Cultural Conflict in Venezuela

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Abstract

Venezuela is a country deeply polarized and facing a rapid escalation of violence. This paper tries to address cultural differences and how diverse cultures within the country entered into a destructive cycle of engagement to cause political and social conflict in Venezuela. What is proposed here is in fact a novel perspective to look at the complexity of the Venezuelan social conflict, by taking the notion of culture seriously. The present work begins with a brief explanation of Augsburger’s cultural dynamics and Mazrui’s characteristics of culture as the theoretical framework in which Venezuelan society will be analyzed. Giving some historical background of the conflict in study, the analysis will differentiate between two main cultures in the country: Urban/Elite and Rural/Barrio cultures. Finally, after a description of the destructive cycle in the Venezuelan cultural dynamic, political conflict will be addressed as a consequence of the cultural conflict described in the present work. To conclude, some suggestions are made, so that Venezuelans would go from a destructive mode to a more collaborative cycle in the Venezuelan cultural dynamic.

Key words: Venezuela – Social Conflict – Culture – Political Polarization
Introduction

Venezuela is a country with one of the longest democratic traditions in Latin America. The country also enjoys, among other valuable resources, one of the largest reserves of oil and natural gas in the world. Neither democratic procedures nor the lucrative extraction of resources, however, seems able to stop the escalation of social conflict and violence in that nation. Political and economic analysts have written many articles and papers to outline Venezuelan political polarization, but in these studies cultural differences among Venezuelans have not been highly considered to understand the roots of the Venezuelan social conflict. This paper tries to fill that gap by addressing cultural differences and how diverse cultures within the country enter into a destructive cycle of engagement to cause political and social conflict in Venezuela. What is proposed here is in fact a novel perspective to look at the complexity of the Venezuelan social conflict, by taking the notion of culture seriously.

This paper begins with a brief explanation of Augsburger’s cultural dynamics and Mazrui’s characteristics of culture as the theoretical framework in which Venezuelan society will be analyzed. Then, after giving some historical background of the conflict in study, the analysis will differentiate between two main cultures in the country: Urban/Elite and Rural/Barrio cultures. Finally, after a description of the destructive cycle in the Venezuelan cultural dynamic, political conflict will be addressed as a consequence of the cultural conflict described in the paper. To conclude, some suggestions are made, so that Venezuelans can go from a destructive mode to a more collaborative cycle in the Venezuelan cultural dynamic. By following these suggestions, polarization will be lessened and the de-escalation of conflict will lead to a more harmonious society.
Theoretical Framework

The central role of culture in conflict is one of the most important contributions that conflict resolution practitioners and academics have proposed in their understanding for resolving social conflict (LeBaron, 2003, p. 4). This contribution is relatively recent in history. It is so, not because cultural causes in social conflict are new, but because technological advances in communication and transportation in recent times have made possible more frequent encounters of individuals and groups with cultural differences (Augsburger, 1992, p. 7). These encounters often result in conflict that has sparked attention in the field of Peace and Conflict Studies.

Conflict practitioners and academics, however, have a problem in finding an accurate notion of culture for their framework in studying conflict (Avruch, 1988, p. 4). Notions of culture are diverse and often attached to political perceptions of class and society (Avruch, 1988, p. 8). Therefore, conflict analysts must find and clarify first the notion of culture that will be used as an analytical tool to understand any particular conflict. This means that the analyst should settle on his or her notion of culture prior to any other consideration towards an understanding of the conflict and its causes. Also, culture is experienced as something that comes from and shapes the social group, which constantly finds its identity through the development of its own culture. In this sense, we will work with a dynamic (1) and functional (2) notion of culture.

