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Political Leadership and the Emergence of Radical Mass Movements in Democracy

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The perception of liberal democracy as a solidly institutionalized system in which opposition forces moderately compete with legitimate authority is so fixed that people are often surprised when mass radicalism emerges. Why, when, and how do radical mass movements emerge in pluralist (or semipluralist) political systems? The article, by linking radical action at the mass level with strategic choices at the elite level, argues in favor of an explanation based on symbolic framing processes. Radical mass action is best explained by the symbolic-cum-strategic action of individual political entrepreneurs employing specific frames to mobilize large masses of people. The argument is empirically clarified by the examination of three cases in which mass radicalism occurred in recent decades (Greece, Yugoslavia, Venezuela) and is then counterfactually tested in six cases of nonoccurrence (Spain, Portugal, Bulgaria, Romania, Colombia, Ecuador). The present analysis also points to a novel theorization of political charisma and charismatic leadership.

Keywords: mass radicalism; movement leadership; symbolic framing; political charisma; Greece; Yugoslavia; Venezuela

The future belongs to the masses, or to the men who can explain things simply to them.

Jacob Burckhardt

Consider the following cases: First, in the mid- and late 1970s, while moderate conservative leader Constantine Karamanlis was trying successfully to consolidate a new democratic institutional framework in Greece, maverick politician Andreas Papandreou led a radical mass movement (RMM) in the form of political party—the Panhellenic Socialist

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Movement (PASOK)—that promised general change (allaghi). Although no one could tell with some precision what the promised change was about, PASOK grew spectacularly and in 1981 won a stunning 48.2% of the national vote and captured state power. Second, in 1987, Slobodan Milošević, then president of the Serbian Communist Party, adopted a distinctly nationalist rhetoric intended to achieve the opposite from Tito’s communist regime—namely, to actively bring the masses into politics. Supported by an ever-growing number of Serbs demanding justice for their brethren in Kosovo and Croatia, Milošević rose in December 1989 to the presidency of Serbia after a referendum-type election in which 86% of Serbs expressed confidence in him. Third, in 1998, Hugo Chávez, a failed coup leader and political outsider using a markedly anti-establishment rhetoric, became president of Venezuela after receiving at the polls an impressive 56.2% of the vote. To generate support for his candidacy, Chávez had created the Movimiento Quinta Republica, originally a military group now turned into political party. In addition, he set up the so-called Bolivarian Circles—that is, citizens’ self-help committees organized at the neighborhood level, which effectively functioned as propaganda and mobilization mechanisms.

At first sight, the foregoing cases represent three types of political leadership that developed in markedly dissimilar cultural, institutional, historical, and geographical settings. Papandreou was a parliamentarian and party founder who competed in a pluralist electoral arena; Milošević was a communist leader who rose to prominence after successfully outmaneuvering his internal party opponents; and Chávez is a soldier turned politician but only after failing to capture state power by military coup. Even more dissimilar are the political trajectories of the three leaders in their respective countries. Papandreou enjoyed a long term of power as prime minister (1981-1989 and 1993-1996); Milošević’s rule was shorter and ended bitterly with the destruction of Yugoslavia and the impoverishment of Serbia; Chávez, at the time of this writing, is still the unchallenged leader in Venezuela, and so his record book remains open. To be sure, several authoritarian characteristics seem to have already crept into his populist rule.

Despite the foregoing differences, all three cases tell a common story—that of political entrepreneurs who rose rapidly, let alone triumphantly, to power by heading RMMs and that of people who readily abandoned prior loyalties to rally behind the emergent leaders. In all three cases, this happened against a background affected by social strain, political flux, and endemic economic crisis—in short, what Durkheim (1912/1995) believed to cause collective effervescence—which offered radical challengers new
possibilities for mass action. How then did mass radicalism emerge in Greece, Yugoslavia, and Venezuela? And why did the same phenomenon not appear in other similarly conditioned countries?

For purposes of the present analysis, I define radical as any movement or political party that explicitly aims at the legal, customarily nonviolent subversion of an existing institutional framework to replace it with a new, allegedly better one. Subverting an already solidified institutional framework may involve drastic constitutional change, alterations in the relations of production and the engineering of profound economic redistribution among social groups, shifting international alliances, and any other measure from which claims to a new legitimate authority may be deduced.\(^1\) What it may not involve, however, is disputing the legality of political pluralism.

Radical movements must be distinguished from revolutionary and reformist ones. The former class refers to extremist political groups seeking “to challenge, by extra-legal means, most commonly violent, the stability of the state” (Szajkowski, 2004, p. vii), whereas reformist movements aim just at the evolutionary transformation of an existing and stable framework of legitimate authority. In the continuum from revolution to reformism, radicalism therefore occupies an intermediate position and is best distinguished by the amount and type of change it seeks; unlike revolution, which aims at the complete overthrow of liberal democracy, and reformism, which aims at the gradual and piecemeal substitution of specific democratic policies, mass radicalism aims at the wholesale substitution of some democratic order with an alternative one.

