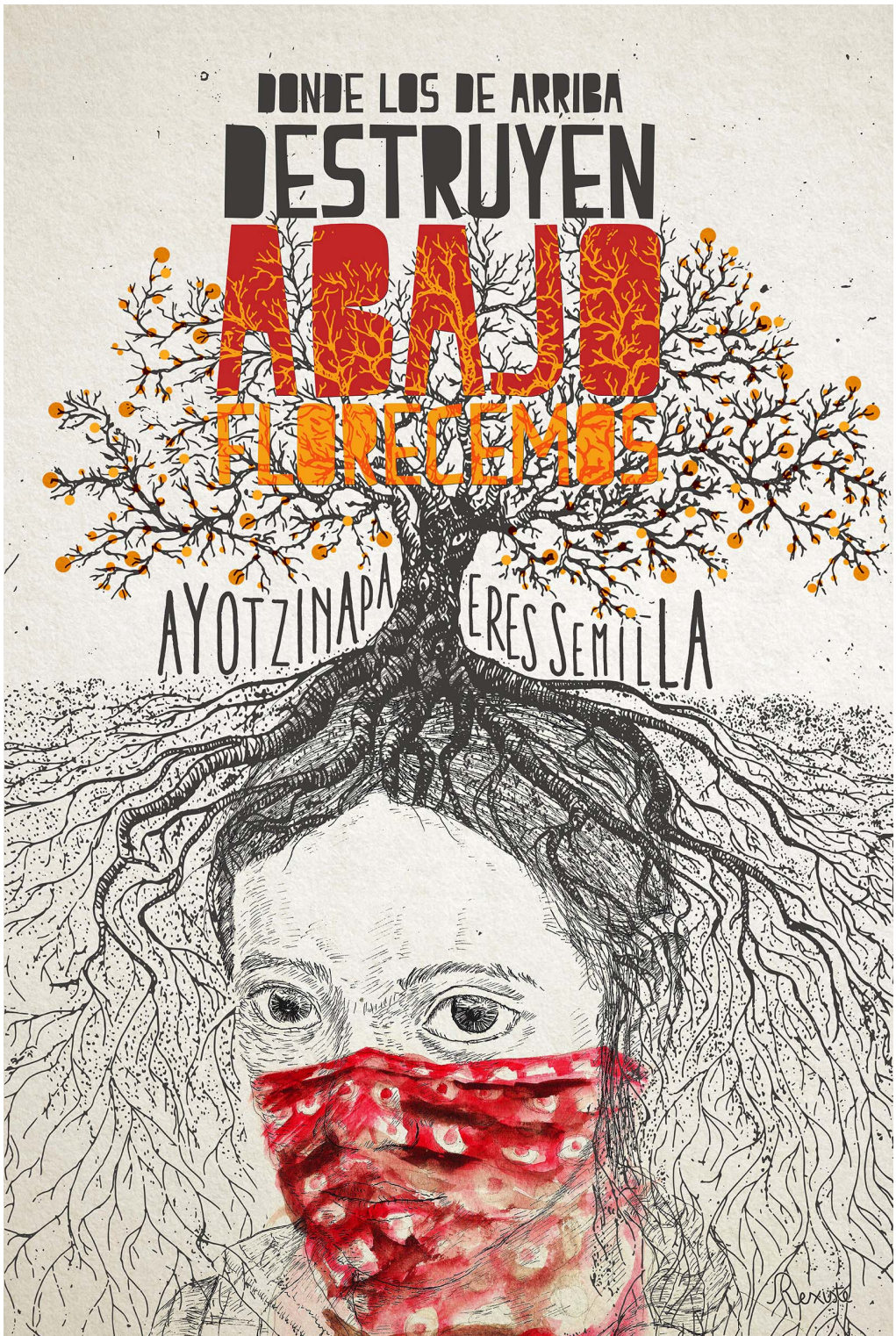


FIGURE 7. *Donde los de arriba destruyen abajo florecemos* (Rexiste 2014).