The dynamics of culture (number 1 above) can be addressed in two ways: culture as a dynamic in itself (1a) and culture as a cause of the dynamics in society (1b). Regarding culture as dynamic in itself (number 1a above), Avruch highlights six inadequacies in the use of culture very common in conflict resolution theory and practice (Avruch, 1988, p. 14). This happens when culture is addressed as homogeneous, stable, uniformly distributed, merely
individual, subject to custom, or timeless (Avruch, 1988, p. 15). Reacting against these inadequacies, Avruch states that these inadequacies jeopardize the use of culture as an analytical tool in conflict resolution processes (Avruch, 1988, p. 16). Therefore, erroneous notions have to be deconstructed in order to update a definition of culture accurate for examining conflict.

In this sense, experience shows that individuals are the only ones able to inherit, lead and create culture, although culture can be contained by certain populations or groups to which these individuals are members (Augsburger, 1992, p. 18). The notion of culture is a flexible one. An individual could be a member of many cultural groups and participate in these groups at different levels; cultural differences exist within such individuals who must integrate these varies allegiances by adapting them to their many membership groups (Augsburger, 1992, p. 26). Therefore, change and coherence within culture are always possible.

In addition, when culture is considered a “socially inherited solution to life problems” (Avruch, 1988, p. 20), culture becomes connected to cognition and affection. Culture relies on traditional forms from outside and psychological processes as well, and thus it can be internalized differently in each individual (Augsburger, 1992, p. 7). In fact, the way human beings respond to concrete life situations and their problems develops the diversity and creativity of local cultures. Culture is crucial in motivating action in society, whose dynamism could be destructive or collaborative.

Regarding culture as a cause of dynamics in the society (number 1b), according to Augsburger, inevitable conflicts come from the encounter of two members of groups belonging and practicing different cultures. These conflicts can result in competition or collaboration (Augsburger, 1992, p. 53). When the conflict results in competition, it opens
up a destructive dynamic, which tends to magnify the number of “issues, negative attitudes, and self-justification” (Augsburger, 1992, p. 47), and to escalate into tactics of power, threat, coercion and polarization by following uniform, single-minded militant leadership.

A destructive dynamic tends to perpetuate itself by developing a competitive conflict spiral. In this spiral parties in conflict become trapped by self-fulfilling prophecies that lead to a “negativization” of all the activity among parties (Augsburger, 1992, p. 54). Parties then invest all their energies in achieving or retaining power by any means possible, because power is perceived as the only way for them to ensure “respect” for their rights and the satisfaction of their needs. Finally, situations in this dynamic become intractable as groups demonize each other.

Contrary to this, when conflict leads to collaboration, activity may result in a constructive, creative dynamic. In this dynamic, parties are able to risk “face” and trust in the other to search for a creative solution to the situation that causes conflict among them (Augsburger, 1992, p. 55). Discussion leads to mutual exploration, in which common goals and needs are discovered. After groups recognize each other as persons, attention and respect become reciprocal. Finally “maturity emerges as there is recognition of ambiguity in all situations, ambivalence in the self and tolerance of contradictory impulses and insights” (Augsburger, 1992, p. 66).

With respect to the functional notion of culture (number 2 above), Mazrui distinguishes seven functions that culture serves in society (Mazrui, 1990, p. 7). According to this author, culture provides:

a) Lenses of perception and cognition: this is particular worldview or “idiocosm” (Bailey, 1991) in individuals and groups of what seems to be
“normal” or belonging to a “common sense” understanding. This construct can also be reinforced by media and/or backed by governments.

b) Motives for human behavior: this is what makes a certain group or individuals to act or respond in a particular manner (Mazrui, 1990). In fact, culture shapes observable patterns of behavior and habits in groups and individuals.

c) Criteria for evaluation: this is what groups consider valuable, defensible, beautiful, attractive or not. Culture helps people in how they appreciate ideas, events, beliefs, values, artifacts and emotions (Dubinskas, 1991, p. 190), even when their external behavior is not coherent with the “proclaimed” values of the group.

d) A basis for identity: it means that culture provides to groups and individuals, not only how they see others, but also, and often in comparison to the other, how they see themselves. In fact, culture now plays a major role in the construction of identity along with race and religion (Mazrui, 1990).

e) A mode of communication: culture shapes how people express their ideas and needs, not only by providing language. In fact, communication also incorporates gestures, symbols and the performing of music and arts (Mazrui, 1990). Practitioners also can distinguish culture by the importance given to its many modes and overlapping systems of communication.

f) A basis of stratification: class, ranks, titles, possessions and activities attached to individuals and groups are valued by culture, which also assigns their status in society.

g) System of production and consumption: culture shapes and even defines actions and habits, not only in relation to other individuals and groups,
but also in relation to nature, means of production and ways in which needs are satisfied by commodities (Mazrui, 1990).