Finally, it is worth distinguishing RMMs from social movements. Although both types of movement may be radical and although social movements are sometimes massive, major differences exist. Social movements originate from society’s grassroots, aim at social contention, and use noninstitutional forms of political participation to contest the state (Tarrow, 1998). In contrast, RMMs are always organized from above; they aim at capturing state power, and they rely on institutional forms of participation, such as elections.

The study of RMMs includes several puzzles and raises interesting issues: the centrality of some individual leader in building and giving these movements content and purpose; the brevity of their emergence and, often, their spectacular electoral success; their divisive character and their ability to produce new social and political identities. Given that mass radicalism in democracy entails high risks, questions abound: Why do people decide to take such risks? When and where is it more likely for RMMs to emerge? And why do RMMs emerge in some countries but not in others? The rest
of the article is divided into four parts. In the first part, the mechanism of framing is utilized to sustain a causal link between radical action at the mass level with strategic choices made at the elite level. My thesis is that RMMs can be explained only by understanding the symbolic-cum-strategic action of political entrepreneurs employing specific frames to mobilize large masses of people. In the second part, theoretical assertions are empirically tested against the cases of Greece, Yugoslavia, and Venezuela. In the third part of the article, to further reinforce the points made, I conduct an additional counterfactual test using a set of similarly conditioned countries in which no RMMs emerged (this set of “negative” cases includes Spain, Portugal, Bulgaria, Romania, Colombia, and Ecuador). I conclude with some theoretical implications and point to a theory of political charisma and charismatic leadership emergence.

Frames, Framing, and the Emergence of RMMs

The study of mass political radicalism is not sufficiently developed. Still, utilizing previous research, especially that on contentious politics, we may identify three sets of causal explanations of the emergence of RMMs in democracy. A first set of explanations places emphasis on objective socioeconomic and political conditions, which either present opportunities or impose constraints on mass radical action. Social inequality and political instability in particular generate individual grievances (Gurr, 1970) that may in turn set the radicalism chain in motion. A second set of explanations considers mass radicalism to be a consequence of intended actions by rationally minded political individuals. Seeking to maximize their expected utility, such individuals choose to participate in RMMs when they calculate that prospective benefits outweigh possible risks (Popkin, 1979). To achieve their ends, radicalized actors engage in appropriate resource mobilization and, specifically, the creation of professional movement organizations (McCarthy & Zald, 1973, 1977; Melucci, 1988; Oberschall, 1973). Finally, a third set of explanations points to the cultural symbols, disembodied discourses, and shared meanings that people use to define their situations. The analysis of frames and the framing processes in particular try to reconcile structural and rationalist explanations of individual decisions in alternative structural contexts. Such decisions are predicated on whether they are framed as losses–choices or as gains–choices. Mass radical action will most likely occur when a significant number of individuals adopt a losses frame (Berejikian, 1992).
Particular strengths notwithstanding, all of the foregoing explanations tend to neglect individual agency (Barker, Johnson, & Lavalette, 2001; Goldstone, 2001; McCarthy & Zald, 2002; Morris & Staggenborg, 2004). Political leaders are considered to act as simple “intermediaries, as tacticians and foci of events, rather than as independent shapers of the course and outcomes of contention” (Aminzade, Goldstone, & Perry, 2001, p. 127). Even when the need to study the mechanisms of contentious politics is openly acknowledged (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001), no room is made for individual political leadership; most of contentious politics theory takes all action to be collective (Ganz, 2000; McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996) and to come from below.

The neglect of leadership becomes particularly acute in the burgeoning literature on frames and framing processes (for the classics, see Snow & Benford, 1988, 1992; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986; for more recent reviews, see Benford & Snow, 2000; Johnston & Noakes, 2005). Frames are interpretative schemata that enable people to “locate, perceive, identify, and label” realities within their proximate or broader world (Goffman, 1974, p. 21); they consist of symbolic narratives that offer people meaning in a perplexing world, present new identities and social roles, enlarge the political agenda, project the ideal of good and just society, and challenge existing authority relationships. In short, symbolic frames are powerful devices, or mechanisms (Elster, 1993), that are necessary for radical social change to occur. This becomes possible because, as Brysk (1995) explains, we “think about politics in stories, and our consciousness is changed when new stories persuade us to adopt a new paradigm. Collective action itself then involves a kind of storytelling or political theater, performing the new paradigm to persuade others” (pp. 561-562).

If such frames are ubiquitous for providing people with shortcuts for interpreting the world, for locating blame, and for proposing new courses of action, the question is raised: Who does the framing and how? Perhaps misguided by the general belief that “movements are seldom under the control of a single leader or organization” (Tarrow, 1998, p. 7), contentious politics theory points to collective and often impersonal framers, such as political activists (McCarthy, 1996), intermediate elites (Morris & Staggenborg, 2004), the media (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Klandermans & Goslinga, 1996), and movement members and focus groups.

