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Article

THE CONCEPTUAL POLITICS OF DEMOCRACY PROMOTION: THE VENEZUELA CASE

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Abstract

In 1970 Giovanni Sartori articulated what he saw as the greatest challenge to political science in an increasingly globalized world: decontextualized traveling of concepts. As a solution he proposed the use of a "conceptual ladder" to help inform the decisions scholars make regarding the concepts they wish "to travel". This paper seeks to push the boundaries of Sartori's critique beyond academia to include policy. To that end, it consists of three sections. The first employs a brief historiography of the conceptual debate between Schumpeterian and Dahlian definitions of democracy. The second evokes Venezuela's recent political history to illustrate how the United States government has, at different times, employed various definitions, and standards, of democracy to describe the Venezuelan regime. The third unpacks what this oscillation should imply moving forward for academics engaged in the conceptual politics of democracy; in sum, the instrumentalizing of the ambiguity of the concept—democracy—by oscillating between Schumpeterian and Dahlian standards devalues the concept for academics, policy makers and indeed citizens alike. We then echo Ish-Shalom's (2011) sentiment, that a concerted effort is required from the academy to establish a "criteria of reasonableness" for defining democracy (Ish-Shalom, 2011). This includes, and is especially dependent on, what these criteria might look like—although developing the criteria is beyond the modest scope of this paper, we conclude by suggesting that effort must include a valuation of democracy's normative essence.

Key Words

Conceptual politics; democracy; Venezuela; coup; United States; Hegemony

Introduction

In 1970 Giovanni Sartori articulated what he saw as the greatest challenge to political science in an increasingly globalized world: decontextualized traveling of concepts. As a solution he proposed the use of a "conceptual ladder" to help inform the decisions scholars make regarding the concepts they wish "to travel". This paper seeks to push the boundaries of Sartori's critique beyond academia to include policy. To that end, this paper consists of three sections. The first employs a brief historiography of the conceptual debate between Schumpeterian and Dahlian definitions of democracy. The second evokes Venezuela's recent political history to illustrate how the United States Government has, at different times, employed various definitions, and standards, of democracy to describe the Venezuelan regime. The third unpacks what this oscillation should

imply moving forward for academics engaged in the conceptual politics of democracy; in sum, the instrumentalizing of the ambiguity of the concept—democracy—by oscillating between Schumpeterian and Dahlian standards devalues the concept for academics, policy makers and indeed citizens alike. We then echo Ish-Shalom's (2011) sentiment, that a concerted effort is required from the academy to establish "a legitimate meaning" or "criteria of reasonableness" for democracy (Ish-Shalom, 2011). We finish by considering the difference between the type of Gramscian hegemony Ish-Shalom advocates for and the Baudrillardian hegemony of the policy community, one which has hitherto emptied the conceptual value of democracy by instrumentalizing its ambiguity. In other words, while the academy influences policy, scholars do not typically take into account the reverberative effects of their theories being employed as policy—and this is precisely the issue.

Schumpeter and Democratic Minimalism

Joseph Schumpeter is the father of modern democratic minimalism, the first of two major schools of thought to be addressed. He defined democracy a system which empowers those "who command more support than do any of the competing individuals or teams...[as] this seems to assure the standing of the majority system within the logic of the democratic method " (2003, 11). Democracy, in other words, was for him a procedural phenomenon. Indeed, he was highly critical of normative definitions or those which misconstrued democracy as an "institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realize the common good" (1954, 250). For such a will to exist, said Schumpeter, it must be preceded by a consensus among an entire nation over what "good" and "bad" entailed, a notion he describes as epistemologically flawed. People are bound to have different and even conflicting conceptions of "good" and "bad" because "questions of principle…cannot be reconciled by rational argument [or, because] ultimate values—our conceptions of what life and what society should be—are beyond the range of mere logic " (1954, 251). The will of individuals cannot be amalgamated into one common good will, therefore, because there is no centre toward which all individual wills could gravitate. Furthermore, he insisted, individual wills are themselves hardly political factors worthy of respect. For Schumpeter the individual's will is nothing more than an "indeterminate bundle of vague impulses loosely playing about given slogans and mistaken impression" (1954, 253). Even

> if the opinions and desires of individual citizens were perfectly definite and independent data for the democratic process to work with, and if everyone acted on them with ideal rationality and promptitude, it would not necessarily follow that the political decisions produced by that process from the raw material of those individual volitions would represent anything that could in any conceivable sense be called the will of the people (1954, 254).

He rejected the idea that the selection of the representatives in a democratic system should be made secondary to democratic arrangement itself and instead posited that only "role of the people is to produce a government…which in turn will produce a national executive or government" (1954, 269). Simply put, democracy is nothing more than an "institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (1954, 269). Schumpeter defended his conceptualization of democracy as being an improvement over the classical (i.e. normative) theory in two important ways.

