

The Anti-Bolivarian Student Movement: New Social Actors Challenge the Advancement of Venezuela's Bolivarian Socialism*

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ABSTRACT

The decision of Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez not to renew the private TV channel RCTV's (*Radio Caracas Televisión*) broadcasting licence in May 2007 became the focal point for students from different universities of Caracas to unite (with no political affiliation with opposition parties) and construct a movement that used youth, freedom of speech, nonviolence and reconciliation as the discourse to challenge Chávez's regime. This apparent apolitical movement took Chavistas and opposition supporters by surprise. This paper examines the emergence, formation, and success of this movement and why it failed to convert and evolve itself as an influential opposition political force after 2007.

Key Words: student movement, Manos Blancas, Generación 2007, RCTV, socialism, Venezuela

In May 2007, students from different universities organised a protesting strategy that succeeded in constructing a new anti-Bolivarian movement that sought to challenge the expansion of the Bolivarian project (Venezuela's new revolutionary project led by Hugo Chávez). What was interesting about this student movement was its claim to have no political affiliation

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with opposition parties. This article is important because it unfolds what the opposition political machinery lacked, and how this sector of society managed to incorporate new discursive elements to the opposition camp and prevent the advancement of Chávez's revolutionary project. This analysis seeks to answer two key research questions. First, how elements of youth, new, fresh, apolitical, innocent, and so on are used to challenge the expansion of the Bolivarian hegemonic project? Second, what was the antagonistic nature of a new generation of anti-Bolivarians that sought to influence people from other sectors of the population in a deeply dichotomised society?

Three diverging interpretations of this anti-Bolivarian movement were found in the literature; however, none of these interpretations examine this anti-Bolivarian student movement from a national standpoint or substantiate their claims with convincing empirical evidence. By analysing symbols, news, diverging interpretations about the student movement, and conducting fieldwork at different regions of Venezuela, I examine this anti-Bolivarian student movement with a totally different approach. With a wide range of qualitative sources, this investigation unpacks the nature of this opposition movement, and analyses why this form of student discourse succeeded in challenging Chávez's Government during that period.

I look into the emergence of the movement, its formative process and how media exposure helped the student movement position itself as a new opposition force in Venezuela. The first section describes the events that crystallised this movement, key student leaders and the discourse used to represent this non-partisan movement. It follows with three diverging interpretations of the student movement mentioned above, followed by a critique of these interpretations. The final section of this paper is a theoretical analysis describing the success and failure of the student movement. I claim that this student movement while it starts of with a lot of possibilities and optimism, and seems to constitute a challenge to the new hegemonic project, it ultimately failed and is absorbed into other opposition political parties.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDENT MOVEMENT AND ITS DISCOURSE

This student movement became a major opposition force in Venezuela when the government insisted on not renewing RCTV's broadcasting licence on 28 May 2007. Days prior to the termination of RCTV's licence,

students from the universities in Caracas (the capital of Venezuela) started protesting outside their university campuses. They claimed that “with no RCTV the population would no longer have the right to be objectively informed because most other private channels made a treaty with the government” (Hossne 2007). On 28 May 2007, students from universities in Caracas joined the protest against the closure of RCTV shouting rhythms like: “‘freedom of speech [...] this is our future’. The police violently dispersed the students with teargas and blank rifle shots, injuring seventeen students.”¹ In other cities of Venezuela, student demonstrations also took place. “Chavistas supporters responded shooting students with live ammunition. 14 students were injured, one seriously” (Rodríguez and Sánchez 2007).

A key event for the student movement was when parliamentarians of *Podemos* (a Bolivarian political party that had recently defected and joined the opposition) assured the students that they would do everything to allow student representatives raise their concerns in the parliament. In the parliament, Ricardo Gutiérrez of *Podemos* said: “parliamentarians must do all it can to open any forms of discussion and dialogue. We cannot sit here comfortably seeing our universities paralysed, our youth on the streets taking unnecessary risks with the police and National Guard shooting and bombing them with teargas.”² On 7 June 2007, student representatives expressed their views at the parliament, which was broadcasted live on television and radio (Fragiel 2007). In the parliament, Douglas Barrios (Figure 1) from *Universidad Metropolitana* in Caracas said:

[...] [we] we are here in this rostrum to disseminate our rejection to the arbitrary closure of RCTV, the way our right to demonstrate was assaulted and the abuse inflicted upon the student movement [...]. Today, we don't come here to debate [...] but to reinstate civil liberties [...] we are not here to talk about our political leanings [...] we have ideological differences between us [...] we acknowledge the need to have a framework of pluralism where common ideas can be constructed [...]. Students are not socialists, we are social beings. We are not neoliberals, we are liberated beings. We are not the opposition; we are a proposition [...]. Youth is not on the streets today fighting for business interests or political tendencies. We are on the streets making politics without traditional politicians, fighting for

1 “UCEVISTAS protestaron en la autopista Francisco Fajardo cierre de RCTV,” *El Universal*, 25 May 2007, retrieved on 6 June 2009 from http://www.eluniversal.com/2007/05/29/pol_art_17-heridos--dejan-re_303151.shtml

2 “Estudiantes exigen derecho de palabra en el Parlamento,” *El Universal*, 2 June 2007, retrieved on 6 June 2009 from http://www.eluniversal.com/2007/06/02/pol_art_estudiantes-exigen-d_306982.shtml

our nation, protecting the interests of our society [...] all Venezuelans should be treated the same, with no discrimination [...] we believe in equality [...]. We don't believe the hegemony of the minority nor the majority [...] we promote reconciliation [...]. Our classrooms are on the streets, we don't ask, we demand the restoration of civil liberties [...] we are armed with consciousness, solidarity, optimism and modesty [...] a new generation that will fight today, tomorrow and forever to be free and genuine Humanists. Nothing else to say [...]. For now (Barrios 2007).