Equality and hierarchy within the PSUV

The issue of the horizontal and vertical spatial organizations, and consequently of the equality and transcendence of elected politicians vis-à-vis the electoral body is particularly intriguing in political settings that emphasize equality, as in contemporary socialist Venezuela. The rise of Hugo Chávez was conceived as the institutional retaliation of “those below” (*los de abajo*) against the capitalist and political oligarchy of “those above” (*los de arriba*). Much of Chávez’s energy went into attempting to resolve the political ambivalence of contemporary democracies and in envisioning ways in which the state could be conceived as governed by those below. Since 1999, when Chávez’s rule began, a radical reform of the state was promised to allow the poorer sectors of Venezuelan society, which formed Chávez’s electoral base, to stand up, and take hold of the administration that had been

unreachable above them (Chávez 2009). As demanded by large sectors of Venezuelan society, institutional power, that is, elected politicians, were to negotiate policies with *los de abajo* who were identified in the 1999 constitution as a recognized agency, protagonist of the *poder popular* (popular power) implemented through democratic, grassroots, inclusive citizens’ participation. The most relevant enactment of this unprecedented transformation of state architecture were the *consejos comunales* (communal councils) assemblies in which all residents in defined neighborhoods decide the projects to be carried out in their area. The *consejos comunales* produced at times a circular and horizontal use of space, characteristics of egalitarian settings, in other instances a sort of internal hierarchy of elected spokespersons (*voceros/voceras*) prevailed and a few charismatic figures run the meeting and at times monopolized the management of the *consejo comunal* (figure 8).



FIGURE 8. Asamblea de Ciudadanos Consejo Comunal Rafael Urdaneta, Cumaná 28 November 2008, photo by the author

The socialist state, while claiming to diffuse power through the *poder popular*, at the same time re-enacted forms of evident symbolic construction of strong leaderships both at the national level, strongly associated to Chávez's charisma, and at the local level. The ambivalent spatial choreography is evident in socialist demonstrations and rallies. Local leaders tend to present themselves as part of the *pueblo* not only through the inclusive and popular socialist rhetoric indicating the will to transcend the transcendence of elected politicians, but also by conforming to the dominant-color landscape and dress code as well as indulging in popular entertainment, dancing *samba* or *cumbia* in public. At one level of semantic construction, the politician is just a citizen serving citizens. At the same time, politicians during the march invariably stand in front of other demonstrators, have the privilege of speech amplification and when pictures are taken they form the front line, embodying (in an encompassing fashion) the visible but indistinct red crowd behind them. Socialist politicians need to present themselves as similar to the average Venezuelan citizen but standing out as representatives. At the end of the demonstration, the value gap becomes evident as politicians climb onto a podium to give speeches as they look down on the crowd of PSUV sympathizers below them. Egalitarian and hierarchical rationales co-exist and clash within the PSUV.

Since the 1990s, Venezuela has had a long and important history of egalitarian self-organization, of autonomous and inclusive popular assemblies as well as forms of institutionalized direct democracy.² Moreover an egalitarian ethic is well established and strongly supported in popular sectors, expressed in terms of *barrio* solidarity for those most in need (*los mas necesitados*), as an ethic of mutual recognition of differences, as the capacity to activate communitarian direct action against institutions, as the demand in some public gatherings of the *derecho de palabra* (the right to speak for all those present). PSUV grassroots activists espouse the egalitarian popular moral: *barrio* po-

litical leaders present themselves as servants or combatants on behalf of the citizens (*luchador social*); their role, they explain, is to struggle for community well-being, paying special attention to those most in need. When coordinating between themselves, they at times promote horizontal assembly management methodologies. Militants' appellations at grassroots meetings are reciprocal: *mi primo* (my cousin), *mi hermano querido* (my dear brother), *mi reina* (my queen), *compatriota* (compatriot), or *compañero* (comrade) (see Fernandes 2010: 252; Strønen 2014: 314–315).

