



Culture and Democracy in Post-Revolutionary Mexico and Bolivarian Venezuela

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The relationship between culture and democracy is rarely considered in a long-established and largely unquestioned democracy like that of the United States. It is assumed that a democratic government guarantees freedom of expression; thus, the nature of culture's association with democracy is often left unchallenged except under circumstances of censorship or situations that would appear to conflict with civil rights. Otherwise, culture runs its course separate from the mechanisms of government.

Communities undergoing social transformations offer the opportunity to probe our assumptions on how democracy should address culture. The establishment of new structures of government more often than not brings changes to the cultural sphere. In the paragraphs that follow, I will look comparatively at two situations – one past, one present – that have radically reconsidered the relationship between culture and democracy: the post-revolutionary period in Mexico during the 1920s and the Bolivarian Revolution in contemporary Venezuela.¹

The Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) created a deep level of social consciousness in the country's citizenry. The Constitution of 1917 approached "democracy not only as a legal structure and a political regimen, but as a system of life founded on a constant economic, social, and *cultural* betterment of the people."² The belief that culture was a right guaranteed by law drove certain intellectuals and artists of the post-revolutionary period to envision ways for art to be universal, although the interpretation of this concept varied widely. José Vasconcelos, Minister of Education from 1921 to 1924, who launched the mural movement and set up a program of Cultural Missions to spread education and culture to even the most remote areas of Mexico, was an aesthete dedicated to the Western canon. As part of his mandate, he distributed cheap copies of classical texts to the poor, oversaw the construction of a stadium inspired in part by Greek and Roman models, and set up a network of libraries throughout the country. Other artists, such as Gabriel Fernández Ledesma, promoted folk traditions as the most relevant expressions of art in Mexico and those most likely to reach a wide audience. He and a group of contemporaries were leading advocates for alternative centers of art education – such as the Open Air Schools of Painting and Popular Painting Centers – aimed to take artistic instruction to all sectors of the population, from the rural peasantry to urban workers. Another approach to democratizing culture was in combining art and political activism, as practiced by Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Tina Modotti, and the

¹ There is a long-standing debate on whether the current situation in Venezuela deserves to be called a revolution. My aim is not to challenge semantics but rather to compare two moments of political change and social transformation.

² "Constitution of Mexico," Title 1, Chapter 1, Article 3. Emphasis added. Reprinted in <http://www.ilstu.edu/class/hist263/docs/1917const.html>. Accessed July 24, 2008.



artists affiliated with the Popular Graphics' Workshop. These artists, believing the post-revolutionary government did not go far enough in instilling radical social change, were vehement proponents of the communist cause and assimilated Marxist ideals into their art and activities.

Post-revolutionary Mexican artists and intellectuals thus set forth a variety of proposals on how best to integrate art and democracy. Despite their good intentions, one of their major hurdles was that a small elite group presumed to stand for the majority. For example, peasants and urban workers were very often the subjects of modern Mexican art but, except in isolated cases, did not have the opportunity to speak for themselves and even less to become significant contributors to official culture. Their reactions to seeing themselves depicted in numerous murals, paintings, and prints (if they ever actually saw them) are rarely documented, and over time, the socially conscious aesthetics that drove post-revolutionary Mexican art became dismissed as irrelevant to achieving significant social change.

Enter Venezuelan art in the late 1950s. After decades in which social realism was the predominant aesthetic in Latin America, Venezuela, along with Brazil and Argentina, adopted geometric abstraction as the standard bearer for a new art. Relying on kinetic and optical effects, artists began to produce environments and public works that addressed common sensory experiences in non-hierarchical ways. Although their formal explorations followed personal trajectories, they were united in their belief that contrary to figuration, geometry could be a universal – and consequently more egalitarian – visual language. Eventually, it became clear that this perspective was also flawed, as geometric abstraction became associated with corporate aesthetics and remained very much an elite taste and sensibility. For the influential art critic Marta Traba, kinetic art in Venezuela was emblematic of the government's disregard for the deep-rooted social problems she witnessed there.

After decades of corruption and worsening social conditions, Hugo Chávez was elected president of Venezuela in 1998 and immediately proceeded to transform the country's entire political, communal, and cultural structure. He has promoted a system of government based on participatory democracy, which aims to put decision-making power directly in the hands of the people. To this end, numerous grass-roots organizations have emerged for citizens to engage in public debates in community forums and to take a more active role in their governance, including how culture might affect their lives.