Figure 1. Douglas Barrios speaking at Venezuela's National Assembly (parliament) on 7 June 2007

Barrios's speech unfolds interesting elements about the student movement. The closure of RCTV is no longer the main reason why students are challenging the government. The opportunity to address the nation and parliament with TV and radio "live" coverage gave students the platform to shift its position and expand into other contexts. Barrios recognises ideological differences amongst them, however, via pluralistic practices common ideas can be constructed. Their objective was to distance themselves from opposition politics and represent a new frontier where differences are respected and common interests agreed. Discursively, this is what they want to convey by stating: "we are not socialists [...] we are not neoliberals [...] we are a proposition." Another interesting remark is the use of "hegemony". They don't accept a dominant hegemonic practice that benefits neither the minority nor the majority of the population. Students believe that via "reconciliation", conflicts in this polarised society can be resolved. Another concept Barrios introduced is "humanism". I'll elaborate on this concept in the next section. And, there is the odd (to some extent plagiarising) use of Chávez's "For now" (*Por ahora*. Chávez's

catch phrase from his brief speech in the failed coup in February 1992) in this anti-Chavista context. It seems that students are trying to capitalise on its symbolic significance and get the support of Chávez supporters.

Due to constant media coverage (mainly *Globovisión*: the only opposition TV channel broadcasting) of students demonstrating in Caracas, and the “live” broadcast in the parliament, there were reasons to believe that this was national student movement. National media exposure gave the ideal platform for key university leaders to express their dissatisfaction with Chávez’s plans and market themselves.³ People assumed that the internal dynamics of this new student movement consisted of university leaders from various regions of the country, and the leaders seen and heard on TV were internally selected.⁴ We question, how and in what context was this student movement formed?

According to Gustavo Tovar Arroyo,⁵ the student movement was founded after the failed coup in April 2002. Tovar Arroyo recounts that on 11 April 2002, the government and political opposition groups ordered “*el pueblo*” (people) to shoot each other. Students realised the need to call for dialogue instead of killing each other. Instead, the government encouraged more discrimination. “None of our attempts to stop government’s misuse of power worked (strikes, referenda, using the judicial system); nonetheless, slowly and undetected by the authorities, a feeling of freedom emerged:

3 From the end of May until December 2007, more than two hundred video clips in *youtube*, which are primarily live coverage clips of *Globovisión* at student demonstrations, interviewing students, and so on; and, more than a hundred on-line newspaper reports from key Venezuelan national newspaper’s website, informing readers of student’s nonviolence discourse, student leaders and student demonstrations; gives us an insight into the medias’ interest with the student movement during that period. Government supporters claim that this “media show” consolidated a new form of aggression against Venezuela by publicising misleading information about the *Manos Blancas* movement. “Las vías violentas de la derecha venezolana,” *TARINGA! – Inteligencia Colectiva* 13 February 2010. Retrieved on 10 April 2012 from <http://www.taringa.net/posts/info/4651552/Las-vias-violentas-de-la-derecha-venezolana.html>. According to Eva Golinger, an American attorney and strong supporter of Chávez’s anti-American political project, from 2005 until 2009, student groups received approximately US\$ 7.45 million from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). “America’s strategy is to incorporate young political figures in the opposition political system, attract young people and destabilise Chávez’s revolutionary project. The USAID has accomplished its objective: key 2007 student leaders have joined opposition political parties and won elections.” “LA USAID detras de la ‘Manos Blancas,’” *CUBADEBATE – Contra el Terrorismo Mediático*, 11 February 2010. Retrieved on 10 April 2012 from <http://www.cubadebate.cu/opinion/2010/02/11/la-usaid-detras-de-las-manos-blancas/>

4 “Estaremos dando la cara,” *El Universal*, 3 June 2007, retrieved in July 2010 from http://www.eluniversal.com/2007/06/03/pol_apo_estaremos-dando-la_306748.shtml

5 Enrique Krauze (2008, 140-141) describes Tovar Arroyo as the teacher/mentor, writer and organiser of the student movement.

the Venezuelan youth” (Tovar Arroyo 2007, 104-105).

When Chávez announced his intention to close RCTV in December 2006, workshops of human rights principles with university and school students nationwide were organised. The closure of RCTV “violated two human rights: freedom of expression and freedom of thought” (Tovar Arroyo 2007, 122-123). Days before RCTV’s closure, a nonviolence demonstration strategy with representatives from various universities was organised. Students said: “we shall not fight nor protest because the closure of RCTV, but for human rights: freedom of expression and freedom of thought.” After their first march on 28 May 2007, “more than eighty university representatives of the capital gathered to determine ways to expand this movement. They discussed their rights, politics, strategy, history, political organisation and humanism” (Tovar Arroyo 2007, 124).