Barrio egalitarian politics is however inserted in institutional dynamics through the employment of activists by local administrations, the massive distribution of state subsidies to finance the policies of the *poder popular* and militants' electoral work. In Venezuela, as in other modern states, those in a "high" position (*los de arriba*) are identified not only with the president but with local politicians as well as with the high offices of local administrations. In short, those who stand above are those who control the government machinery. What stands below the institutional structure are citizens and communities and in particular the poorer sectors, *los de abajo*.

Subversive uses of vertical metaphors

The socialist institutions, which tend to present themselves as expressions of *los de abajo* or authentic representatives of *el pueblo* meaning the poorer sectors, have increasingly been accused of manifesting condescending and transcendental superiority. The critique directed against PSUV politicians and prominent public office holders, phrased using the vertical metaphor, has been formulated both by the wealthy opposition to the PSUV and by grassroots PSUV militants. Both these accusations identify *los de arriba* with the PSUV leadership while they differ in the characterization of *los de abajo*: for the opposition those below are citizens, deprived of their civil rights and oppressed in demonstra-

tions; the socialist base uses the metaphor to denounce the authoritarian exclusion of the *barrio* brokers from access to crucial political offices and decision-making processes monopolized by what is seen as the corrupt party elite.

Since 2008, the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD; Democratic Unity Roundtable) has acted as a catch-all electoral coalition intended to unify parties against the PSUV. MUD politicians and supporters are normally perceived as *los de arriba* in terms of class composition, but the opposition has recently tried to present itself as the political voice of *los de abajo*. In 2014, the executive secretary of MUD explained: “Our work is being there, at the base of the pyramid, at the base of society to construct a change from bottom upwards” (Lozano 2014). During the opposition demonstrations between 2014 and 2016, slogans using vertical metaphors began to be heard at marches, written on placards, and spread on the internet: *Cuando los de abajo se mueven los de arriba se caen* (When those below move, those above fall); *No somos ni de izquierda ni de derecha, somos los de abajo y vamos por los de arriba* (We are not left-wing nor right-wing, we are those below, and we challenge those above). Both mottos were used by the 15M Spanish movement in 2011. Since then the catchphrases have spread rapidly on the internet and have been used by demonstrators in various parts of Latin America. In 2014, the slogan was used during the massive opposition protest of Saturday, 1 March (Votaaotros 2011). The opposition’s use of the vertical metaphor aims to weaken the association between the *chavistas* and the *pueblo* and to intercept popular protest through an ambiguous and strategically inclusive use of the high/low opposition, employed as the dichotomy between government and people (see, for example, figure 9).

The critique of the PSUV leaders for being *los de arriba* is also evident in the language used by radical grassroots PSUV activists who denounce the failure to address the transcendental architecture of the state and to generate an autonomous popular power, politically equivalent to its institutional counterpart. *Barrio* brokers

involved in the implementation of the *poder popular* at its base have recurrently used vertical metaphors both to conceptualize their relations to the institutional hierarchy and to phrase critiques of the vertical character of the party. Within the PSUV the metaphor is structured on the opposition between *los de abajo* identified as grassroots militants, *las bases*, head of *bataillon*s, the spokespersons of the *consejos comunales* (all positions associated to those I have called *barrio* brokers) and *los de arriba*, institutions, administrators, politicians. Voters and activists continually made use of the vertical schema to visualize and describe relationships linking *barrio* agents and institutions: the two poles were conceived as having diverse logics, interests, and, most of all, different power as a consequence of the resources at their disposal. Militants were constantly seeking ways to make public funding trickle down, *bajar recursos*, and carefully examined directives received from above, *bajar lineamientos*. The use of *bajar* meaning internet downloads reinforces the notion of a downward direction of products elaborated by the institutions above: militants can download the official music of the PSUV and the application forms (*planillas*) to register as PSUV militants, to ask for individual subsidies, to demand funding for one’s *consejo comunal*. Being positioned below does not imply being passive: *barrio* brokers are active in filling forms and searching for sponsors; communities need to mobilize to have funding; the party base is called upon to understand and explain directives to PSUV sympathizers. The perception of the relationship between the leadership and the peripheral agents of the PSUV, however, indicates an evident asymmetry in power that distinguishes those who decide and those whose agency is framed and limited within the confines decided by the PSUV leadership.