Let us move on to see how the social conflict in Venezuela has deep cultural roots. It is necessary, however, to briefly explain historically how a prosperous country, such as Venezuela, became trapped in a social conflict among two different cultures, which found in the competition for political power the way to deal with their perceived intractable differences.

**Historical Background**

The history of Venezuela, as similar to the history of Latin America, is a history of inequalities and injustices since the very beginning of the process of colonization. Columbus arrived to the Venezuelan eastern shore in his third trip in 1498, and named the site “the Land of Grace” because of the beauty of its nature and native population (Vilda, 1999, p. 20). Soon, the process of conquest of the land started and the Spanish violently subdued the native population (Vilda, 1999, p. 49) and started an accelerated process of intermingling and intermarrying (Vilda, 1999, p. 36). However, in the 18th century, the territory which is now Venezuela, was given by the King of Spain in concession to some German families – the Welsers— as payment for their services to the Spanish Crown (Tinker Salas, 2009, p. 22). These people, obsessed with the legend of *El Dorado*, penetrated the land in their search for gold, founding settlements and leaving missionaries uncharged for the “Christianization” and pacification of the native population.

Due to the failure in finding *El Dorado* with its subsequent lack of social and economic development in the region, the territory and its population was governed from afar by the Viceroy of Santa Fe de Bogotá (current Colombia). Venezuela only achieved status as General Captainship in 1777 (Vilda, 1999, p. 56). At this time, to a lesser degree than
other cities, such as Mexico, Lima or Bogota, Venezuelan cities, such as Caracas, Maracaibo, Mérida and Barcelona reproduced the colonial structure and culture enforced by civil and religious authorities throughout the colonies (Ellner S. a., 2007, p. 102). Therefore, the population were divided into *Peninsulares* (those coming from Spain to rule), *Criollos* (known as creoles those born in the new territories without mixing with natives), *Pardos* (Half-castes), *Indios* (aboriginal population) and *Negros*, who were not subjects of the Crown, as the others, and were brought as slaves initially from Africa, but also from another colonies, such as Cuba or Cartagena de Indias (Vilda, 1999, p. 84).

At the beginning of the 19th century, Venezuela started its process of independence from the Spanish empire (Vilda, 1999, p. 87). After declarations, proclamations, bloody battles and constitutional attempts to create a larger South American nation following the dreams of Simon Bolivar “The Liberator”, Venezuela proclaimed its first Constitution as an Independent nation in 1830. The long War of Independence—from 1811 to 1821— left the country in misery (Hilman, 1994, p. 31). The elite, which used to come from Spain to govern the General Captainship, was substituted by a new military elite who ruled the country throughout the 19th century, Venezuelan-born descendants of the Spanish (Hilman, 1994, p. 32).

This first century of the history of the Republic of Venezuela was characterized by anarchy and poverty, which caused continuous struggles among local powers (McCaughan, 2005, p. 45). Other characteristics of this period included militarism, authoritarian rulers known as “Caudillos”, little access to health care, training and formal education due to institutional weakness. This weakness also affected the Catholic Church, compared to the Church in Colombia or Brazil where it remained strong and highly influential in post-colonial society. In addition, the Federal War (1858-1863) decimated the population and destroyed
the minimum of economic infrastructure that survived the War of Independence (Hilman, 1994, p. 33).