First, his method provides a simple and efficient means of distinguishing democratic governments from non-democratic ones which is of great instrumental value for academics. Moreover, it includes the possibility for genuine group-wise volitions while actually specifying the exact role they play in the democratic method. That is, as political issues which political leaders can grasp and use to jockey for power within the system. Its again worth noting here Schumpeter's low estimation of the common will —"group-wise volitions" as he calls them—as useful only in so far as political leaders can manipulate them and even democracy itself. He restricted the "kind of competition for leadership which is to define democracy to free competition for a free vote", yes, but also contested that,

> though this excludes many ways of securing leadership which should be excluded, such as competition by military insurrection, it does not exclude the cases that are strikingly analogous to the economic phenomena we label 'unfair' or 'fraudulent' competition or restraint of competition. And we cannot exclude them because if we did we should be left with a completely unrealistic ideal. Between this ideal case which does not exist and the cases in which all competition with the established leader is prevented by force, there is a continuous range of variation within which the democratic method of government shades off into the autocratic one by imperceptible steps. But if we wish to understand and not to philosophize, this is as it should be (1954, 271).

Perhaps here we find the most striking and recurring characteristic of minimalist conceptualizations of democracy: the refusal to accept any possible rubric for democracy which venerates it beyond the grasp of crass proceduralism and collectible data. In addition, Schumpeter claimed, his theory clarified the relation of democracy and individual freedom. Since everyone must accordingly be free to vote and compete for political leadership, in a democracy "a considerable amount of freedom of discussion for all [is provided]...[and] in particular it will normally mean a considerable amount of freedom of the press [as well]" (1954, 272). A relation, however, which "is not absolutely stringent and can be tampered with (1954, 272)."

Second, and most importantly, for Schumpeter the distinction between his conception and a normative one as such lies not in the question of an underlying set of political rights—he explicitly recognizes they are necessary—but rather in that of the common will. He believed his

> theory shed much-needed light on an old controversy. Whoever accepts the classical doctrine of democracy and in consequence believes that the democratic method is to guarantee that issues be decided and policies framed according to the will of the people must be struck by the fact that, even if that will were undeniably real and definite, decisions by simple majorities would in many cases distort it rather than give effect to it. Evidently the will of the people is the will of the majority and not the will of the 'the people.' The latter is a mosaic that the former completely fails to 'represent.' To equate both by definition is not to solve the problem (1954, 272).

This articulates the essence of Schumpterian definitions of democracy—a strident denial of the common will as a characteristic of democracy. What binds the electorate together is instead its acceptance of election outcomes or acquiescence to a common leadership. Democracy's value is, in other words, the standing of the majority system within those societies which enjoy it, in which power is smoothly transferred to officials elected by a majority of voters (1954, 273).

Dahl and Democratic Maximalism

Though he is often cited (see for example Arend Lijphart 2011, Thomas Denk 2013 and Dawisson Belem Lopes 2016) as a proponent of Schumpeterian minimalism, Robert Dahl is clearly someone working with a maximal or qualitative definition of democracy. Much of the confusion has to do with his concept polyarchy. Dahl understood it to consist of eight procedural elements which best facilitate contestation and participation, or as the minimal requirement for democracy (2006, 67-71; see also Diamond 2003, 34). While his formulation of polyarchy ostensibly supports democratic minimalism, Dahl himself attempted to dissuade that interpretation. Polyarchy, he said, is an "inadequate, incomplete, primitive ordering of the common store of knowledge about democracy, [which] is formulated in the conviction that somewhere between chaos and tautology we shall be able...to construct a satisfactory theory about political equality" (Dahl 2003, 84). Democracy, for Dahl, is contingent on consensus within a given society regarding the conditions of polyarchy as achieving political equality; it is

> an expression of the common will for equality (Diamond 2003, 75-6). There are polyarchies and there is democracy; a polyarchy is a skeleton, a political system that employs procedures as a means of striving toward equality. Democracy is an ideal expression of common will in favour of that equality. And so, if the "theory of polyarchy is roughly sound, it follows that…in the absence of [social consensus]...no constitutional arrangements can produce a non-tyrannical republic" (Dahl 2003, 84). Thus, Dahl is advancing a maximal definition of democracy entirely concerned with common will that is distinct from his minimalist notion of polyarchy.

Indeed, Dahl's theoretical work is highly insistent on political equality as the necessary goal of democracy. Philosophically, equality is a highly contested and therefore problematic term—but within the scope of liberal democratic theory it stands on more solid ground. Within the cannon, political equality refers to an equal application of the law and an equal availability among the citizenry to the various power-changing and challenging mechanisms of democracy. For Dahl, it follows, quite clearly then, that democracy can be made possible only in situations of relative equality; where everyone has (more or less) the same social support and opportunity to voice their concerns and contribute to the shaping of the common will—to contribute their two cents. Within the logic of his conceptualization of democracy, then, political equality is indeed a reasonable and worthy goal because "a government unchecked by citizens who are free to discuss and oppose the policies of their leaders is more likely to blunder, sometimes disastrously, as modern authoritarian regimes have amply demonstrated" (Dahl 2006b, 5).