The present account of RMM emergence utilizes the concept of frames and framing but views individual leaders as independent variables and seeks to bring them to the analytical fore. Its central thesis is that RMMs are the outcomes of deliberate actions taken by power-seeking political entrepreneurs.
Along this process and against a background of political flux and multiple grievances in society, such leaders develop compelling symbolic frames that resonate with underlying emotions, obscured collective memories, and ostentatious national aspirations. In other words, rather than being produced at the anonymous mass level of society, frames are, in reality, constructed by eponymous political leaders. The latter, in their pursuit for power, engage in creative symbolic action for recruiting adherents, building political organizations, and, ultimately, bringing about political change. This is particularly evident in environments affected by acute crisis, within which political leaders “have an opportunity to create new visions and state new truths” (Laitin, 1986, p. 91). In such places and times, some individuals “may prove to be more perceptive, more creative, and more articulate than others, and their formulations may appeal more than those of others to a wide collectivity of people who are in the throes of the same problem” (Cohen, 1974, pp. 59, 30).

Of course, identifying the framers is hardly enough for understanding the microfoundations of mass political radicalism. Other questions abound: What are frames made of? How do they work? Which frames work best?

Symbolic frames provide the necessary link between the elite and the mass-action levels. They perform three functions with respect to mass politics: the demarcation of the political universe; the solidification of political groups; and the provision of resources for political organization and conflict to group members. Specifically,

**Symbolic frames demarcate the political universe.** To the extent that frames involve a kind of storytelling about politics, they provide matrixes within which the “chaotic public will” (Neumann, 1956, p. 396) takes shape and becomes specified; they also offer signals about opportunities for social change.

**Symbolic frames help make the political groups.** Given that political groups are never to be found ready-made in reality, frames, quite like ideologies, form the basis for the creation of political identities and the aggregation of common-interest groups (Boltanski, 1982; Bourdieu, 1987; Thompson, 1963). It is precisely this enormous capacity of frames to enhance in-group solidarity and out-group hostility in order to produce political groups that makes them so important for the conduct of politics.

**Symbolic frames provide resources for political organization and conflict.** In the hands of political leaders, frames and, particularly, the symbols they contain are perfect means for manipulating groups and creating the conditions for mass action (Cohen, 1974). Once adopted by a mass public, symbolic frames become instruments of not only vision but also division of the world. Along the process and as political entrepreneurs realize the potential of framing for
attracting mass followings, individual citizens learn that they can improve their lives by taking appropriate stances in conformity with or opposition to existing frames.

Which frames work best to produce radical mass action? Brysk (1995) again offers a general prescription of success:

First, symbolic politics must speak to the heart: successful symbols must be culturally appropriate, have historical precedent, be reinforced by other symbols, and signal a call for action. . . . [Second,] the content of the message also matters. A successful message offers meaning to experience the dominant order ignores or dismisses. [Third,] narrative structure or plot also influences the power of a story. To be read as a coherent narrative, events must be selected, semanticized, and temporally ordered. (pp. 576-579; cf. Wasielewski, 1985)

Here, we are in the realm of emotions and how they are constructed (Goodwin, Jasper, & Poletta, 2001; Jasper, 1997). The study of RMMs in particular reveals a strong injustice component that seems to be necessary for motivating radical action (Gamson, 1992; Turner & Killian, 1987). Given that “before collective action can get underway, people must collectively define their situations as unjust” (McAdam, 1982, p. 51), political entrepreneurs painstakingly try to use symbolic narratives to present reality as being fundamentally unjust for large social sectors and ripe for radical change. “Every frame,” writes Gamson (1992), “has the task of interpreting the source of [human] sufferings and considering how they can be mitigated or eliminated” (pp. 35-36).

As it will be shown in the following section, the injustice frames proposed by Papandreou, Milošević, and Chávez follow Brysk’s prescription (1995); moreover, they all consist of three elements, each roughly corresponding to the general symbolic frame functions described earlier. First, all three frames are based on simple binary oppositions dividing the respective societies into allegedly irreconcilable parts—for example, rich versus poor, privileged versus underprivileged, la oligarquía (the oligarchy) versus el pueblo (the people), core versus periphery, Serb versus Croat, Orthodox versus Muslim, and so on. Such divisions, besides effectively demarcating the political universe, provide new clues for perceiving social reality. Second, by pointing to some adversary other, injustice frames help make groups with remarkable member solidarity. Such groups often resemble moral communities fighting against some symbolic enemy—poverty, capitalism, the Right, the West in general, or the United States in particular—in the name of some high-order
value—social equality, ethnic supremacy, national sovereignty, and so on. Third, injustice frames invariably include some *salvation narrative* (see Smith, 2000), which is a powerful means for keeping the group together and providing it with ethical weapons during its struggle.

### Three Cases of RMM Emergence

This section sketches the rise of RMMs in Greece during the mid-1970s, Yugoslavia in the second half of the 1980s, and Venezuela in the late 1990s. In each country, there emerged on a substratum of political flux and uncertainty (but not outright crisis) some leader advocating a radical hegemonic political program seeking to replace the dominant one. Papandreou (1976) called for changes that were “inescapably linked with the socialist transformation of the Greek society . . . [and whose] basic and permanent aim should remain the change of the political system, and not its conservation” (pp. 231-232); Milošević, by igniting Serbian nationalism, consciously undermined the foundations of the Titoist federal system that had been in place for several decades; and Chávez used every opportunity to make clear his intention to pull apart the Venezuelan political status quo and implement such drastic changes as a new constitution, the redesign of the judicial system, and radical economic redistribution. By utilizing compelling injustice frames, all three leaders succeeded in building RMMs and, eventually, conquering state power.