Rayma López, a student leader who has been involved in student movements since 1998 gives us a different version about the emergence of the student movement. López points out that “there was a student forum with student representatives from different regions of the country. However, there was a degree of discontent from representatives not from Caracas because representatives from universities in the capital dominated the *Red Democrática Universitaria Estudiantil*.” López claims that Tovar Arroyo’s April 2002 version, as the foundation of the student movement is incorrect. There were university groups already functioning. The *Red Democrática Universitaria Estudiantil* was a national student union federation founded in 2002. “Student leaders met, but as the police intelligence harassed and prosecuted them, these meetings came to a halt.”⁶

Referring to Tovar Arroyo’s account regarding the expansion of the student movement after 28 May 2007, López stressed that “many universities with less students were simply excluded from the committee Tovar Arroyo mentions. Universities outside the capital were regarded as irrelevant.” López represented the state-run pedagogical universities nationwide, and struggled to persuade the “group” to select her. She said: “with all the pedagogical campuses across the country, we are the largest in Venezuela. I demanded our presence; otherwise, I was going to speak to the ‘media’ as it violates the human rights principles they are advocating.”⁷

This implies that the student representatives seen and heard in the media were primarily from universities in Caracas. According to Tovar Arroyo, it was impossible to reach consensus at meetings attended by

6 Rayma López: student leader of the *Universidad Pedagógica Experimental Libertador*. Interview by author, Caracas, 4 March 2009.

7 *ibid*.

up to 127 representatives. Hence, it was decided to form what was called the G-8: student representatives from eight universities in Caracas. Twenty-five representatives formed the committee of which student representatives like Alexis Cabrera, Stalin Gonzáles, Fabricio Briceño, Ricardo Sánchez, Rayma López, Yon Goicoechea and Freddy Guevara were members (Tovar Arroyo 2007, 126-127). This student movement benefitted from media coverage – i.e. protesting against the closure of RCTV at the end of May 2007, its opportunity to publicize itself by speaking in the parliament, and so on. The discourse used to persuade people from all sectors in this deeply polarised society of their apolitical, innocent and peaceful objectives (the first research questions of this paper) is addressed and analysed in the next section.

STUDENT DISCOURSE: *RESISTENCIA AND MANOS BLANCAS*

The student movement used two types of discourse: *Resistencia* (resistance) and *Manos Blancas* (white hands). The symbol *Resistencia* had a specific objective: to challenge the constitutional amendments presented in the December 2007 Referendum (Pereira 2008). Discursively, however, “resistance” as an anti-Bolivarian symbolic signifier was rather limited. It only put across an ordinary political message that didn’t capitalise on the movements’ attributes, such as youth, nonviolence, non-partisan, etc. The discursive impact of *Manos Blancas* was more productive in challenging the socialist Bolivarian hegemonic project.

After the RCTV closure, *Manos Blancas* became a central opposition discourse alienated from party-politics. This symbol was used in demonstration banners, pamphlets, posters, t-shirts, and an identity-code commonly used by painting palms of hands in white (Figures 2 and 3). Days after the termination of RCTV’s licence, a student clearly stated the significance of *Manos Blancas* to this movement:

Students are tired of a Venezuela divided by colours (political ideology/ affiliation) [...] we rest upon on reconciliation. Our movement has no political aspirations despite our firm call to the government for justice and respect. The only colour we represent is ours: Manos Blancas, a symbol of freedom. These hands shall stand to change our lives and mould our history [...] Venezuela, we promise, we shall continue our peaceful demand for freedom and respect to our rights [...]. Enough of spectators! We are tired of division and polarisation! Enough of labelling us with colours! (Hruskovec 2007).



Figure 2. White Hands with Paz (peace)



Figure 3. White Hands symbol

This student wants to emphasise their detachment from the opposition political apparatus by articulating the meaning of “colour” in political discourse. They claim that *Manos Blancas*: a symbol of freedom is their colour. In other words, a simple logo/symbol that aimed to get the support of people from both camps. Its apparent detachment from opposition party-politics helped students open a new frontier that could have gradually developed into a new political project. According to López, *Manos Blancas* is an iconic symbol that unified a variety of groups as one identity. However, many viewed it as a rather powerless “nonviolence” symbol. A better symbol for students in other regions of the country was *Manos Negras* (black hands). For students that burn tyres, painting their hands “white” was out of context; they didn’t have the media coverage vis-à-vis those in Caracas. They had to resort to conventional demonstration methods to repel police attacks.⁸

The student movement played a key role in defeating the government in the December 2007 referendum. Nonetheless, I argue that students’ involvement in Venezuela’s socio-political turmoil quickly changed. Perhaps as a result of manipulation by opposition political parties, the movement started to adopt political strategies rather than keeping its reconciliation, nonviolence and non-partisan (*Manos Blancas*) principles. These non-political planks were, perhaps unconsciously brushed aside when the students campaigned against the constitutional amendment referendum. Angel

⁸ Rayma López, interview by author, Caracas, 4 March 2009.

Álvarez resonates with my analysis, as he notes, “the student movement as new political agents helped to defeat Chávez in the December 2007 referendum” (Álvarez 2008, 405-406). Key points worth mentioning in this article are the diverging interpretations of the student movement in the literature. Addressing these analyses could give us different perspectives about the student movement, and, in my view, reveal what these authors fail to address.

DIVERGING INTERPRETATIONS OF THE ANTI-BOLIVARIAN STUDENT MOVEMENT

The first case addressed in this section is Tovar Arroyo’s description of the movement’s ideological plank and strategic methods. The author of the second paper argues that this movement primarily consists of students that enjoy and promote neoliberal practices, and feel threatened by the institutional changes this socialist hegemonic order wants to implement. The last paper is a critique written by members of the Bolivarian *Universidad Socialista del Pueblo*, founded in 2007. They argue that this *Manos Blancas* student movement is not what students claim to be.