Grassroots activists have used vertical metaphors, mostly to present complaints against the PSUV elite, demand wider participation, and request more transparent decision-making dynamics. Brokers complained that it was impossible for them to ascend in the party hierarchy,



FIGURE 9. *No importa si eres de izquierda o eres de derecha*, AnonymousVenezuela.³

and they were conscious that, through the hunting of votes for politicians and their affiliates, they were reproducing inequalities of opportunities within the PSUV. *Barrio* brokers lamented that they did not want to “put the ladder” (*poner escalera*) or stated “we work and they benefit . . . we don’t want to be a ladder” (*no queremos ser una escalera*) for others to climb the party hierarchy thanks to their patient grassroots brokerage done “below” in the neighborhoods with the communities. This expression was used in Cumaná on 10 November 2009 during the pre-

sentation of *el kino del pueblo*, a grass-roots activists’ list that challenged established politicians in the internal elections for the first ideological congress of the PSUV: “We are from the community, we are from the people! We do not want to be anybody’s ladder. It is time that the people take power. It’s time for those who are above go to those who are below.”⁴ On 24 November, after the election and the congress were held, *barrio* brokers, among whom some of those who stood for *el kino del pueblo* and had lost the elections, were summoned by the elected delegate for their

geographical sector. They did not know him, he was not one of them, one of the base, but a man supported by the powerful *governador*. Community activists listened closely to his speech and when it was their turn, they expressed their disappointment.

We want socialist grassroots units (*bataillons*) to have more relevance in directing and coordinating at the national, regional, and municipal level. If I make a small survey and ask those who are present here [grassroots activists] if they have an institutional position in the *gubernacion*, city hall, or in the regional legislative council, we will see that 97 percent of the heads of the grassroots units, that is the *pueblo*, do not hold executive positions. We carry out the political work at the base, and they are imposing on us several executives that we don't even know . . . they keep placing their people in key roles. We want all the party to be involved in deciding the selection for high offices. I understand that the *governador* and the mayor need people they trust, but not all! We are the ones who put the ladders for them (*ponemos las escaleras*).

“Putting the ladder” means that those below are the ones who toil in the electoral work so that others—those chosen by the party elite—get elected and thus climb in the party hierarchy rather than those who produced their effort in anonymous neighborhoods. In the meeting of *el kino del pueblo*, a grassroots candidate had clearly rendered graphically the dynamics that exploited those holding the ladder, who received little personal benefit, for those climbing it. In his drawing, the PSUV is presented as a united but hierarchical pyramid with a differentiation of levels and functions: a triangle with at its apex the “members of parliament,” at an intermediate level the “directors” and at the bottom the “base.” He then added what moved between the levels: votes were associated to an arrow pointing upwards while *becas*

(scholarships/subsidies), *contractos* (contracts), *proyectos* (projects), and *beneficios personales* (personal benefits) were associated to an arrow pointing downwards (figure 10). “Putting the ladder” meant working as *barrio* brokers to promote the party elite at the expense of grassroots activists progress.

When the elected delegate to the first ideological congress met *barrio* brokers, they discredited him using another twist of the vertical metaphor: they accused him of being a *paracaido* (parachuter), someone sent from above down to earth, to the communities. The delegate who was supposed to represent PSUV militants at the congress had never been seen in the area where he was elected. The vertical metaphor, implied in the notion of *paracaido*, expressed the ethical disapproval of delegates and poli-