#### Case 1: Andreas Papandreou and the Rise of PASOK

When the Greek dictatorship fell in July 1974, Constantine Karamanlis, the old leader of the postwar Right, was recalled from exile to lead the country into democracy. He immediately set out, with intent and by design, to demolish the postwar exclusionist system and build a new pluralist order. His moderate government legalized the Communist Party, led the monarchy to its final defeat by referendum, provided a new democratic constitution, and set as its major goal the accession of Greece into the European Community. Given the success of democratization, one should have expected state power to remain in the control of the established liberal parties for a long time and moderation to prevail in Greek politics. Yet, it was fledgling PASOK—a radical party founded by Andreas Papandreou shortly after the transition to democracy—that soon emerged as the real protagonist in postauthoritarian Greece.
Initially appearing as a radical Marxist party with strong claims to resistance against the dictatorship—but also an unrealistic political program—PASOK performed rather poorly in the 1974 elections (13.6%). After that point, however, PASOK fully confirmed the accuracy of its designation as a movement. By the 1977 elections, it succeeded in doubling its popular support (25.3%) and then, in October 1981, in capturing state power, with an impressive 48.2% of the national vote. During that period, the organizational growth of PASOK was spectacular. Grassroots organizations became established throughout the country, as well as throughout the trade unions, the professions, the universities, and even the secondary schools. Party activism and mass mobilization were intensive, and they contributed greatly to final electoral victory. How, then, can we account for PASOK’s precipitous rise? What drew Greek voters so massively to that novel political formation? Contrary to previous explanations that have mostly focused on the structural preconditions of such a radical political change (Mouzelis, 1978, 1986; Papandreou, 1975, 1976), this analysis proposes that emphasis is placed on the symbolic politics played by Papandreou, who almost single-handedly provided PASOK with an ideology, organization, and sense of mission. To put it simply, without Papandreou’s abilities and massive personal popularity, the rapid ascent of PASOK to power is simply unthinkable.

Similar to what happens in like circumstances (O’Donnell & Schmitter, 1986), the end of authoritarianism in Greece provided an ideal setting for popular upsurge. With the return to pluralism, large segments of Greek society, long excluded from the political process, were decisively brought back into it. Admission of all parties into political competition, however, not only made formal dissent possible but also encouraged excessive social demands and political radicalism. Moreover, a sense of social inequality was felt by large segments of the population who had been upwardly mobile during the economic boom of the 1960s and 1970s but now faced the dangers of stagflation and unemployment. Finally, the Turkish occupation of the northern part of Cyprus had dramatic consequences in the national psyche and was mostly blamed on the Americans (who had backed the dictatorship). Blending old grievances with newly risen expectations, the emergent society thus clamored for all kinds of things and put new and often onerous demands on the moderate government. The situation is nicely depicted in the following passage:

In the midst of the events and actions of the period immediately following the fall of the junta, there emerged [in Greece] a vague representation of reality, a simplistic notion of history, a bipolar view of social conflict, . . . an equally
utopian expectation of radical change, and a general messianic feeling. Demands . . . were being raised everywhere. (Elephantis, 1981, pp. 118-119)

As the structure of political opportunities shifted to the advantage of the masses, new political leaders emerged who, in speaking in the name of the people, offered novel political visions. Of those leaders, by far the most successful was Papandreou. Having realized that the best way to attract a mass following was through appeals to widely held sentiments, hopes, fears, and expectations (Laitin, 1986), he offered the Greek people a new symbolic master narrative based on a comprehensive worldview and the promise of radical change (allaghi). This construction of the social and political universe was spread along two axes. The first divided the world into “metropolis” and “periphery,” the latter being dependent on the former. The second axis represented the ostensibly inherent struggle between an exploiting “establishment,” both foreign and domestic, and the “people”—that is, all “nonprivileged Greeks” opposed to the establishment. This worldview included the theoretical construction of a ladder of subversion descending from the world capitalist center to the remotest Greek village, and it was supported by a pair of simple binary oppositions—one between foreigners and Greeks, the other between privileged Greeks and nonprivileged ones. Thus dividing the real world between two opposing halves, Papandreou succeeded in identifying the movement’s opponents while forging in-group solidarity. The success of his strategy was impressive: Papandreou was able to win state power within only 7 years.