The Student Movement: Humanism, Reconciliation and Nonviolent Action

According to Tovar Arroyo, the movement practices the principles of humanism. The principles of humanism are strongly connected to the thirty human rights principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Tovar Arroyo 2007, 58-62). Tovar Arroyo claims that Chávez’s “‘socialism or death’ discourse is an ideological persecution and a death threat to half of the country.” He questions: “is it possible to distance ourselves from ideological prejudice and live together peacefully? If the incumbent imposes ‘socialism or death’ in Venezuela, limiting people’s freedom, there shall be no room for us to coexist” (Tovar Arroyo 2007, 109). Tovar Arroyo argues that the humanist *Generación 2007* (resonating with the *Generación 28* student movement that challenged Venezuela’s dictatorship in 1928; see Coronil 1997, 91-94) was a movement that campaigned for human/civil rights and reconciliation. Comments like “socialism or death”⁹ is a “death threat to half of the country” shows how anxious they are if this socialist project advances. The significance

of socialism and the way Chávez articulated it as the next phase of the revolution after being re-elected in December 2006 alarmed many Venezuelans.

This humanist *Generación 2007* tried to persuade all sectors in this deeply polarised society that this was an opportunity to improve relations amongst all Venezuelans through dialogue and reconciliation. Mahatma Ghandi's nonviolence methods are central strategic practices to the student movement. Gene Sharp, a nonviolence theorist and methodologist inspired by Ghandi's struggle outlines methods of articulating humanism with a nonviolence strategy. Sharp discusses political power in his book *La lucha política no violenta*, describing 198 concepts and methods of nonviolent action (Tovar Arroyo 2007, 65-83).¹⁰

Tovar Arroyo explains that the first step for a nonviolence struggle was to inform people of the thirty human rights principles the “dictator” (i.e. Chávez) violates. To be free, a citizen must control the power structure, consolidate its institutions and independent organisations (to counter-balance political power). Citizens gave the “dictator” political power, not the other way round. The nonviolence strategy aims to convert every man – not enslave him/her. Sharp claims that “when people refuse to cooperate and persist with a position of disobedience, they deprive the State from the basic element of human support and cooperation, essential for any government or hierarchical system to function.” This is Sharp's political mechanism of “nonviolent action” (Tovar Arroyo 2007, 84-86). Students believe that a future of slavery, prohibition and repression is ahead if a nonviolence strategy is not articulated (Tovar Arroyo 2007, 109). Next, I'll discuss an article titled: *La revuelta de los estudiantes venezolanos del 2007 – El levantamiento político de una generación*. This analysis contextualises the student movement from a completely different angle thus teasing out interesting class-based elements about the students and Venezuela's “neo-liberal” educational system.

Students: Product of Neoliberal Practices

Ramon Casanova, a research professor at UCV's (*Universidad Central*

9 With the metaphor: ‘Homeland, Socialism or Death’ (*Patria, Socialismo o Muerte*) Chávez discursively announces hence incorporates Cuban ideological practices as the next phase of the Bolivarian project. Chávez has borrowed Fidel Castro's 1960s ‘Homeland or Death we shall Win’ (*Patria o Muerte, Venceremos*) – a vital motto in Cuba's revolution.

10 These 198 non violent ‘methods are mainly symbolic acts of peaceful opposition or of attempted persuasion’. These are: nonviolence protest and persuasion, social non-cooperation, economic non-cooperation, economic boycotts and strike, political non-cooperation and nonviolence intervention methods (Sharp 1973, 117).

de Venezuela) Centre for Development Studies (*Centro de Estudios del Desarrollo*) claims that we have to analyse the students' social fabric in order to understand what's behind this movement. Casanova argues that the student movement that began in 2007 is a product of the global hegemonic neo-conservative Cultural Revolution (from the Thatcher and Reagan era) that has shifted cultural values in the last 30 years. This student movement rejects this new political structure, and what it signifies to their own socio-economic conditions –e.g. a threat to their educational system– tailored to meet their own social agenda (Casanova 2009, 100-101).

Casanova claims that the students that participate in this movement are a product of social adaptation to neoliberal economic practices. These students welcome the ideology of neoliberal capitalism as a structure that promises a fulfilling future. They feel threatened by a revolution that promises a daunting future. Students are defending social and educational differences to guarantee the reproduction of their technocratic-elite position. The closure of a private anti-Bolivarian TV channel (RCTV) signified the unavoidable end of the old institutional structure. Casanova argues that “this is a class revolt against the new order, not the other way round” (Casanova 2009, 103-105).

Referring to Douglas Barrios's speech in the parliament on 7 June 2007, Casanova uses the discourse Barrios articulates as evidence to substantiate his claim that these students are a product of the 1980s and 1990s neo-conservative values. Barrios refers to political ideologies by stating: ‘students are not socialists, we are social beings. We are not neoliberals, we are liberated beings. We are not the opposition; we are a proposition’. Casanova points out that Barrios's statement implies that students promote the values of pluralistic liberalism in a democratic context, and that liberty subverts equality (Casanova 2009, 118).

The 2007 student movement is an upper-middle class protest against new hegemonic practices. These students live in their own social micro-world: at home, school and what they hear from the media is a very negative interpretation of the Bolivarian project and what democratic socialism means. “They are petrified of socialism; they view it as the apocalypse. Liberal thinking provides the basic principles for freedom, individualism and private rights” (Casanova 2009, 99-116). Casanova describes Father Luis Ugalde, the rector of *Universidad Católica Andrés Bello* (an established private university in the capital) as one of the most influential ideological figures of the movement, who describes the movement (in a hagiographic manner) “as the saviours of a fractured society by ‘offering’ a way out of the violence and harassments the authoritarian

government imposes upon them” (Casanova 2009, 107).