So, "if we conclude that political equality is desirable in governing a state...it almost goes without saying that the only political system for governing a state that derives its legitimacy and its political institutions from the idea of political equality is democracy." (2006b, 6). For Dahl, equality is not an auxiliary component to the "good life" that can only be loosely associated with democracy (as per Pzerworski, Lipset et. al.) but actually forms the very foundation of its legitimacy. Dahl believes that in order to assess which institutions are most vital for democracy we must begin with the concept of this ideal form of democracy. An ideal conception of democracy is necessary to compare our reality against; otherwise attempts at classification will become tautological. Dahl argues that a "description of an 'ideal' system can serve two different but entirely compatible purposes" (2006b, 7). First, as previously mentioned, it can help assist political scientists in answering empirical and scientific questions concerning democracy. Second, it can help us make moral judgements by providing an ideal end or goal.

Empirically, the "function of an ideal system is to describe the characteristics or operation of that system under a set of perfect [ideal] conditions" (2006b, 7). This method is most often used in the hard sciences, like physics for example, where "[i]t is not uncommon... to formulate hypotheses concerning the behaviour of an object or force under ideal conditions that cannot be perfectly attained in actual experiments but that can be satisfactorily approximated" (2006b, 7). Accordingly, while an ideal democracy may not be achievable it must be used as a standard to which all democracies should aspire and also one which can be used to measure the value of current democratic systems (2006b, 8). For Dahl, the inexpressible nature of concepts like political equality and common will are signifiers of democracy's potential as opposed to a procedural encumbrance. While Dahl recognizes the importance of political institutions in democratic systems, he does not believe that they are "sufficient to achieve anything like perfect or ideal democracy" (2006b, 10).

For Dahl, "if we simply assume that beliefs about equality are always hopelessly anaemic contestants in the struggle against the powerful forces that generate inequalities, we could not possibly account for the enormous gains [in] human equality over the past two centuries" (2006b, 24) . He is careful to distinguish what ought to be from what is. He does not argue that to be a

democracy a country must be perfectly equal. Instead, Dahl is arguing that democracies must continually strive for greater political equality, which indeed can be facilitated by political institutions. As such, Dahl (2006a, 83) is adamant that the sole existence of democratic institutions, absent ongoing advancement of political equality as measured by ideal democracy, will only result in the reinforcement of existing inequalities and the production of "tyrannical" governments.

Defining Democracy and Why?

There are any number of academics who are engaged in the definitional debate regarding democracy—but for the most part they can be divided into minimalist and maximalist schools of thought. But why and how do they make that choice? For most the choice is an instrumental one; it depends on the scope and aim of your project. In other words, scholars are often tempted to let their research question decide for them. In this vein, David Collier and James E. Mahon adopt Sartori's "ladder of generality" as a mechanism for rationally choosing between the definitional approaches. Based on the idea of extension (the set of entities in the world to which a concept refers) and intension (the set of meanings or attributes that define the category and determine membership), they explain:

> In a taxanomic hierarchy, these more specific and more general categories occupy subordinate and superordinate positions, with the extension of the subordinate categories contained inside the superordinate ones. The hierarchy represented by these sets of terms can be called, adapting Sartori's label, a 'ladder of generality'(Collier and Mahone 1993, 846).

With their ladder of generality, Collier and Mahon provide a useful tool for academics to fulfill the requirements of their given research task while averting the dangers of conceptual stretching by allowing their research question to guide definitional choices. Although there are serious consequences to each definition, the choice between the two is widely held as dependent, or instrumental. This is but one example, but it appears to be representative of the broader use of democracy in political science. The concept is deemed flexible, entirely malleable to the needs of a given scholar pursuing a particular project. If she requires a large-N, she simply climbs down the ladder of generality, increasing extension and limiting intension. On the other hand, if a case study is being conducted perhaps it would be more useful to her to maximize intension—in that case she had better climb up the ladder of generality.

The proceeding, and second section of this paper will establish that it is not only academics who partake in these pragmatics but that the policy community is even more predisposed to doing so. It is the primary motive of this paper to illustrate how such pragmatics "overstretch" and devalue the concept of democracy. The next section will focus on two seminal events in the conceptual politics of democracy promotion in Venezuela. In essence, the remainder of this paper will establish

how the United States' involvement with Venezuelan democracy, emblematic of a larger, global initiative, has-- so to speak-- lessened its purchase. It will illustrate, in turn, why academics would do well to stay abreast of the effects of ad-hoc oscillation between minimal and maximal definitions of democracy.