Case 2: Slobodan Milošević Champions Serbism

“In Yugoslavia,” as Banac (1992) has put it, “hate and anger [had] to do with nationhood” (p. 168). As long as Yugoslavia existed, the national question in that country revolved around the fundamental conflict between federalism and centralization, “a situation in which the largest nation’s claims to power [i.e., the Serbs’] came up against the defense of the interests of the smaller nations and minorities” (Lendvai, 1991, p. 253). After World War II, Marshal Josip Broz Tito, Yugoslavia’s communist leader, in his effort to build a multiethnic country on the principle of “brotherhood and unity,” created a Soviet-style federation of six republics with equal status and ample veto power. Power decentralization was further reinforced by the constitution of 1974, which, despite Serbian protests, offered the autonomous regions of Kosovo and Vojvodina real autonomy rights, such as home rule and their own police. When Tito died in 1980, “his legacy was mortification by grievance” (Banac, 1992, p. 173).
The grievances raised by the Serbian nation were the most serious and, among them, the gravest concerned Kosovo. The importance of this region to the Serbian nation cannot be exaggerated. In contemporary Serbia, the fateful 1389 defeat of Serb prince Lazar by the Ottoman Turks at the Field of Blackbirds, near the modern town of Kosovo Polje, is constantly evoked and its memory vividly recaptured by a myriad of tales, legends, poems, songs, paintings, and novels. To the extent that Serbs considered Kosovo to be their sacred land and cradle of their historical existence, the region’s “fate [remained] a vital question for the entire Serbian nation” (Mihailović & Krestić, 1995, p. 130).

From the Serbs’ point of view, Kosovo’s fate was seriously compromised by the violent irredentism of the Albanian majority of its population. Shortly after Tito’s death, a rebellion of ethnic Albanians had broken in Kosovo demanding full independence from Serbia and the elevation of their region to the status of a federal republic. The federal police and army had crushed the rebellion immediately, but this was not to stop the fast deterioration of the relationships between the two ethnic groups, which forced an estimated 25,661 Serbs to emigrate from Kosovo to Serbia between 1981 and 1988 (Thomas, 1999; Woodward, 1995). Already by the mid-1980s, processions of desperate Kosovo Serbs could be seen almost daily in Belgrade in front of the Yugoslav Federal Assembly. Such was the setting, then, within which Slobodan Milošević, a rather grim communist apparatchik (Zimmermann, 1995), was to perform his act of political legerdemain and emerge as a charismatic leader (Pappas, 2005; Vujacic, 1995). Although Serbian nationalism had preexisted Milošević, it was he who gave it new content and shape.

Milošević’s rise to political prominence is marked by an impromptu speech that he gave at the very town of Kosovo Polje in April 1987 in front of a crowd of local Serbs and Montenegrins complaining that they were discriminated against by the ethnic Albanian authorities. Under the enthusiastic jeers of his co-nationals, Milošević promised them that “from now on, no one will ever dare beat you,” and he concluded his speech with these words, which would become the basis of his nationalist ideological program:

Yugoslavia does not exist without Kosovo. Yugoslavia would disintegrate without Kosovo. Yugoslavia and Serbia are not going to give up Kosovo.

(quoted in Judah, 2000, p. 29)

Following that incident, Milošević turned into a fervent champion of Serbism, which is based on the idea of integrating all Serbs within a single
state structure (Pavković, 1998). This idea, which was anathema during Tito’s rule, amounted to a complete reversal of Yugoslav federalism, which had been premised on the suppression of nationalism and the deterrence of active participation of the masses in politics. At any rate, Milošević’s message was able to express the nationalist yearnings of a large number of Serbs, address their accumulated grievances, and offer the promise of restoring the lost power of the Serbian nation. By violating Tito’s fundamental premises for the sake of Serbian nationalism, Milošević’s fame spread fast throughout Serbia. As Dragović-Soso (2002) has described the situation, “[Milošević’s] photographs adorned shop windows and buses, poets and songwriters composed verses to his glory, people lit candles and chanted prayers for his health, crowds came together and dispersed at his bidding” (p. 1). Now, Milošević was in a position to organize the RMM that was to consolidate his power but eventually led Yugoslavia to destruction and collapse.

Milošević’s ascent to and subsequent consolidation of power were swift. By the end of 1987, he was able to win over his moderate party opponents, such as the Belgrade party boss Dragiša Pavlović and Serbia’s president Ivan Stambolić, and gain absolute control in the Serbian Communist Party. During the following year, mass rallies (significantly called “rallies of solidarity” or “truth rallies”) were staged in many places in Vojvodina, Montenegro, and Serbia in support of Milošević and his nationalist project. By the beginning of 1989, the old Titoist party leaders in Vojvodina and Montenegro had been toppled and replaced by men loyal to Milošević. In February of the same year, Milošević succeeded to jail Azem Vlassi, the ethnic Albanian leader, and replace him with his own men. In March, as if to officially seal his political victories, Milošević proclaimed a new Serbian constitution, which was ratified by the Kosovo assembly. The constitution stripped Vojvodina and Kosovo of most of their autonomous powers, including control of the police, education, and economic policy, as well as choice of official language. Serbia was believed to be whole again, and its new leader seemed to enjoy “a popularity greater than any Serbian political figure in [the 20th] century” (Djilas, 1993, p. 83). In December 1989, Slobodan Milošević became president of Serbia after a referendum-type election in which 86% of Serbs expressed confidence in his leadership.

Case 3: Hugo Chávez Carries Out the Bolivarian Revolution

Unlike most of its neighboring countries, Venezuela presented during the postwar decades a workable two-party system based on several political
pacts and agreements signed by the major party elites. Venezuela’s dominant parties gradually built nationwide organizations that allowed those parties’ alternation in office and, in consequence, their sharing of the spoils gained from power exercise (Kornblith & Levine, 1995). In such a partyarchal system (see Coppedge, 1994), “state subsidies gave everyone a bit of the wealth . . . and the parties gradually took control of most organizations within civil society” (McCoy, 1999, p. 65). Venezuela’s political system thus came to resemble a “subsidized democracy . . . based on the economic capacity of the state [to provide] the prebends necessary to maintain a certain consensus around the democratic system” (Giacalone & de Acevedo, 1992, p. 138). As long as the economy followed an upward trend, two-party democracy worked sufficiently well, but when it went on decline, political crisis seemed unavoidable.