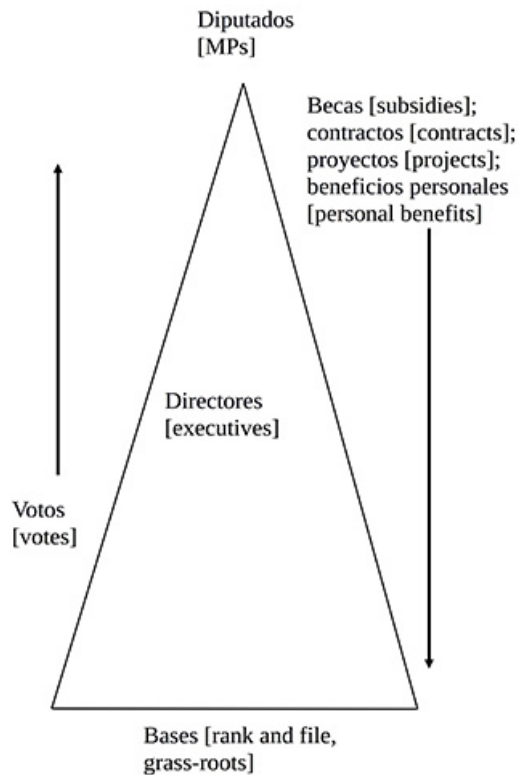


FIGURE 10. *The PSUV pyramid.* Drawing made by Miguel Bermúdez, and copied by the author, Sala de Batalla Social Subversiva Caribe, Cumaná, 10 November 2009.

ticians who do not belong to the community and have not constituted their political capital through grassroots neighborhood service.⁵ The same expression was used when the PSUV newly elected mayor of Cumaná met *barrio* brokers who complained about his PSUV predecessors' choice of executives. One complained that grassroots activists' demands on behalf of their communities have been simply ignored.

My request was unanswered for eight months. We go [to the office] and we send people, we go and we send people but there is no answer. If there is no reply, the work we do [in the neighborhoods] is wasted. We send comrades and we go to the institutions and they ask: "who are you?" We were like this [shocked]. "What happened here? Who was parachuted here?" . . . Here David [newly elected mayor of Cumaná], there are many comrades who deserve and have the ability of holding a political office in the administration.⁶

The literature on the *chavista* channeling of popular power in a state-sponsored institutional framework may be divided among those who see it as an effective strengthening of political agencies at the grassroots level (among others, Azzellini 2012; Ciccariello-Maher 2013); those who have denounced it as untenable because of its dependence on the PSUV and Chávez since its creation (among others, Álvarez and García-Guadilla 2011; García-Guadilla 2008); and those, with whom I tend to sympathize, who appreciate its groundbreaking effort even though major shortcomings and inconsistencies are noted (among others, Briceño and Maingon 2015; Ellner 2006, 2008; Fernandes 2010; Strønen 2014; Wilde 2017). Shifting from grassroots discourses to academic reasoning, one however still finds the centrality of the vertical metaphor useful to understand the functioning of the PSUV. Steve Ellner (2006) focuses on *chavista* strategies "from above" and "from below." Even analysts sympathetic to the PSUV

make use of the vertical metaphor to defended Chávez's socialism as a groundbreaking experiment in state transformation, aimed at its disintegration.

I will speak neither of power from above nor entirely from below, but instead of a "dual power" that exists in ongoing, tense, and antagonistic opposition to the state, straining insistently upward from the bases to generate a dialectical motion allowing the revolutionary transformation of the state and its institutions, with the ultimate goal of deconstructing, decentralizing, and rendering it a nonstate . . . "dual power" is the condensation of popular power from below into a radical pole that stands in antagonistic opposition to the state. (Ciccariello-Maher 2013: 19, 240. see Azzellini 2012)

While there have certainly been legislative efforts to regenerate the state through its dialectics with popular power, the demise announced by scholars did not alter the usual hierarchical spatial references. There is still an "above" and a "below" as distinct forces; the vertical dimension is still a crucial analytical tool both for actors and academics, even for those who announce its forthcoming expiration.

Conclusions

When the state promotes the harmonious coexistence of egalitarian and hierarchical principles the outcome is often ambiguous and contradictory. Up to the rise of parliamentary democracies, most cultural contexts expressed a clear preference for one of the two organizational principles: some settings, most notably aristocratic kingdoms, crafted a coherently vertical disposition while others a congruent horizontal one, most notably herdsmen as well as hunters and gatherers. Over the last couple of centuries several states have espoused both principles or, one could argue, have blended an

egalitarian rhetoric with persistent structural inequalities (see, for example, Graeber 2007). Socialist states are the ones that have more emphatically combined an egalitarian oratory with a vertical concentration of power. Leadership has often been presented as a horizontal service to the people by one of them. A state, however, even when claiming to adopt radical socialism, cannot run solely on the egalitarian principle: leaders must be acknowledged as embodying an increased value, rendering them transcendental figures.