U.S.-Venezuela Relations

Policy makers in the US evidently have their very own ladders of generality. Especially it seems when it comes to the promotion of democracy in Venezuela. The article employs a "most similar systems" design through a case study of Venezuela focusing on two incidents: 1) the 1989 Caracas riots and 2) the 2002 coup d'état and the differing US response to both. In both circumstances riots broke out over dissatisfaction with the president and his policies, resulting in the army opening fire on citizens. The only major variance, within the scope of this paper, is the US response to these events. In 1989, when the coup was directed against a friendly face in Carlos Andres Perez, it was essentially Schumpeterian. On the other hand, in 2002, the White House argued that the popular outrage, the common will, of the Venezuelan people justified the coup against Chavez. The Venezuelan case study is moreover ideal as the events took place only 12 years apart, both times under a Republican presidency—those of Presidents George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush. The symmetry of the events allows for most of the variables to be held constant while assessing the possible causes of the variance in official US responses to the riots. Though this is an in-depth case study, we are confident that the latest US-Venezuelan stand-off does not contradict its findings. Does Maduro share in the blame over the nation's heart wrenching collapse? Absolutely. Has he lived up to the lofty ideals of the Bolivarian revolution? Absolutely not. Be that as it may, the U.S. support of National Assembly leader Juan Guaido is certainly opportunistic. As we will see, when in 1989 Venezuelans mobilized *en masse* against the rise in prices over fuel and food the U.S. backed the president to the hilt. It seems, in other words, that the "common will" of the Venezuelan people is of relevance only when it lines up with US foreign policy.

El Caracazo, 1989

Carlos Andres Perez was elected to his second, non-consecutive, term as president on December 4, 1988 with 53% of the vote. His re-election was largely due to residual popularity from his first term (1974-79) during the oil bonanza when Venezuela's oil revenues quadrupled. During his first stint as President, Perez relied on the oil export income "to expand the state and to provide employment and state subsidies, thus contributing to improved socioeconomic conditions" (Lalander 2010, 129). The economic situation in 1988, on the other hand, was decidedly less rosey.

Venezuela was then "on the verge of bankruptcy, after a decade of deepening economic crisis with social and political repercussions" (Lalander, 129). Perez's resurgent political support was a consequence of his anti-Washington Consensus stance, blamed as it was by the majority of

Venezuelans for the turmoil of the 1980s. While on the campaign trail Perez repeatedly "denounced International Monetary Fund policies as 'the bomb that only kills people'" (Kozloff 2006, 43). It is an understatement, then, to suggest that Venezuelans were disappointed with the President's radical economic policy shift announced in February 1989 (Lalander, 29). Perez on that day announced an austerity package in accordance with IMF and World Bank guidelines requiring the "elimination of welfare programs, subsidies, and price and wage regulations" (Kozloff, 43). When the price of fuel doubled Caracas mobilized (Kozloff, 43).

The subsequent events of February 27 and 28 of 1989 are known in Venezuela as *el Caracazo* ('the big one' in Caracas), when violent protests broke out over the deregulation of goods. Perez responded by calling a state of emergency (rescinding basic rights and liberties in the process) and charging the police and military with bringing an end to the disturbance. Police opened fire on protestors leaving an official death toll of 277 and unofficial tolls in the thousands (Cannon 2009, 37). According to Major Franciso Arias Cardenas, who was on the ground at the time, the President instructed the police to restore order at "whatever cost" (Derham 2010, 255). Captain Luis Rafael Valderrama, also present for the riots, characterized the events as "assassinations directed by the insensitive hand of [a] tyrant" (Derham, 255). He also spoke of "his shock at the scale of the terrifying massacre that his comrades in arms had been ordered to carry out against their own people" (Derham, 255). Major Cardenas recalls relieving an officer who ordered his men to fire upon unarmed civilians (Derham, 255).

Moreover, Perez "suspended the individual rights to liberty and security, the inviolability of the home, free transit, freedom of expression…the right to gather publicly and privately…[and] the political right to peaceful protest" with the executive Decree #49 on February 28th and did not fully restore these rights until March 22, 1989 (Crisp 1998, 157). Having had such serious reverberations politically and socially, *el Caracazo* marks a watershed moment in recent Venezuelan history. The reaction of Perez to the riots initiated the process of political radicalization of the *barrios*, leading to rise of Hugo Chavez, who attempted to overthrow Perez in 1992.

White House Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater responded to the events in 1989 by reiterating "U.S. support for [Venezuela's] democracy and for President Perez's courageous and determined efforts to address his country's economic and financial situation" (*Reuters* 4 March 1989). Vice President Dan Quayle, speaking to Reuters on behalf of the White House, also commented that he did not "believe that we should or are going to change our desire to see rather significant economic adjustments" (*Reuters* 4 March 1989). These comments were made after Perez suspended the Constitution, assumed massive executive powers, and violently suppressing riots by personally ordering the military to fire on civilians. Therefore, in reiterating his support for Venezuelan democracy, in the wake of *el Cracazo*, President Bush invoked a (most) minimal definition of democracy: since Perez was elected democratically his violent response to the protest, while unfortunate, was somehow beyond rebuke.