Economic decline began in Venezuela in the early 1980s, and it was associated primarily with the plummeting of the international oil prices. A bold devaluation of the currency in 1983 failed to turn things around. Between 1983 and 1993, Venezuela’s GNP dropped by 40 percentage points and led to double-digit inflation rates; in 1989, inflation peaked at 84.5% (Crisp, 1998). The economic downturn created a state that has been described as “endemic discontent, [meaning] the tendency of large sectors of the population, from all walks of life, to be dissatisfied with the government’s performance” (Molina & Pérez, 1998, p. 3). The failure of president Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1989 to implement an austerity program provoked massive street riots, which, however intermittently, continued into the next years. Then in February 1992, Hugo Chávez Frias—that “young creole colonel, with his parachutist’s beret and his admirable ease with words” (Márquez, 2000, p. 18)—attempted a coup against the government. Although it failed, the attempted coup generated wide support within the middle and lower social strata, which precipitated the political dealignment from the traditional parties and, ultimately, the erosion of stable two partyism (Alvarez, 1996; Rey, 1991). It was on the basis of such widespread popular discontent that Chávez decided to transform “a mass that was immobile [and] amorphous in a mass movement” (Harnecker, 2002, p. 172) that would be “dedicated to the fundamental transformation of society” (Hawkins, 2003, p. 1137; Sylvia & Danopoulos, 2003) and that, within a very short time, would catapult him to state power.

Chávez founded the Fifth Republic Movement (Movimiento Quinta República) in October 1997. By that time, increasing numbers of people had begun seeing in Chávez a new leader capable of radical political change (Hawkins, 2003), thus sustaining Gott’s claim (2000) that, in the tumultuous
1990s, “the arrival of Hugo Chávez on the scene was greeted [by many Venezuelans] as though it were the Second Coming” (p. 19). Be that as it may, in the 1998 election, which to Chávez’s own words was characterized “above all by an explosion of sentiments” (Harnecker, 2002, p. 26), Chávez won by a landslide (56.2% against 40%, gained by moderate Henrique Salas Römer), thus verifying the collapse of the old party system. Over the next years, Chávez set out to implement his promise of “Bolivarian revolution,” a program for radical change named after the independence hero Simón Bolívar. In 1999, the new president organized a national referendum to ratify a new constitution (in which the yes vote received 88%), and shortly after, he encouraged the organization of the Círculos Bolivarianos, which are neighborhood groups whose mission is to turn out the pro-Chávez vote and defend the revolution—and so the círculos did during the short-lived coup against Chávez in April 2002. Not long after Chávez was then forced to resign, his supporters rioted in virtually every city in Venezuela and within less than 48 hours had succeeded in his restoration to power.

Chávez’s rise to power cannot be accounted for except through his symbolic political discourse, through which Chávez succeeded in three areas. First, he expressed a widespread feeling of collective disenchantment and social despair that was in the air since the early 1980s. Going contrary to the ideas of political accommodation and social harmony, which had prevailed in Venezuela for four decades, Chávez emphasized political domination, addressed social inequality, and declared the inevitability of conflict. “What differentiates Hugo Chávez from his political rivals,” writes Naím (2001), is “his enthusiastic willingness to tap into collective anger and social resentments [what] other politicians had failed to see, refused to stoke, or had a vested interest in not exacerbating” (p. 27). Furthermore, Chávez successfully presented the national maladies as resulting from the conflict between a powerful political elite and the powerless people. In this sense, all politics were condensed into a moral and ethical struggle between the repressed people (el pueblo) and an oligarchic elite (la oligarquía). As Carlos de la Torre (2000) explains,

El pueblo is positively defined as all that is not oligarquía. Given their suffering, el pueblo is the incarnation of the authentic, the good, the just, and the moral. It confronts the antipueblo, or oligarquía, representing the anauthentic, the foreign, the evil, the unjust, and the immoral. (p. 15)

Finally, Chávez proposed himself as a leader of the people capable of making away with the old political system and bringing social justice. The
size of his success is attested by the mass support he received, which, remarkably, quite like the support received by Papandreou and Milošević, was “socially heterogenous and multiclass, as his backers hailed from all walks of life” (Weyland, 2003, p. 836).

**Accounting for RMM Nonoccurrence**

If the causal hypothesis is correct—that is, if RMMs are linked to power-seeking political entrepreneurs who are capable of mobilizing large social sectors on the basis of compelling injustice frames—why do we not observe such movements more frequently? Two possible reasons explain why: Political entrepreneurs are either unwilling or incapable of employing a strategy based on RMM building. Unwillingness is explained through either an initial preference for a moderate strategy or the lack of significant social constituencies welcoming radicalism. In either case, radicalism is deemed counterproductive or costly (or both) and is not chosen as a best strategy. Incapability, on the other hand, simply entails either the absence of skills necessary to construct an appropriate symbolic frame or a leader’s lack of personal authority to organize, lead, and maintain an RMM. None of the foregoing assertions can, of course, be properly tested in the present context. But they can be analytically illustrated with reference to a broader number of relevant cases.