Contemporary Venezuelan dynamics are intriguing because they are the more recent and arguably among the strongest examples of a muscular and resounding combination of the vertical and horizontal political criteria. They confirm and exasperate the ambivalence of citizens' relationship with socialist leaders documented elsewhere. In Venezuela, as elsewhere, leadership is criticized mostly at the bottom of the party's hierarchical structure with local politicians (mayors, governors, regional figures) being the prime target of criticism: "[in China there are] leaders high above and the local officials down below: The former are distant, yet emotionally close, whereas the latter are close, yet emotionally distant" (Steinmüller 2015: 12). However, the Soviet emphasis on the "gratitude" toward the leader for having generated "communist happiness" (Ssorin-Chaikov 2017: 87, 116) is clearly visible in the deferential tone of public speeches by *concejos comunales*' representatives receiving funding from local politicians who they have starkly criticized (Boni 2017: 231). Hans Steinmüller (2015: 6, 7) characterizes the relationship between citizens and Chinese leaders as an emotional tie of mixed horizontal familiarity and vertical "moral indebtedness" toward a father-like figure, a "local expression [that] captures well the combination of hierarchical and egalitarian elements in the political persona of Mao." Similar feelings, with an analogous hypertrophic iconic display of the leader, are found in Venezuela (see Allard 2012: 245). Chávez has been venerated by some Venezuelans as a messianic figure as other socialist

leaders (Brandtstädter 2016; Ssorin-Chaikov 2017; Steinmüller 2015) but, while in life, the turbulent and subversive grassroots activists within his party continuously questioned his choices for local offices.

The shaming use of vertical metaphors by grassroots activists who, albeit critically, still identify themselves with the PSUV was confined to specific settings. In PSUV official and public political rituals (marches, leaders' speeches, public distribution of funds), as in soviet gift-giving to leaders (Ssorin-Chaikov 2017), the choreography was strictly controlled vertically, and there was very little room for the upward expression of dissent. The same grassroots activists who publicly expressed gratitude to local politicians in official rituals, however during the campaign for internal elections, in peripheral party *barrio* meetings, in internal party maneuvering or in the meeting with the newly elected mayor expressed severe criticism toward the PSUV's local hierarchy. The *arriba/abajo* dialectic has been used to criticize elitist management of the state by the opposition to the PSUV and has been widely utilized within the party as well. Compared to other socialist settings, the Venezuelan specificity lies in the explicit and recurrent critique of politics' vertical dimension expressed by grassroots PSUV activists. When the state does not deliver the popular power that was promised, bottom-up insubordination to local leaders was considered not only legitimate but also a moral imperative. The radicalism implicit in this position would not be tolerated within the party in most other socialist settings where resistance was (and had to be) largely confined to hidden transcripts, cynicism, and irony (Scott 1990; Steinmüller and Brandtstädter 2016). In China, the irony of rural resistance experts reveals "the gap between ideals and reality, a gap in which politics proper can arise"; dissidents sought "political fairness, participatory citizenship, distributive justice and responsive, accountable officials" (Brandtstädter 2016: 123, 128).

While similar demands are common among grassroots PSUV activists, the vertical meta-

phor is more than a mere critique of local leadership, subversively questioning verticality as a socialist organizational principle. It functions as a critical expression against the continuing disempowerment of local activists in relation to the party centers as well as a metaphorical rendering of the distance between the promised political horizontalism, the grassroots desired outcome of the “Bolivarian revolution,” and persistent hierarchies. This latter use of the spatial metaphor has a strong rhetorical appeal as it goes to the core of the ambiguous blending of the horizontal and vertical dimensions in the *chavista* state. It seeks legitimacy in the socialist condemnation of vertical inequality to phrase an emphatic demand for egalitarian horizontalism. In brief, reference to the vertical axis allows a drastic and unambiguous simplification of the party’s political agenda as a choice between incompatible organizational principles.