The 20th century found Venezuela in chaos. Dictators ruled the country in sequence as a large “hacienda”. Nationalism became a strong ideology for defending the country against certain forces: European debtors, who blockade the coast and principal harbors demanding immediate payment of the debt for the War of Independence, and local leaders who threatened the fragile national government (Hilman, 1994, p. 34). However, a nation of poor half-castes, led by authoritarian rulers would forever change when Venezuela entered a new era of commercial oil production. This era started in 1914, after US companies drilled Zumaque No. 1 in the northeastern coast of the country, attracting the attention of more developed countries (Tinker Salas, 2009, p. 46), which felt a strong need for the resource because of industrialization and warfare.

The wealth that came from the concessions given by the government for the exploration and exploitation of oil served the purpose of the dictator Juan Vicente Gomez to embrace a project of rapid modernization (Hilman, 1994, p. 34). His fierce violence contrasted with his support for developing highways and harbors, means of transportation, elite culture and formal education (Vilda, 1999, p. 181). The wave of progress also benefited the Catholic Church, which started to receive large numbers of foreign missionaries to compensate for the lack of native-born priest and nuns. During this period, cities became centers of education, modernity and prosperity, attracting many from the rural areas in which progress seemed still distant and the lifestyle unchanged in centuries.

The main change in Venezuelan history however came not only from the increase of public expenditures, but also from the presence of foreign workers and investors in many areas of Venezuela and the building of the oil camps (Tinker Salas, 2009, p. 81). Americans
came with their families and lived a way that was never sought before in that area of the world. Traditional elites, such as landowners and traders, became interested in participating in the new style of living that all the employers of oil companies enjoyed. Secluded, in the beginning, from the rest of the country, the communities built by oil companies were provided with modern utilities and services, contrasting sharply with the lack of amenities experienced by the rest of Venezuelan inhabitants (Tinker Salas, 2009, p. 83).

After World War II, Caracas became a modern city, the capital of a highly centralized state (Hilman, 1994, p. 76). Policies of “Venezuelanization” of the oil industry began so that the staff of the oil companies would progressively all be Venezuelans (Tinker Salas, 2009, p. 185). Meanwhile, many non-educated people were left behind in the progress brought by the oil industry in cities and camps. However, the new elites living in oil camps and cities required low skilled laborers and domestic servants, and so a massive migration came from rural areas, and also from neighboring countries (Trigo, La Cultura en los Barrios, 1988, p. 294). Due to the huge informal work demand and the lack of housing policy for those without formal employment, these newcomers built “marginal misery belts” around every Venezuelan city – the so-called “barrios” (Bruce, 2008, p. 30).

Inequalities in the distribution of wealth are very much the case for any Latin American nation (Blofield, 2011, p. 2). However, in Venezuela it is also easy to observe a “perplexed society” (Hilman, 1994, p. 7), whose division relates not only to inequality of income, but also to the ways in which two different sectors of the society see life and confront their daily reality. Social fragmentation became evident when the Venezuelan army massacred rioters protesting the application of neoliberal economic measures in February 1989 (Hilman, 1994, p. 46). Three years later, an army faction led by Hugo Chávez conducted a failed coup d’état against the democratically elected government questioning the
legitimacy of a government who would support such a policy and response. While the elite applauded neoliberal economic measures, the political response of the people from the barrio, who were identified with the protesters, was expressed in polls and elections: their unconditional support for Hugo Chávez and his “Bolivarian” movement (López Maya, 2011, p. 218) when he came to the political arena in 1999 (Wilpert, 2007, p. 18).

In the current situation and especially after the death of the leader of the so-called “Bolivarian Revolution” Hugo Chávez, there has been an increase in manifestations of resentment from people in the lower economic strata towards those seen as privileged (Ellner S. a., 2004, p. 207). The government as well has continued a strategy of dominance in the media through a licensing control (López Maya, 2011, p. 234). The middle class people suffer from inflation and shortages in basic products, far beyond the fascination of the revolutionary rhetoric (López Maya, 2011, p. 231). Criminal violence has increased and many have left the country in search of the stability and prosperity that Venezuela seems to forget (Chirinos, 2004).