Following a counterfactual logic (Fearon, 1991), I pit in this section each of the positive cases against pairs of countries belonging to same world region (see Goodwin, 2001) and sharing similar socioeconomic and political characteristics. To this purpose, Greece is compared with Spain and Portugal circa the time of their almost-simultaneous transitions to democracy; post-Titoist Yugoslavia to Bulgaria and Romania during the early post-communist years; and Venezuela to neighboring Colombia and Ecuador. Each set of countries represents a particular geographical region (Southern Europe, Eastern Europe, Latin America), as well as a particular mode of transition to and consolidation of democracy (Lynn Karl & Schmitter, 1991). I begin the analysis with a summary overview of socioeconomic indicators in the three country sets and then proceed with a qualitative examination of political developments in each of the negative cases.

Table 1 is based on two indices: first, level of economic growth, as measured by per capita income, and second, the Human Development Index (HDI), which is a summary measure of human development based on three dimensions—a long and healthy life, level of education, and standard of
living as measured by GDP per capita. These data firmly disconfirm the structuralist and objectivist thesis on the emergence of RMMs. Although Greece, Yugoslavia, and Venezuela were in many respects better than or at least comparable to most of their neighbors in terms of socioeconomic and political developments, it was in the former that RMMs emerged—not in their often poorer, unhappier, and more insecure neighbors. Why? My answer is that no country in our set of negative cases can be said to have displayed political entrepreneurs who in critical historical moments were willing and capable to employ radical symbolic frames for mobilizing mass action. To exemplify the point, I begin with the Southern European cluster of countries and then go on to the Eastern European and Latin American ones.

In the mid- and late 1970s, Spain’s economy was in a better position than Greece’s, but the former’s political situation was much more complex. The authoritarian regime had left a firm institutional structure that was difficult to dismantle; as such, revitalized nationalistic feelings in Catalonia and

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<td>Southern European Cluster</td>
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<td>GR</td>
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<td>Income per capita</td>
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<td>Human Development Index</td>
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Note: GR = Greece; SP = Spain; PT = Portugal; YU = Yugoslavia; BU = Bulgaria; RO = Romania; VN = Venezuela; CO = Colombia; EC = Ecuador.
e. Real GDP per capita (constant prices in U.S. dollars); year of reference, 1999. Source: *Penn World Table 6.1*.
h. Year of reference, 1995; that year’s highest rank, Norway (0.935). Source: *UN Human Development Report* (United Nations Development Programme, 1995).
the Basque Country were raising the problem of state cohesion. In a climate of widespread disappointment in society (the so-called desencanto), radical mass action might have seemed an appealing option to several political entrepreneurs. As in Greece, for instance, the Socialist Party leadership might have been tempted to capitalize on political discontent, or, as in Yugoslavia, nationalist leaders could have mobilized their constituencies demanding separatism. In contrast, with the partial exception of the Basques, all Spanish leaders opted for a strategy of “negotiated” institutional change based on political pacts (Maravall, 1981; Tezanos, Cotarelo, & de Blas, 1989), consensus building, and collective forgetfulness (Aguilar, 2002). Political moderation thus prevailed over radicalism because all key political leaders chose to participate in new institutional building, rather than oppose it.

In Portugal, the military-led transition to democracy in April 1974 was characterized by “a spontaneous outpouring of egalitarian solidarity and enthusiasm” (O’Donnell & Schmitter, 1986, p. 54), high mobilization (Bermeo, 1986), and the revolutionary transformation of political institutions and social structures. Compared to Spain and Greece, Portugal was an economic laggard with a relatively low HDI score. Radicalism was, however, exhausted with the countercoup of November 1975, after which a liberal democratic regime was firmly established in the country. The new institutional arrangement had two characteristics (Jalali, 2006): the exclusion of the Communist Party from national government and the effective restriction of party competition between two parties—the center-left Socialist Party and the center-right Social Democratic Party. By this arrangement, radicalism was undermined as a viable option, and moderation prevailed.

Turning now to the Eastern European cluster of countries, Bulgaria and Romania share many similarities, which allows for their joint examination. In the early postcommunist period, both countries faced severe economic difficulties and accumulated social strain (which reflects in their poor HDI scores). Their economies suffered from negative growth and excessive inflation rates (Economist Intelligence Unit, 1991a, 1991b). Politics, however—thanks to historical legacies and the dynamics of regime transition in this pair of countries—was not as clamorous as it was elsewhere in the region, particularly in Yugoslavia. Bulgaria and Romania had experienced long and exceptionally ruthless communist rules in which no opposition ever emerged. and their respective transitions to democracy were undertaken by former communist leaders in reformist disguise. Power thus remained in the hands of “liberal left-overs” (Ishiyama, 1995, p. 162) from the communist
era determined to rule on a moderate reformist program. To the extent that anticommunist, market-liberal, and democratic opposition had remained weak, fragmented, and inexperienced, the major political entrepreneurs found it difficult to stage a bid for power on a new radical frame. Nor there was enough room for such a frame (Chirot, 2005); in both Bulgaria and Romania, the ruling socialists moved steadily toward the center ground trying to meet the major demands of the opposition by strengthening the new democratic institutions, advancing economic liberalization, easing interethnic tensions, and—in the longer run but no less crucially—joining the European Union.