The White House put its money where its mouth was, with Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady responding to the crisis with a proposal for a sweeping emergency debt relief plan (*Manilla*

Standard 11 March 1989, 22). The ensuing "Brady Plan" offered Latin American countries the opportunity to swap their debt for Brady Bonds—"which were actually securities backed in part by collateral put up by the IMF and World Bank" (Pesek 1999, 22-24). In that sense, the Brady Plan was a clear successor of the Baker Plan. The previous Secretary of the Treasury Baker had proposed to give high debt countries "new access to medium-term new loans, in addition to rolling over of amortization of old loans...in return for economic reforms," such as decentralization (van Wijnbergen, Mervyn and Richard 1991, 14). Rather than rebuke him for his response to the protests, Perez was rewarded for complying with the Washington Consensus.

As such, it is fair to assess US response to *el Caracazo* as supportive of Perez and therefore indicative of a minimalist conception of democracy. Recall, before Marlin Fitzwater announced President Bush's support for "President Perez's courageous and determined efforts to address his country's economic and financial situation" he reiterated the administration's support for "democracy in Venezuela" (*Reuters* 4 March 1989). This phrase is telling as it invokes Perez' free and fair election as insulation from US criticism regarding his handling of protestors. This is a most stark minimalism—the electoral procedures had not been abused and remained intact, anything not covered by those procedures is not indicative of the democratic-ness of Venezuela; not even *el Carcazo*. The deaths of the protestors were therefore not going to deter President Bush from reiterating his support for CAP and Venezuelan democracy.

2002 Coup d'état attempt

During the 2002 coup, on the other hand, the US State Department immediately recognized the new regime of Pedro Carmona, president of Venezuela's largest business organization, at the expense of a deposed Chavez, arguing that the latter had abdicated his right to rule by ordering police forces to fire on protesters caught in an altercation with *Chavistas* (pro-Chavez demonstrators). Press Secretary Ari Fleischer announced that the White House believed "the [Venezuelan] government suppressed what was a peaceful demonstration of the people" and that the US government "looked forward to working with democratic forces to 'restore the essential elements of democracy'" (*Reuters* 12 April 2002). As is well known, Chavez was an outspoken critic of American economic and foreign policy and, as mentioned previously, had made a name for himself by attempting to depose President Perez in 1992. His notoriety was such that following his release from prison he remained popular enough to secure the Venezuelan presidency.

The Bolivarian Chavez quickly made enemies at home and abroad. Domestically, Chavez made a great number among Venezuela's business class by refusing to appoint its members to key cabinet positions, a time-honoured institution of Venezuelan democracy. Internationally, the tensions between Chavez and the US revolved around his challenging of the Washington Consensus. He was vehemently opposed to the neoliberal agenda, particularly the Free Trade Area of the Americas agreement, as well as being a vocal critic of the war in Afghanistan (Kozloff 2006, 66-7). Furthermore, Chavez' insistence on providing Cuba with Venezuelan oil circumvented

American embargos. Most egregiously, one of the first initiatives undertaken by Chavez was the nationalization of Petróleos de Venezuela S.A—Venezuela's state oil company. Given that Venezuela was both the world's fifth largest oil exporter and the fourth largest supplier to the US, this was deemed direct threat to US energy security interests.

According to Michael Derham (2010, 261, 265; see also Eva Gollinger 2007), the failed coup attempt on April 11, 2002, was indeed backed and funded by the US government. Derham (2010, 261, 265) cites forensic evidence that suggests the coup, including the death of the protestors—which created the foundation for supporting the coup along maximally democratic lines—was "supported, financed and incited by the US...[as a] culmination of prolonged criticism of the Chavez government." The mutual distaste for Chavez that Washington shared with Venezuela's business elites possibly provided a backbone for their alliance and the coup attempt. Venezuelan multibillionaire Gustavo Cisneros forged strong ties to the Bush family after Chavez' successful bid for presidency in 1999. That year he met with then Governor of Texas George Bush and subsequently invited his father, President George H.W. Bush, to Venezuela for a fishing trip (Kozloff 2006, 68).

Moreover, on the eve of the coup important Venezuelan politicians, business figures, and the U.S. Ambassador had congregated in Cisneros' mansion. Allegedly, a second meeting occurred that evening at Cisneros' office at Venvision (the TV station which he owned) between the coup leaders, including Pedro Carmona who was slated as Chavez' replacement. Further US ties to the coup include the involvement of Otto Reich, assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere Affairs who allegedly met regularly at the White House with Pedro Carmona, as well as other coup plotters (Kozloff 2006, 68). One of the key cogs in creating the circumstances necessary for both the coup and the US reversal in policy was the Venezuelan media, particularly Cisneros' Venvision. Its coverage heavily evoked the rhetorical and moral authority of a common will.

The documentary *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Inside the Chavez Coup* (Donnacho O. Briain, 2003) made explicit the role of the private media in both creating the necessary preconditions for and the post hoc justification of the coup. Venvision substituted its regular programming for nonstop anti-Chavez propaganda for days leading up to the attempted coup, calling for protestors to take to the street and demonstrate against the centralization of the PdSVA which was conveyed as an attack on the prosperity of the nation. On April 10 Carmona called for an opposition march to its headquarters. The next day thousands of Chavistas rallied outside the presidential palace to showcase their solidarity with their leader. Meanwhile, at the PdSVA, the opposition leaders decided against Venezuelan law to reroute the protest to the palace. State television pleaded with the opposition not to reroute the march for fear the two sides would clash, clearly wary of the fact that one in four Venezuelan's are armed. Nevertheless, the opposition march arrived at the palace at 2pm, a short while before the first shots were fired.