In my view, Casanova’s interpretation of the student movement only focuses on the events seen in the UCV, universities in Caracas and the media. Casanova gives a lot of attention on Stalin Gonzales, president of UCV’s student movement (who joined party-politics after graduating), Ricardo Sánchez who replaced Stalin Gonzáles in the UCV leadership, and Yon Goicoechea, a prominent student leader from Universidad Católica Andrés Bello who much benefited from media coverage (Casanova 2009, 105-116). Casanova describes the student movement as a social product of global neo-conservatism – threatened by Chávez’s ‘socialist’ hegemonic project. The next interpretation is also a strong critique of the student movement.

Bolivarian Perception of the “Manos Blancas” Student Movement

Authors of the *El movimiento de las “Manos Blancas”* paper highlight interesting points about the student movement. They argue that Sharp’s theory of nonviolence resistance in the book *From Dictatorship to Democracy* uses cases and dubious methods to describe what a dictatorship is without historically contextualising these points. Conclusively, cases are categorised as free or not free in a rather law-like manner to suit their own schema. Sharp discusses 198 methods to oust dictatorships and dictators, with a protest and persuasion, no cooperation, and intervention layout. “In order to conduct this analysis we have to agree, without any doubt, that we are dealing with a dictatorial and despotic regime. Students claim that the ‘State’ in Venezuela uses repressive, arbitrary and violent methods. They pretend to be innocent unarmed victims prosecuted by a ‘brutal and genocidal’ government” (Universidad del Pueblo 2009, 1-3).

They also claim that this sense of victimisation (to a certain extent cynical) hides the true intentions of this movement. Student discourse seeks to portray them as spontaneous and open. These tactics have given them a lot of popularity. It isn’t difficult to understand the meaning of the “Open Hand” symbol. “Subconsciously, it convinces people that the movement has ‘good intentions’; that they are ‘genuine’, ‘spontaneous’ – almost infantile: *everyone, look, we are not armed, we don’t hide anything!*” They point out that “if we compare it with other ‘spontaneous’ movements using the same symbol (“Open Hand”) – inspired by Sharp’s ‘nonviolence’ theory, we see interesting affinities.” For instance, “the Open Hand gradually changed to be a Fist” (Universidad del Pueblo 2009, 3-4). That is precisely

what's happened with *Manos Blancas*. The symbol changed to a Fist symbol signifying "Resistance"; the same as the one used in Serbia to oust Milosevic in 2000.¹¹ "They've plagiarised Serbia's OTPOR! Fist" (Universidad del Pueblo 2009, 8-9).

Furthermore, the authors stress that "we cannot forget this movement –contextualised in various forms (e.g. changing names) pretends to be apolitical, pure– acting like humiliated victims. It is obvious that not all 'Manos Blancas' students are aware how they are manipulated by foreign organisations." Some are right-wing students that strategically distanced themselves from opposition parties. However, "once they achieve their objectives, they join those parties. In spite of this, society still views them as spontaneous, 'pure', even innocent." They claim to be the underdog, victims of a government that wants to antagonise them (Universidad del Pueblo 2009, 5-8).

Authors of the *El movimiento de las "Manos Blancas"* paper criticise Sharp's theoretical framework by arbitrating what dictatorship is. They also argue that the student movement wrongly accuses the Venezuelan Government of being "brutal and genocidal" and use Sharp's flawed and unfounded theoretical approach. And, they claim that students are connected with foreign and right wing organisations (it could be because Yon Goicoechea received a US\$ 500,000 prize from the Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty in April 2008,¹² and his decision to join *Primero de Justicia*, a centre-right party¹³). However, such claims have not been substantiated in the paper. Nonetheless, Goicoechea accepting the prize and becoming an active member of the opposition has weakened that element of "freshness" students enjoyed in 2007. The next section analyses Tovar Arroyo's account about the formation of the movement, its humanist stance, reconciliation strategy and nonviolent action, the flaws in Casanova's class-based critique of the movement, and the interpretations and arguments presented in the *El movimiento de las "Manos Blancas"* paper.

11 This symbol was also used by a movement in Georgia (2003) with the word 'Enough' to oust Eduard Shevardnad. Also, a Russian anti-Putin movement using the word 'Defence' (Universidad del Pueblo 2009, 4).

12 "Yon Goicoechea, ganador del premio Milton Friedman por la libertad," The Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty. 24 April 2008. Retrieved on 6 June 2009 from <http://www.elcato.org/special/friedman/goicoechea/index.html>

13 "Primero Justicia anuncia la incorporacion de Yon Goicoechea a la tolda aurinegra," *El Universal*, 14 December 2008, retrieved on 10 June 2009 from http://www.eluniversal.com/2008/12/14/pol_ava_primero-justicia-anu_14A2167653.shtml#

Critique of the Three Interpretations of the Student Movement

Tovar Arroyo's book provides a genealogical, ideological and strategic outlook of the student movement. However, based on interview sources, I find contradictions in Tovar Arroyo's claim regarding the formation of the student movement after the April 2002 failed coup. Rayma López states that there was a national student mechanism called Red Democrática Universitaria Estudiantil before the April 2002 version Tovar Arroyo mentions. His account that student discussion didn't occur prior to the April 2002 appears to be incorrect. There was a dialogue amongst students from different universities in the country before the latter date. Danny Ramírez, a student leader from the state Táchira (600 miles from Caracas) agrees with López's side of the story. I'll elaborate on Ramírez's involvement in student demonstrations later.