**Elite/Urban Culture in Venezuela**

Artifacts, symbols and attitudes from the Elite/Urban culture are located in the cities, especially in its financial core area and its residential developments. However, due to the global media, many individuals in the countryside show a sense of belonging to this culture when they have strong connections with the cities financial and political system. Men and women belong in equal proportion to this culture as well. For them, following Mazrui’s approach (outlined on page 3 above) culture serves the following social needs:

**Lenses for perception and cognition:** Venezuelans identify with Elite/Urban culture, and look at their daily lives through the lenses provided by Western ideas of modernity, progress, order and autonomy (Trigo, 2012, p. 109). Scientific knowledge is
highly appreciated, and so formal education is pursued. Successes in the world are predictable, and so a safe and secure environment is imperative in order to invest the resources available and to plan for the future. Life is not chaotic, but lived in a hierarchy following Thomism and Aristotelian approaches enforced by Catholicism (Hilman, 1994, p. 22). However, some members of the academic elites, by imitating their peers in the international Academy, also show favor to post-modernist approaches that threaten ideas spread through Catholicism, especially those relating to morality and critiques against individualistic behavior.

**Motives for human behavior:** people from this culture identify with the American motto “the pursuit of happiness”. They are convinced of the right of living to seek prosperity and productivity for them and for their “loved ones” (Ellner S. a., 2007, p. 198). Therefore, human rights are seen as the universal framework and guarantor of the legitimacy of the quest for this “good life”. However, due to the influence of the Catholic Church, social justice and charity for the needy and less fortunate counteract this pursuit.

**Criteria for evaluation:** American and European standards of beauty and merit are followed closely in the consideration of what is valuable or not in this culture. Therefore, fine arts, high technology and modernity are valued at the higher level, in comparison to other artifacts and ideas (Hilman, 1994, p. 78). The relationship with nature is ambivalent: it is appreciated, but in proportion to its enjoyment or potential for exploitation. Aristotelian approaches of natural law and order are also followed, and as a consequence people and events are valued according to their adherence to these formal and rigorous standards. Effectiveness also affects how time and space are perceived. Chaos and noise are rejected, and thus cities have to provide spaces and time in which solace, silence and order can be enjoyed.
A basis for identity: People see themselves as part of a global citizenry, with rights and duties for building a lifestyle that guarantees self-development and autonomy. However, being Venezuelan is not accidental because the beauty and bounty of the land and its history shape people’s worldviews (Hilman, 1994, p. 52). In this respect, people see themselves as in continuity with the few intellectuals and academics of the 19th and 20th centuries, who, in most cases, were good communicators of the ideas they learned during their experiences abroad, mainly in Western countries. Definitely, they do not see themselves as Spanish or Americans. They are Venezuelan, even though taking on a new nationality is seen as an advantage and that does not jeopardize their “gentilicio” (relation with their land of birth).

A mode of communication: Written communication, movies and TV are the most important means of communication for this culture. Spanish is carefully preserved as the unique language with interest in its orthography and consistency. For many, English is a second language. National literature transmits values and identity (Hernandez, 2005, p. 94). However, subtitled movies and cable TV have become a source of new values and models for identification in this culture. Also, this culture is highly connected through the Internet and the new social media, such as Facebook.

A basis for stratification: Appreciation for wealth and formal education are the basis of social stratification. Also, due to their interest in the elites, lineage and family names connected to historical figures play a role in the stratification of society. Every organization in society (military, Church, neighborhood associations) is expected to follow this stratification, and so hierarchy will keep order and effectiveness in achieving the goals of every sector in society. Some elements of “colorism” (preferences for lighter skinned people) in the large rainbow of browns are also present in this stratification, which can easily blur because of education and wealth. However, the creative input of the grassroots are
appreciated yet solely mediated through elite artists, novelists and intellectuals (Hernández, 2005, p. 94).