Finally, with respect to the Latin American cluster of countries, Colombia first presents interesting similarities with Venezuela. Both countries had developed, since the 1950s, functioning two-party systems with elaborate sets of formal and informal rules to which all sociopolitical collective actors abided (i.e., the army, the church, the bureaucracy, the trade unions; Peeler, 1992). Similar to Venezuela’s, Colombia’s political system had, by the 1990s, lost credibility and become infested with high popular discontent; a large number of political entrepreneurs from outside the political mainstream did in fact contest contemporary elections. Yet, in Colombia, no anti-establishment candidate was ever successful in thwarting the old system of two-party, traditional elite domination. An explanation lies in that country’s entanglement in civil war and its continuous offensive against the illegal drugs industry. With Colombian politics and society already torn between the liberal democratic forces and the revolutionary guerilla organizations, there was no room left in the political system for extra radicalism and further division. When prospectively faced with such daunting tasks as to end a bloody civil war and win amid corruption and violence, no political entrepreneur could afford to introduce a new radical frame encouraging mass action and the replacement of the existing institutional system. Instead, with society rejecting further radicalism, political entrepreneurs were more likely to defend the established order and actively engage in its preservation against extra-institutional opponents.

Ecuador, the poorest and politically less developed of our three Latin American countries, achieved a negotiated transition to democracy as late as 1978. Since then, it has presented a complex political scene with constantly shifting alliances and widespread popular disenchantment with political institutions. This period has been dotted by military interventions (1987, 1999, 2000), political emergencies caused by a border dispute with Peru (1981, 1995), and reform-seeking upsurges of the indigenous population (1997, 2000, 2004). Throughout, several political leaders have emerged, attempting
“to politicize the humiliations of common mestizo Ecuadorians” (de la Torre, 2000, p. ix) and mobilize them into mass radical action. Despite their willingness to exploit the opportunities offered by national politics, however, none of those political entrepreneurs has been able to create, let alone maintain, an RMM. The case of Abdalá Bucaram—self-referred as “the leader of the poor” but locally known as el loco (the fool)—is quite telling: Elected as a president in 1996 by 54% of the voters, on a ticket promising radical social and political change, he was forced by the same people to resign only 6 months later, in February 1997. Almost simultaneously, the congress dismissed Bucaram on grounds of “mental incapacity” (p. 80).

Conclusions

This article serves two objectives and a half. First, it introduces the notion of RMM, which describes phenomena that are quite common in contemporary democracy. Given that RMMs are seriously neglected and understudied—unlike their next of kin, revolutionary movements and social movements—this article is but a first step toward more empirical and theoretical research. In that direction, the article, second, offers an explanation of RMM emergence. Through the comparative analysis of three cases, it shows that RMMs emerged in Greece in the 1970s, Yugoslavia in the 1980s, and Venezuela in the 1990s, through the symbolic-cum-strategic action of their leaders. Andreas Papandreou, Slobodan Milošević, and Hugo Chávez acquired vast political authority because they were able to construct subversive ideological messages, capable of manipulating large mass publics and mobilizing them toward radical political action. Their tales tell us how creative symbolic power—that is, the strategic manipulation, modification, or change of existing shared symbols—can become a most powerful political resource. “When this creativity is particularly original,” notes Cohen (1974), “when it helps to articulate or to objectify new groupings and new relations,” we become faced with leaders who are “charismatic” (p. 30).

This is not a point to be missed, because the foregoing analysis of RMM emergence points directly to a novel theorization of political charisma. Unlike the traditional and legal–bureaucratic types of leadership, which refer to widely accepted and firmly institutionalized forms of authority, charisma describes a distinct type of leadership that is personal and aims at the radical transformation of an established institutional order. Because RMMs, such as the ones examined here, offer exemplary cases of
such a type of leadership, their further study provides the blighted concept (see Spinrad, 1991) of political charisma with a range of new empirical referents, readily subject to measurement and comparison. This is the half-fulfilled objective of this article. The other half lies in the future.

Notes

1. Besides the cases of mass radicalism examined in this article, this category of movements may expand to include many left- and right-wing parties, postcolonial and national liberation movements, several populist movements, and a number of fundamentalist movements that emerge via elections (like, for instance, the Palestinian Hamas).

2. Although a Marxist force (and, hence, a potentially radical one) at the beginning of the transition process, the Spanish Socialist Party moved rapidly toward the political center. Its new leader, Felipe González, forced the party to drop its Marxist label and adopt a moderate social democratic program and a strategy emphasizing political convergence (Boix, 1998; Gillespie, 1989). As for the Catalan leaders, they, too, refrained from mobilizing their constituents around radical demands of independence and a swift devolution of powers from the center to the periphery.

References


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