The directors interviewed Andres Izarra, who was the head of news production at a prominent Venezuelan private TV channel, after the fact. He confessed to using a camera positioned opposite a bridge upon which Chavez supporters were seen shooting to insinuate that the Chavistas were behind the assassinations and acting under Chavez' orders. The filmmakers

show the opposite angle of the very same shot, which clearly reveals that the street below the bridge was in fact empty. Indeed, Derham (2010, 265) charged "Cisneros, [with] film[ing] and produc[ing] the whole coup, faking it so it appeared the shooting was done by Chavistas, when in reality forensic and video evidence showed they were defending themselves against the [opposition backed] metropolitan police and snipers." The opposition nevertheless capitalized on the momentum gained by such footage and demanded that Chavez step down and take responsibility for the massacre of 19 civilians.

The presidential palace was subsequently surrounded by tanks and at 10pm members of the military high command arrived at the palace to demand Chavez' resignation. Initially he refused but the generals threatened to bomb the palace if his "indignation" continued. At 3:30am Chavez agreed to hand himself over to prevent that from happening but refused to resign. The next day private TV channels continued their assault on Chavez; "Venvision was doing its best to legitimate the new Carmona regime in the public eye...[t]he network did not cover pro-Chavez protests calling for the president's reinstatement" (Kozloff 2006, 69). The White House in turn swiftly announced its support of an unconstitutional government headed by Carmona (*Reuters* 12 April 2002).

The White House indeed refused to acknowledge Chavez' forced resignation as a coup. Jason Webb (*Reuters* 13 April 2002) reported that:

> [the] United States, which had long been irritated by Chavez's friendship with Cuba and worried about his control of the world's fourth-largest oil-exporting nation, has said that it does not consider his overthrow a coup. Instead it blames his government for triggering its own downfall by ordering gunmen to fire on…protest[ors].

Press Secretary Ari Fleischer announced that the White House believed "the [Venezuelan] government suppressed what was a peaceful demonstration of the people" and that the US government "looked forward to working with democratic forces to 'restore the essential elements of democracy'"(*Reuters* 12 April 2002). State department spokesman Philip Reeker had similar sentiments, calling for the "essential elements of democracy, which have been weakened in recent months, [to] be restored fully" (*Reuters* 12 April 2002). An unnamed senior U.S. official also commented, arguing that it:

> …[w]as not just the military but virtually every sector of Venezuelan society [which] had mobilized against Chavez, the middle class, the media, the military and the police. *This was widespread. This was the Venezuelan people rising up for the protection of democracy* (emphasis added) (*Reuters* 12 April 2002).

Interestingly, had the U.S. government labelled the transition as a coup, they would have been required to act and restore Chavez according to the Organization of American States' Democracy

Charter, which was ratified and strongly supported by the United States (*Reuters* 12 April 2002). But there are more pressing reasons for their refusal to call a coup a coup, ones which also explain the extreme variation between responses in 1989 and 2002. The Carmona government immediately re-established ties with the IMF which in turn hastily recognizing Carmona as president. Thomas Dawson, the IMF's director, expressed his concern for Venezuela by pledging that "[w]e [at the IMF] are ready to help the new government as far as their immediate needs are concerned" (in Kozloff 2006, 69).

The opposition used the discourse surrounding the death of the 19 protestors as pretext to oust the Chavez government. This discourse was influenced by maximal definitions of democracy—one which emphasizes expressions of common over procedural norms. The protest was accordingly an expression of Venezuelan will against Chavez who, due to the death of 19 civilians, must resign. Ironically, the Pedro Carmona government quickly proved brutal itself. Though it only lasted from 11-14 of April, it "committed various human rights abuses including extra-judicial killing, unauthorized detentions and torture. In the following days, seventy-three more people lost their lives before the restoration of Chavez to the government" (Cannon 2009, 125). Paradoxically, the Carmona government relied on the discourse of human rights as a:

> [c]entral discursive pillar...the [Chavez] opposition, with many allies in the international community, is constantly and actively vigilant in identifying, publicizing and repudiating any human rights violations on the part of the national government. It does not, however, highlight those cases that have been the responsibility of anti-government elements, and immediately blames the government for all victims without hesitation (Cannon 2009, 125).

The Carmona dictatorship, then, used the media to create:

> …a climate of intolerance and instability through non-stop broadcasts of opposition mobilization and incessant negative commentaries on the behaviour and personality of President Chavez and his government with...little regard for veracity…[moreover] Carmona...closed community radio stations, arresting and torturing some of their workers (Cannon 2009, 125).