**The system of production and consumption:** Due to this close relationship with global culture, which is also urban, the system of production and consumption reflects free market and capitalist patterns (Trigo, La Cultura en los Barrios, 1988, p. 292). The state should be more a guarantor than a provider of the “goodies and services” needed by individuals in the society. In fact, people want to decide what to consume or wear, and want to work hard to earn money to buy it. However, the typical avoidance of state intervention in economies inspired in liberal ideas is changed by the fact that oil and its products, as principal products for consuming and exploitation in the country, belong to the State (Briceño-León, 2006, p. 51).

References to private schools, shopping malls, travels, Catholic symbols and images, learning another language, university degrees, beauty pageants, family names and universal human rights are proper to the Elite/Urban culture of Venezuela. However, it is important to clarify that belonging to this culture, with its multiple nuances and variations, does not mean to belong to any elite or to live in any city. We named this culture as “elite” and “urban” because it is often found in these places of the social strata and territory.

**Rural/Barrio Culture in Venezuela**

Rural and barrio culture develop a different set of relationships and worldviews that differ completely from Elite/Urban culture, even though they have many artifacts and symbols in common, such as some religious images and high-tech means of communication. This culture is located mainly in the countryside of the nation and in shantytowns named “barrios”. Barrios are spontaneous and informal self-made houses and large communities
built by migrants from rural areas and neighboring countries on invaded lands located often on the margins of the cities. These people came to the cities in search of a better standard of living, and adapted or reshaped their rural culture and values to respond to the complexities of urban life. To explain the function of this culture to the people who belong and identify with it, we will follow the approach of Pedro Trigo, a Venezuelan phenomenologist who has been living and working for more than 25 years in the slums of Venezuela (Trigo, 2012).

**Lenses for perception and cognition:** In the barrio, life is not taken for granted. The Barrio’s people presence in the city has not been fully recognized, and so they need to create their space among those they serve and work for (Trigo, 1988, p. 294). In that sense, they rely on their instinct in order to avoid danger and find opportunities of success, and on primary skills in order to be noticed and then hired. Studies and erudition are only means which never can fully represent or approximate what life really is and what that means for people in the barrio – their will to survive and escape from dehumanizing relationships in the city to which they don’t belong (Trigo, 2012, p. 94).

**Motives for human behavior:** The main motive for action in the people of the barrio is life as a value in itself. They are obsessed with living life with dignity and respect (Trigo, 1988, p. 294). This obsession brings a new logic and reasoning in which material resources and spirituality are subordinated to the protection, reproduction and celebration of life. Their relationships with the sacred, in nature, souls, images and rites are consequences of this obsession. Exciting activities, rituals and parties, occupy a large space for transcending the boredom of ordinary life. However, the protection of what they consider life can drive them to behaviors of verbal and physical violence.

**Criteria for evaluation:** Respect for the dignity of everyone’s life is the main criterion for evaluating what is beautiful and good (Trigo, 2012, p. 95). This respect leads
one to value the creativity and hard work showed in certain episodes of the barrio’s “flow”. Universal canons of beauty and good taste are ignored if the artifact has been made with creativity and effort. For that reason an ongoing mutual validation of life and a respect among barrio members are undeniable. That is done through gestures showing familiarity and even tenderness. However, if someone shows disrespect, such an attitude can also justify from others the denial of the life and dignity of that person.

**A basis for identity:** The identity of the people of the Rural/Barrio culture is embedded in their mutual relationships. Role, titles, principles and legal norms mean less that the opinion and gestures coming from your neighbor (Trigo, 1988, p. 296). The identity is built in everyday life and in everyday circumstances. For this reason, integrity and congruence in words and deeds is crucial. Authenticity and loyalty toward the people around one creates a network of solidarity and support among people of the barrio against individualism and exclusion.