As Tovar Arroyo points out, the student movement promoted reconciliation through dialogue in a deeply polarised society. However, the regular use of the term "dictator/dictatorship" in his analysis, that is, discourse that condemns Chávez and the regime before a dialogue for reconciliation occurs does not lay the right foundations for both camps to share some common ground and develop a reconciliation process. If anything, claiming that the president is a dictator could have further galvanised the Bolivarian hegemonic project with Venezuela's less privileged population. Discourse that seeks to demonise Chávez and thus exclude him from his deep-rooted popular support, in my view, only works with people that share similar class-based conditions. Venezuela's poor, living with different socio-economic circumstances for many years need something radical to happen for them to change sides.

That attempt to break that element of signification Chávez represents with his grassroots supporters needs a radical social and political project that requires the participation of the "people". Only claiming that Chávez is a "dictator" is not sufficient to break the popular support Chávez still enjoys and politically nurtures. The only way to displace this revolutionary process is if people from the *barrios* no longer support Chávez at the ballot box as they feel dissatisfied/disillusioned with Chávez and his political machinery. Furthermore, in practice, Tovar Arroyo's reconciliation account appears to be different. According to López, "reconciliation was only mentioned when the media was there. Once, Chavista students went to one of our meetings; there was a very brief moment of dialogue that concluded with gunshots." Sharp's "nonviolent action", mentioned by

Tovar Arroyo, “was a discourse that helped to congregate students and civilians in the marches – reassuring them that the police would not attack them. However, the riot police didn’t attack because the media (live) was reporting the event.”¹⁴

Jhonny Prada, a student leader in San Cristobal, Táchira, said: “we never plan a violent march. However, when the police disperse us using pellet shots, we respond with stones. Injuries have been horrific.” Prada notes that internal discussions and plans are agreed upon; however, “discourse related with human rights, humanism, nonviolence and reconciliation as Tovar Arroyo claims, are not subjects of discussion in our meetings. The discussion/debate focuses on planning and thus react accordingly in the march.” Prada also said: “in Caracas, media coverage guarantees a pacific march, but here in Táchira, we have no alternative but to burn (figure 4).”¹⁵ This is what López referred to earlier as the *Manos Negras* (black hands).



Figure 4. A student protest in 2007, San Cristobal, Táchira

Referring to Casanova’s description of the student movement, my main criticism to his claims is his deterministic view that these students are only a product of neoliberal practices. He also categorises the student movement seen through the media as a national student movement. Class-based generalisation in this context does not give us an accurate picture of the student movement he analyses. For example, as a

14 Rayma López, interview by author, Caracas, 4 March 2009.

15 Jhonny Prada: student leader of private universities in Táchira – *Instituto Universitario de la Frontera*. Interview by author, San Cristobal, 25 March 2009.

non-participant observer I attended a student documentary shooting on 7 January 2008. Twelve students expressed their views and experiences during the 2007 events. A student representing UCV's Social Studies School mentioned her humble background and family sympathy for socialist ideas. However, she strongly rejected the "socialist version the government was imposing upon the people" (Figure 5).¹⁶



Figure 5. The shooting of a student documentary on 7 January 2008, Los Naranjos, Caracas

On 3 June 2007, Ricardo Sánchez, the UCV student president said: "government discourse only promotes segregation and differences. I'm from Catia (a poor area in the west of Caracas), but there are also students from Lagunita (a wealthy district with golf courses and affluent homes). The UCV is diverse (class) and is determined to fight for citizens' rights. We don't accept social polarisation."¹⁷ I accept that a considerable proportion

16 The location and time of this student meeting was very secretive right from the start. The student leader who informed me of this event couldn't attend, but contacted me with another student who was organising the event. After constant government phone tapping since May 2007, and the interest of foreign journalists that sympathised with the government to interview them and attend their internal meetings; a sense of suspicion and distrust with non-participants like me was understandable. During my presense in the shooting of the documentary, all students were skeptical of my true intentions. After the event, Lopez told me that during the meeting, many of them called her asking if I was trustworthy or not. Unfortunately, this documentary was not released. Caracas, 7 January 2008.

17 "Es un proceso de Resistencia al gobierno," *El Universal*, 3 June 2007, retrieved on 14 August 2010 from http://www.eluniversal.com/2007/06/03/pol_apo_es-un-proceso-de-re_306746.shtml

of students in Caracas have a middle class background; nonetheless, to claim that the student movement is just a class revolt against the new hegemonic order, in my view, is an incomplete and misleading argument.

In the *El movimiento de las "Manos Blancas"* paper, I read a strong critique of Sharp's nonviolent action theoretical methods, however, there is no reference in the paper to sustain the link between Sharp's nonviolent action method and the student movement. I guess the authors refer to Tovar Arroyo's book. They don't seem to realise that the student movement in Caracas is different from the Táchira movement. Students in Táchira don't protest following Sharp's nonviolent actions. Furthermore, the discourse used to describe the students as "innocent", "pure", "*almost infantile: everyone, look, we are not armed, we don't hide anything!*" and "victim" does not objectively reflect what this movement proposes.