In a dramatic reversal from the US response to the 1989 riots, the common will which supposedly carried Carmona to the presidency, also provided him with necessary democratic cache to upend the Constitution, and other procedures of Venezuelan democracy. The Carmona government, in turn, wasted no time in dissolving the National Assembly, the Supreme Court, dismissing the Attorney General, the head of the Central Bank, the Ombudsman, and the National Electoral Board. While Chavez was reinstated as president on April 14, the US' response to the failed coup and brief Carmona dictatorship provides a telling contrast to the US response to *el Caracazo*. The third and final section of this essay will illustrate how the different US responses to these events has

overstretched the concept of democracy and that consideration of this overstretching should be rolled into academic conceptualizations of democracy.

Implications

The US response to *el Caracazo* should be seen as supportive of democratic minimalism; Perez's election via free and fair elections provided the pretext necessary to justify his brutal repression of popular outrage. Again, it was in the interest of the US to support Perez's presidency, because of his willingness to accept the Washington Consensus. This is the quality which prompted President Bush to "reiterate…U.S. support for [Venezuela's] democracy and for President Perez's courageous and determined efforts to address his country's economic and financial situation" (*Reuters* 4 March 1989).

On the other hand, Chavez was a vocal critic of American neo-liberal economics and proponent of the centralization of the PdSVA. His criticism prompted the Venezuelan business elites (likely in conjunction with the US), to plan and stage a coup to replace him with Pedro Carmona. In order to accomplish this feat, they first had to create the necessary preconditions which were informed in turn by maximal definitions of democracy. Although Chavez was also elected freely and fairly, the murder of 19 by the opposition (at least initially) validated their demands for his resignation. In this scenario, the procedures involved in Chavez' elections were inconsequential—what was deemed important was his actions, his alleged murder of 19 civilians as signifying a grievous disappointment of the common will.

Again, we must appreciate Press Secretary Ari Fleischer's language in his announcement that "the [Venezuelan] government suppressed what was a peaceful demonstration of the people" and that the US government "looked forward to working with democratic forces to 'restore the essential elements of democracy'" (*Reuters* 12 April 2002). Fleischer framed the situation in maximally democratic terms—the people, as opposed to some people, invokes notions of common will in turn reinforced by the anonymous senior U.S. official who suggested "virtually every sector of Venezuelan society had mobilized against Chavez, the middle class, the media, the military and the police…[t]his was the Venezuelan people rising up for the protection of democracy" (*Reuters* 12 April 2002). The Chavez government therefore "trigger[ed] its own downfall by ordering gunmen to fire on…protest[ors]" (*Reuters* 13 April 2002). Therefore, although Chavez was elected freely and fairly, he had abdicated his right to rule by allegedly ordering state forces to fire on citizens.

In a February 2019 speech given under similar circumstances at a convocation centre in Miami Florida, President Trump spoke out against the Maduro Government by invoking the common will of the Venezuelan people. "The Venezuelan people", he said, "have spoken, and the world has heard their beautiful voice. They are turning the page on socialism, turning the page on dictatorship, and there will be no going back. Peace-loving nations are ready to help Venezuela reclaim its democracy, its dignity, and its destiny" (White House Briefing, 2019; Remarks by

President Trump to the Venezuelan American Community). His remarks have been echoed by Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Kimberly Breier, Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. In addition, on June 5, 2018, the Organization of American States (OAS) passed a resolution sponsored by the U.S. to suspend Venezuela from the organization "for violating the hemisphere's democratic principles (US State Department)." Again, we are not coming to Maduro's defense so much as pointing out the hollowness with which such remarks ring given the OAS' long history as a US tool for both regime change and support of "friendly dictatorships…produc[ing] stability and predictability" (Herz 2011, 13).

Hitherto, this paper has chiefly been concerned with explaining the oscillation between minimal and maximal definitions of democracy through two different lenses, that of the academic and policy communities. However, it is crucial to understand that these categories are not really separate—that they permeate each other. For these reasons the remainder of the paper will illustrate why academics should care about the conceptual politics of Venezuelan democracy promotion. Democracy, as a concept, has been over-stretched; a process which is degrading the concept, making it ineffectual.

It is worth re-examining the comments of the senior US officials during *el Caracazo* and the 2002 coup one final time, through a maximalist perspective. Recall, in 1989 President Perez suspended the constitution, along with all of Venezuelan's fundamental rights, and personally ordered the military to open fire on peaceful protestors resulting in a death toll of at least a several hundred, but likely closer to several thousands. How did the Bush administration respond? By having Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater reiterate "U.S. support for [Venezuela's] democracy and for President Perez's courageous and determined efforts to address his country's economic and financial situation" (*Reuters* 4 March 1989).

Again, Marlin Fitzwater evoked democracy as a rationale for venerating President Perez's ordered killings of peaceful protestors as a courageous and determined effort at alleviating Venezuela's economic ills. Vice President Dan Quayle's arguments were even more straightforward, openly stating that the events of *el Caracazo* would "not change our desire to see rather significant economic adjustments" (*Reuters* 4 March 1989). What *el Caracazo* illustrates then, is a Global Order which revolves around a concept of democracy devoid of basic human rights, like that to life, which Perez not only violated but was later rewarded for doing so.