**A mode of communication:** Gestures and oral narrative are privileged in the rural/barrio culture. For this reason, radio is the favorite mass medium, because reproduced stories and music that at the core of barrio culture. Labor and rhythm go together. However Television also has an important place in the houses of the barrio, because it makes possible a (virtual) relationship with those who are powerful; despite the fact that they are far away, they can enter daily into the lives of people through the TV screen (Hernandez, 2005, p. 97). In this sense, reading is boring because the relationship seems too mediated. Only short readings in newspapers and little pamphlets have room in barrio culture. In relation to the Internet, the possibility of finding, maintaining and strengthening relationships through social media seems to be the main motive for the increased use of that means of communication.
where it is available. Their language is Spanish, but with uses, accents, twists and idiomatic expressions that change from one region to another (Baylora, 1979, p. 82).

**Basis for stratification:** In Rural/Barrio culture, everybody, and even nature, deserves respect and care. However, respect enforced by law or social class is considered foreign and strange. Society is looked on as a collective knitted together in a fabric of relationships in which mutual respect is assured (Trigo, 2012, p. 98). Everybody sees him-or herself as “pueblo” in which “nadie es mas que nadie” (nobody is more than anybody else). However elders and children are favored for their strong needs. Money alone can assure higher consideration, if it is shared with the others for strengthening existing relationships. Also highly valued is courage, a quality praised when single mothers keep and raise their children (Ontiveros, 2008).

**A system of production and consumption:** Coming from the countryside without owning any land, people developed a household economy of cultivating their own crops and raising a few animals for the family’s subsistence. Barter transactions were frequent, even after leaving the fields and coming to the city, because they “ferment” human relationships (Leon Cedeño, 2007). Scarcity of resources and a search of better prices and goods for the family recalled the hunting for survival in the rural areas. Nevertheless, barrio people are high consumers of all the goods to which dignity of life and the keeping up of personal relationships are attached (Trigo, 2012, p. 113), such as music devices and cell phones. Also, because most of them came to the city for manual labor, an arena for creativity is limited to their short moments of leisure and the tiny, personal space of one’s own in the overcrowded barrios, full of cement, steel bars and bricks.

References to manual work, craft, music, parties, neighborhood, slangs, originality, life and loyalty are the property of the barrio/rural culture of Venezuela. However, it is
important to clarify that belonging to this culture, with its multiple nuances and variations, does not mean to live in the barrio or in the countryside. We named this culture as “rural” and “barrio” because these places are the spatial references for this culture in Venezuela.

**The Cycle of the Venezuelan Cultural Dynamic**

The notion of culture in Venezuela shows its dynamicity, and parallels what happened in the history of the notion of culture (Avruch, 1988, p. 15). Efforts to address the inadequacies of culture by cultural anthropologist, such as Avruch, is based on similar experiences to what has happened in Venezuela at the end of the 20th century. In fact, culture has long been associated with what we referred to above as Elite/Urban culture, and therefore they have wrongly considered this elite culture as homogeneous, stable, uniformly distributed, merely individual, subject to custom, and timeless in Venezuelan society.

The project of westernization of Venezuelan society that came with the oil industry labeled as “culture” only those values, artifacts and ideas that came from Western society or, at least, were in the interest of their intellectuals. Local culture was looked upon with curiosity and delight. However, the “culture” belonged only to, and could be transformed only by, those who live in the city or in the oil camps, and it was this “culture” which distinguished them from the rural, underdeveloped parts of Venezuela. Elites had the power to validate which activities, rites, ceremonies, habits and artifacts belong or not to the “Venezuelan culture”.

Elites looked with curiosity on and had their own representation of rural Venezuela. However when people from the countryside came to the cities in search for life with dignity, the culture produced by them lost all interest for the elite. Newcomers to the city had to learn westernized manners for survival. Therefore, the “barrio” became an unknown place for elites and a kind of “ghetto” for those who did not want to change their rural culture. In
addition, the rural culture in the city became barrio culture when the people developed creative ways to protect and transmit to further generations what they considered valuable and different to the pervasive westernized culture of the city.