This persistent use of vertical metaphors in a political system, such as in the Venezuelan PSUV government claiming to favor horizontal organization, is an indication of an at least partial failure to achieve its declared aims. Attempts to insert a horizontal rationale are subjugated to and dependent on the overarching vertical architecture of state and party administration. The asymmetrical dialectics between hierarchical institutions and egalitarian communities,

represented by *barrio* brokers, sees the latter in an evident subordinate role: the horizontal logic of egalitarian relations and assemblies are confined to marginal and peripheral dynamics and its claimed parity with the vertical organization is patently false (Boni 2017).

The failure of the most advanced contemporary experiment in the construction of a horizontal state has important implications for both political activists and scholars as it raises a fundamental issue: is a state attempting to delegate its own power a paradox doomed to failure? What is at stake is the promotion of popular authority, often in the form of horizontal decision-making spaces, by centralized governments. Since the French Revolution (figure 11), via Bolshevik Russia (figure 12), and through to Chávez, government promotion of autonomous power at the grassroots level has proven limited, revocable, weak, and dependent. This is evident in the spatial organization of revolutionary contexts: promised egalitarian revolutions have often been sponsored by leaders who, while promising horizontal politics in the future, since the outbreak of the insurrection stand above the masses and trigger the transcendental constitution of the political elite. In revolutionary settings, this vertical privilege may be conceived as a temporary stage but it often became a structural separation of citizens



FIGURE 11. Detail of *Le Serment du Jeu de paume*, incomplete painting by Jacques-Louis David, 1791–1794 (depicts events of 20 June 1789).



FIGURE 12. Vladimir Lenin addressing a crowd of soldiers about to go to war in Poland, Moscow, 5 May 1920.

and rulers that recreates the vertical state the insurrection was supposed to eliminate.

Despite recurrent disappointment and disillusionment, the unceasing manifestation of egalitarian tendencies is still very much alive in Venezuela and in Latin America at large, not only as an imaginary, but as a everyday struggle to open up avenues of practical feasibility for communitarian autonomy. The substantial failure of the *poder popular*, which, in terms of legislation and extent, was rightly acclaimed as groundbreaking, can be ascribed to the state's de facto refusal to renounce its prerogatives. Still, within the general trend toward state monopolistic sovereignty, there have been cycles and exceptions. Venezuelan *comunidades* have historically proven both their radical opposi-

tion to invasive administration and their self-management capacity: it may well be possible that the monopolistic control of the oil revenue by the state, which is what enables it to shape and direct current Venezuelan politics, will undergo profound changes in the decades ahead. What the trajectory of the *poder popular* suggests, in Venezuela and elsewhere, is that the flourishing of autonomous, grassroots political bodies is not likely to be achieved through state sponsorship, but rather against it. How this may happen is very hard to envision as revolutions have invariably been framed within a vertical state logic: the evil, aristocratic, capitalist, colonial state was replaced by the hierarchical revolutionary state, while horizontal popular power may rather germinate from its ashes or outside state reach.

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Notes

1. My use of the high/low dichotomy is different from Pierre Ostiguy (2009) who uses it to oppose “well behaved” and “down-to-earth” politicians.
2. See, for example, La Causa R's administration of Caracas in the early 1990s (Harnecker 2005).
3. Posted 2 March 2017, <https://twitter.com/anonymousvene10/status/837371078976679936>.
4. Sala de Batalla Social Subversiva Caribe, Cumaná, 10 November 2009.
5. Meeting at Fundacity with José Rincones, newly elected PSUV delegate for Valentín Valiente, Cumaná, 24 November 2009.
6. Meeting between David Velásquez and the coordinators of the UBCh for the parroquia Valentín Valiente and Ayacucho, Cumaná, 21 December 2013.

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