It is under that backdrop that we can best appreciate the magnitude of the White House's policy about-face in 2002 when the US implacably blamed the Chavez regime for its own downfall. Chavez deserved to be deposed in favour of Carmona because he ordered gunmen to fire on protestors (*Reuters* 13 April 2002). This was the rationale given for the White House's immediate announcement of support for the illegal and violent transition from a democratically elected Chavez to a transitional government headed by Carmona (*Reuters* 12 April 2002). Ari Fleischer's announcement that the US government "looked forward to working with democratic forces to 'restore the essential elements of democracy' is particularly jarring in this context" (*Reuters* 12 April 2002). Democracy appears to mean anything the White House wants it to—or as French

philosopher Jean Baudrillard (2010) put it, when all signs are emptied of their meaning, power only refers to itself.

This is why academics have to appreciate that they occupy a crucial and central role in these processes of hegemony which Piki Ish-Shalom (2011) explains through his invocation of Gramsci. For Gramsci, says Ish-Shalom (2011, 40), hegemony is the control of the public common-sense as "an essential apparatus for constructing social knowledge and social reality." The ability to frame public common-sense allows for shaping "the repertoire of public actions that people hold to be possible, legitimate, and effective" (2011, 40). At an absolute minimum, the academic community is a role player in the shaping of this common-sense—and this is particularly true when it comes to democracy.

Again, the definitional debate over democracy is not just academic; it is simultaneously academic and public, for the academy is, at least, partially responsible for shaping the public common-sense. Here it becomes useful to draw upon Baudrillard's differentiation between domination and hegemony. Gramscian hegemony is a constructive force, while Baudrillard's is a hegemonic one. Gramsci is speaking of simulation (culture, democracy etc.) and Baudrillard simulacra (the emptying reference of power to itself). How to mediate between the two? By ignoring the conceptual politics of democracy on the policy side, academics have expedited the process of emptying democracy of its substance. Again, this is not the result of a lack of agreement on the concept. Rather, the conceptual value of democracy has been emptied due to a lack of attention paid to the instrumentalization of that ambiguity, by the process of Baudrillardian hegemony. The relationship is not currently dynamic, but unilateral. While the academy influences policy, scholars do not typically take into account the reverberative effects of their theories being employed as policy—and this is precisely the issue. For these reasons Ish-Shalom (2011, 42) introduces a call for "Hambermasian-inspired responsibility for changing how present-day politics is practiced. This is a social responsibility that all theorists bear…"

In particular Ish-Shalom (2011, 43) is calling for a return to pluralism, and a push away from relativism, for relativism is the "sidestepping of moral judgment necessitated by the fact of contested-ness." Pluralism is the method by which Ish-Shalom (2011, 43) argues academics can recognize,

> [t]he existence of a variety of legitimate meanings, and accept them within the limits established by the criteria of reasonableness…pluralism is retained only when one does not discard…the[ir] ethical responsibility of having to morally evaluate different meanings.

This is the role of academics going forward. There must be a concerted effort exerted by the academy for the establishment of such a criteria of reasonableness. This includes, and is especially dependent on, what these criteria might look like; unfortunately, beyond the scope of this paper. Pressed on the issue, a potential starting point would be to place a higher priority on the truth-value of a definition of democracy. Such a definition would pay attention to the inherently

normative essence of the concept, as opposed to the use-value that definition has for academics. Under this approach, when we study democracy, the final aim would not be an instrumental link between definition and publication, but rather a more holistic understanding of the popular or common will surrounding democracy—what it means, and why.

In conclusion, through the Venezuelan case study, this paper has contributed to the process of establishing a "criteria of reasonableness" in several ways. First, it has illustrated how the policy community in Washington has manipulated and politicized the ambiguity of democracy—and in doing so has accelerated the process of emptying democracy, as a sign—for its use as a (Baudrillardian) hegemonic form. For those engaged in theorizing about democracy, we must be cognizant of how the policy community is itself changing what democracy means. In other words, the academy does not enjoy exclusive influence over the shaping of the common-sense, and so our arguments over democracy are growing increasingly moot as we fail to address not only the role of the policy community in shaping the common-sense regarding democracy, but also the common-sense's reaction to these policies.

Second, the paper has established that the academic community needs to engage in the sort of reflexive hermeneutics which can help engender a value reference point for our debate regarding democracy and an understanding of the (potentially latent) ability scholarship has, again, to shape the "repertoire of public actions that people hold to be possible, legitimate, and effective (Ish-Shalom 2011, 40)." It is well understood that the academic and policy communities both influence the common-sense, but the academy must realize that government policy is co-opting the necessarily ambiguous space of debate and essentially weaponizing it. In so doing, government policy is changing the nature of the debate by devaluing the role of academic participation in crafting the common-sense.

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