Nevertheless, the paper provides helpful observations about the student movement, claiming that the *Manos Blancas* symbol was plagiarised from the Serbian resistance movement in 1998. Also, it stresses the connection of key student leaders with right-wing opposition political parties and foreign organisations. However, there is no evidence to substantiate these claims. The next section is a theoretical reflection of the success of the anti-Bolivarian student movement, and its failure to adapt and advance after the three (i.e. 28 May, 7 June and 2 December) 2007 events.

The Student Movement: Its Success and Failure

From a theoretical perspective, we have to put into context the socio-political and economic problems in Venezuela to understand the success of Chávez's populist/socialist Bolivarian project. Social antagonism was the force that gave this new political project the momentum to challenge and displace a discredited institutional structure. Tovar Arroyo claims that the student movement promoted "reconciliation" between two polarised camps. However, in my view, this generation never experienced the economic and socio-political turmoil that took place throughout the country in the 1980s and 1990s. To understand the extent of polarisation in Venezuela, we have to examine why so many people have supported a new political project that promised radical institutional change. Those moments of crises gave Chávez the platform to construct a viable project for Venezuela's popular sectors. To contest and displace the Bolivarian hegemony requires a political frontier that enjoys the backing of those grassroots supporters. The *Generación 2007* had no appeal to the previously excluded population.

Discourse of human rights, reconciliation, dialogue, freedom and peace did not fulfil people's aspirations. In spite of having something in common: the closure of RCTV (e.g. no more popular chat/comedy shows, soap operas, etc.); it is likely that out of this context, Venezuela's poor see students as privileged individuals (this refers to the second research question). If the socialist Bolivarian hegemonic project were to accept a process of dialogue with the students, it would imply that its dichotomic construction that forms the basis of its political base would no longer work. In other words, if Bolivarian agents follow a discourse of reconciliation, differences, pluralism and agonism, the Bolivarian project would basically fall apart.

The three interpretations discussed in previous sections, only relate to the Caracas student movement seen in the media. Fieldwork research outside Caracas gave me an insight about the formation and practices of student demonstrations elsewhere. Student movements in Táchira have been challenging the Bolivarian project for several years. In 2001, there was already a movement of different university students and party-youth groups protesting on the streets. Jhonny Prada said: "there are more student leaders in Táchira than in Caracas. Some of them are relatively violent when they are attacked by the police." Prada added, "media coverage' has been a key element in Caracas. Student leaders like Yon Goicoechea have benefited with the right platform/stage the media gave him. A great Tachirense orator leader like Danny Ramírez has not had that advantage."¹⁸

According to Danny Ramírez, in February 2001, when Chávez began a phase of radicalisation, students were organising student regional marches in San Cristobal and Mérida (the capital of the neighbouring Venezuelan Andean state called Mérida). Ramírez claims that these were the first big student marches in the country. They contacted other universities in the country, hoping to construct a national student apparatus. This initiative failed because some university leaders supported the government. "We tried to form a national union with universities in the capital and others parts of the country." Ramírez visited most of the experimental universities in the country addressing the need to form a national student union. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough interest to make it happen. ¹⁹ On 12 April 2002, in a televised statement the Governor in Táchira said: 'what happened in Caracas was coup d'état and incited the "people" to confront him at the Governors' official residence if they wanted him to leave his post'. Spontaneously, civilians gathered outside the Governors'

¹⁸ Jhonny Prada, interview by author, San Cristobal, 25 March 2009.

¹⁹ Danny Ramírez: student leader of the *Universidad Nacional Experimental del Táchira*. Interview by author, San Cristobal, 31 March 2009.

residency, and Ramírez as the president of the student federation joined with 3,000 students. When Chávez reassumed power, Ramírez was prosecuted and imprisoned.²⁰ According to Ramírez, “a week before the closure of RCTV on 28 May 2007, students in San Cristobal were the first ones to protest nationwide. Students in Táchira come from all classes, Chavistas think students are nothing else but rich kids from the capital.”²¹

It is obvious that there was no national strategic forum amongst student groups. The appearance of a well broadcasted new opposition force in Caracas, contesting government’s decision not to renew RCTV’s broadcasting licence at the end of May 2007, combined with national media coverage of students speaking in the parliament on 7 June of the same year, provided student leaders in Caracas a perfect publicity stage for people to assume they represented students from all over Venezuela. The broadcasting of the *Manos Blancas* discourse on the streets helped this movement get a leading opposition role in 2007. However, the movement had no political substance to seriously challenge the socialist Bolivarian project. The government’s first electoral defeat in the December 2007 constitutional reform referendum (a margin of less than 2 percent), to a certain extent, was partly due to the participation of the *Generación 2007*.

However, after its splash of success since the end of May until December 2007, this movement failed to crystallise. Its popularity and ability to mobilise anti-Chavistas much depended on celebrity student leaders the media promoted. It appears that with no key 2007 student leaders, there were no possibilities to shift the movement beyond the phase of the constitutional referendum and its rejection of the RCTV closure. According to Professor Agustín Blanco Muñoz (UCV), on 27 May 2008, students gathered to organise the “revival of the student movement”, “the *Manos Blancas* movement” or “*Generación 2007*”. Student coordinators were new faces to news anchors. The 2007 celebrity student leaders left and joined political parties. “It was obvious that the media were there to see what new student-leader material was available to promote and sell to the highest bidder: political parties” (Blanco Muñoz 2008).