The 1999 Bolivarian Constitution addresses culture in the following manner: "Cultural values are the unrenounceable property of the Venezuelan people and a fundamental right to be encouraged and guaranteed by the State, efforts being made to provide the necessary conditions, legal instruments, means and funding."³ Like in the Mexican

³ "Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela," Title III, Chapter 4, Article 99. Reprinted in http://www.embavenez-us.org/constitution/title_III.htm. Accessed on July 24, 2008.



constitution, culture here is regarded as the right of each citizen, but circumstances are markedly different. In Mexico, the immediate post-revolutionary period witnessed a cultural renaissance that encompassed not just the visual arts, but also music, theater, and literature. A similar movement has yet to occur in Venezuela, perhaps because of the deep-rooted opposition to the Chávez government by many cultural producers.⁴ Whereas in Mexico, the changes promised by the Revolution – land redistribution, universal suffrage, free access to education – were generally accepted by the majority of the population, Chávez’s new policies have encountered resistance every step of the way. It is safe to say that, with some exceptions, the established art world is not on board with his project.

How participatory democracy can be exercised in the public cultural sphere is still a work in progress. The first two years of Chávez’s presidency were relatively uneventful (except for perpetual budget shortages) for public art institutions in Venezuela. In 2001, however, he dismissed a number of cultural officials, including Sofía Imber, founder and director of the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Caracas Sofía Imber (her name has since then been removed from the title), a decision which sent ripples through the artistic community. Well-publicized vandalisms of public sculptures further discredited Chávez’s attitude toward culture in the eyes of the opposition. Since then, however, his government has played a more active role in cultural promotion and the protection of artistic patrimony. Ironically, it has championed geometric abstraction, despite its associations with the old order, as a major achievement in Venezuelan art.

Two recent efforts on the government’s part have been the establishment of the National Museums Foundation (Fundación Museos Nacionales), which centralizes the operations of the country’s thirteen public museums, and the development of the Misión Cultura, whose main objective is to preserve Venezuelan popular cultures and promote the development of a clearly articulated national identity. These institutions, both housed in the Ministry for the Popular Power of Culture (Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Cultura), call attention to the difficulty of coherently defining culture in Bolivarian Venezuela. Museums, in particular, are undergoing an identity crisis. In an effort to make their operations congruent with the goal of participatory democracy, the government has hosted several public forums to discuss the future of museums. These are generally attended by ardent Chávez supporters with little to no experience in cultural affairs who agree that before he came to power, museums were alienating and unwelcoming. For the most part, they want these institutions, regardless of their focus, to reflect the experiences of their neighboring communities. Though having significantly expanded their programming to address such concerns, museums still retain a deeply hierarchical structure, both in terms of the organization of their employees and in their adherence to artistic canons. It is difficult to see how they could actually function in a truly participatory way.

⁴ A notable exception is the Simón Bolívar Youth Symphony Orchestra, directed by José Antonio Abreu, which has garnered worldwide acclaim.



The Misión Cultura has a greater potential to achieve significant cultural changes and reach a wider public. It consists of a program of study, at the undergraduate and graduate levels, in cultural promotion and development whose aim is to “motivate community participation, guarantee massive access to culture, [and] impel the dissemination and creation of cultural manifestations by the popular and community sectors.”⁵ It is more likely that such a program will be able to reconcile the goals of participatory democracy and cultural access that have proven elusive in the museum realm.

Mexican artists of the post-revolutionary period made significant contributions to the history of art through their integration of formal innovation and social commitment. Though they were less effective in democratizing culture, whether by challenging canonical structures or erasing the boundaries between “high” and “low” art, their efforts did guarantee the preservation of folk arts and traditions. Culture in Bolivarian Venezuela has followed a different trajectory. So far, there has been no artistic renaissance, but perhaps this will prevent the cult of the individual that often accompanies such a phenomenon and allow for a more critical questioning of our assumptions about art and its institutions. The current situation presents a unique opportunity not only to make culture truly available to a public that has had limited resources and little access to education, but more importantly to broaden the concept of art so that participation may be possible at all levels.

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⁵ See Misión Cultura website: <http://www.misioncultura.gob.ve/fmc.php?fmc=1>. Accessed July 28, 2008. Author’s translation from the Spanish.