It seems that there was a problematic lack of discourse to sustain the meaning of the student movement after its success in 2007. Blanco Muñoz observes their dramatic attempts to revive the movement in 2008. If a well-articulated national student union existed, the movement would

20 Ramírez was put in jail for two years, tortured on a regular basis. Scars show the treatment he received. He was sentenced to 6 years in jail. In December 2007, Chávez decreed an amnesty law for political prisoners.

21 Danny Ramírez, interview by author, San Cristobal, 31 March 2009.

have progressed and avoid its media dependence on 2007 Caracas student leaders. In December 2008, it was announced that Yon Goicoechea joined Primero Justicia (centre-right party). In November 2008, Stalin González became the candidate of *Un Nuevo Tiempo* (centre-left party) campaigning to be the Mayor in the Libertador municipality of Caracas. It seems that, without the closure of RCTV in May 2007, there would have never been a student movement like the one addressed in this article.

The lack of opposition forces to challenge the expansion of the socialist Bolivarian project gave students the opportunity to fill that void. There was a short stimulus to challenge the government's decision to close RCTV, and contest the government's attempt to lay the foundations for the construction of "socialism of the twenty-first century" in the December 2007 constitutional referendum. However, circumstances changed after 2007. The students had to find another reason to challenge the government. They found nothing. Conventional opposition party-politics subtracted valuable human resources from the 2007 student project. López says: "the 2009 student movement has no direction vis-à-vis the 2007 period."²² Ramírez thinks that if "the '*Manos Blancas*' project was well articulated, it could have been a symbol of renovation, a Venezuela with new leadership constructing new political practices and a new framework for the society. However, the presence of circumstantial student groups delimited any incentives to transform this movement into a political party."²³

The student movement failed to expand and crystallise as a new opposition political force because the *Generación 2007* movement did not represent the national student population. Even during the process of selecting committee members in May-June 2007, we see clear preferences towards representatives from universities in Caracas. In retrospect, this movement was not formed to expand beyond its strategy to challenge the government on the basis of its decision not to renew RCTV's broadcasting license. *Manos Blancas* discourse didn't have enough significance to the people for it to transcend from its initial student setting to other frontiers. It failed to transcend because there was no incentive to surpass opposition political parties and construct a new political project.

If former student leaders (from all educational institutions throughout the country – not just Caracas) invested in the construction of a new political party (rather than joining opposition parties), this student movement would have expanded and crystallised its socio-political base – in order

22 Rayma López, interview by author, Caracas, 4 March 2009.

23 Danny Ramírez, interview by author, San Cristobal, 31 March 2009.

to challenge and potentially displace in future elections the socialist Bolivarian project in many regions of Venezuela. The failure to transcend and challenge the Bolivarian regime in a political terrain with a discourse of “youth” – detached from the political baggage opposition parties carry, could also be due to the interest of opposition parties to select potential new political leaders and persuade them to join different opposition parties. It seems that for their own political interests, opposition political parties prevented the creation of a new opposition party. Instead, these parties succeeded in extracting/benefitting from this element of “freshness” seen in the *Generación 2007*, and revitalise their own anti-Bolivarian political platform.

CONCLUSION

The *Generación 2007* student movement had a splash of success by challenging Chávez’s decision not to renew RCTV’s broadcasting licence at the end of May 2007, and contributed to the government’s first electoral defeat in December 2007. The student movement temporarily capitalised the significance of the government’s decision to close RCTV for Venezuelans from “all” social classes. Their opportunity to address the nation (live TV-radio coverage) from the parliament on 7 June 2007, gave students the perfect platform to raise their concerns about the next phase of the Bolivarian project and announce what they stood for. The type of discourse Douglas Barrios articulates in the parliament – e.g. “pluralism [...] not socialists, we are social beings. We are neoliberals, we are liberated beings [...] we are a proposition [...] we promote reconciliation [...] equality [...] optimism and modesty [...] humanists” and so on; provides us a glimpse of the student movement and what they offered vis-à-vis traditional opposition political parties.

The success of this movement was based on the “media” widely reporting student leaders coupled with their apolitical and nonviolence discourse in their *Manos Blancas* symbol. The three diverging interpretations of the student movement reveal a set of interesting viewpoints about this movement. Fieldwork research gave me the opportunity to observe and analyse this new anti-Bolivarian movement from a different perspective, analyse the validity of these three interpretations, hence point out in the critique section of this article why I disagree with these different versions of the movement. My main argument is that this movement had ample opportunities to expand, consolidate and challenge the Bolivarian project under a whole set of different circumstances after 2007. By conducting

fieldwork research, I learned that the movement seen and heard in the media only represented students from universities in Caracas. The popularity and success of this anti-Bolivarian student movement depended on key student leaders who quickly became celebrities – thanks to the continuous media attention they received.

It is worth mentioning that Ricardo Sánchez and Stalin Gonzáles, both *Generación 2007* student leaders, won seats in the September 2010 parliamentary elections, with the support of the anti-Bolivarian alliance MUD (Mesa de la Unidad Democrática). Yon Goicoechea, an influential *Generación 2007* leader opted not to stand as a candidate. Fabricio Briceño, also part of *Generación 2007* student leadership, a candidate of PPT (Patria Para Todos: a party that had defected the Bolivarian camp but decided not to join the opposition alliance) failed to win a parliamentary seat. Former *Generación 2007* student leaders politically competing as adversaries rather than enemies, following norms of political pluralism and a sense political respect and tolerance amongst each other; shows interesting possibilities for new political practices to emerge and potentially displace the dichotomic terrain Chávez and his political project have crystallised and reproduced since the 1990s.

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INTERVIEW

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