During the 1960’s and 1970’s the encounters of the two cultures happened only in ordinary life, in workplaces and political parties. Elite culture suppressed any consideration of labeling barrio people as “cultural” subjects. On the contrary, they were called to reject all their “vices” and “bad habits” through education and discipline inflicted by the most representative members of the elite culture: educational institutions and the Church. The first big clash between the two cultures occurred in 1989 in the aftermath of *El Caracazo*, the riots in Caracas in response to IMF policies, and the subsequent massacre of young workers living in the slums by the army (McCaughan, 2005, p. 65).

*El Caracazo* is known as a turning point in the Venezuelan sociopolitical process (Ellner S. a., 2004, p. 76). The event caused the emergence of a cry for accountability of the repression as criminal and human rights issues. However, hidden perceptions and stereotypes in members of both cultural groups regarding the other started to surface. Members of Elite/Urban culture justified the IMF measures, while inhabitants of the barrio justified the riots as an act of self-preservation. Very soon negative attitudes also flourished among the two groups, and the denial of justice for the victims of *El Caracazo*, viewed as a prolongation of the denial of the people of the barrio as cultural subjects, resulted in further polarization.

The dynamic became competitive, when people of the barrio realized that they could compete with the elite culture and not be seen anymore solely as clients or servants. This happened due to the work of minor leftist-oriented political parties, which in their campaigns raised awareness about the real possibilities of change coming from the barrio. People from the barrio have always been objects of political campaigns by promising them a share in the
benefits of the dominant elite culture. Now, the promise coming from new political leaders had changed. At the forefront now would be the way in which they face their reality, with all their own cultural values and interpretations: dignity of life overall, even over wealth and autonomy.

In order to perpetuate the conflict, and to increase as a consequence the electoral support for political change, emergent political leaders with this cultural sensibility, such as Hugo Chávez, worked to stress and widen the gap of cultural differences (Lozada, 2008, p. 90). The discourse for change was maintained until new leaders achieved political power through the democratic electoral process in 1999. Once these new leaders attained power, they began to stereotype and produce self-fulfilling prophecies to maintain negative perceptions between members of the two cultures (Lozada, 2008, p. 99). After 14 years, processes of “sanctification” and “demonization” in both sides of the societal spectrum are common in the cultural competition that has become viral and highly political (López Maya, 2011, p. 231).

How the Venezuelan political conflict is rooted in cultural conflict

The current political conflict in Venezuela has many roots and nuances. It participates in the complex nature of any social conflict. Venezuela currently is an arena of fierce political and ideological competition, in which parties, political movements and the military are deeply involved. However, in the analysis of the political conflict, cultural differences have received very little attention. This cultural blindness, in my opinion, is due to the same polarization in which Venezuelan society is trapped.

In fact, a destructive dynamics in conflict tends to wipe out the perceived enemy, first in the mind, and then in the world (Augsburger, 1992, p. 247). Those who are deeply worried
about how the conflict is pervading and destroying Venezuelan institutionalism and society are still working with the categories given by the elite and the westernized culture to which they belong. Based on the lenses for perception, knowledge and basis of stratification given by the Elite/Urban culture, they characterize the other group by stressing their violence, irrationality and their inability to elect leaders who can ensure productivity and autonomy. For this reason, the cultural roots of the conflict are not fully acknowledged by the elites.

On the contrary, the ability of the leftist political leaders to acknowledge the cultural roots of the conflict gave them the tools for perpetuating non-collaborative dynamics for their political purposes. By widening the gap, they make sure that people from the barrio culture will not see another alternative for obtaining the elite’s respect for the dignity of their life other than through maintaining political power. In fact, leftist politicians have achieved success in almost every electoral processes in the 21st century, even in the midst of an “evidently” deteriorated country according to the perception, opinion and the media linked to the Elite/Urban culture (Martínez, 2013).

Even after the death of Hugo Chávez, his political movement remains in political power through elections, because it is still using the framework provided by the Comandante in addressing and perpetuating the cultural conflict. Chavez’s designation of Nicolás Maduro, a former bus driver with no experience in university education, as his successor as Vice-president and then as candidate for the presidency, seemed to be made for accentuating the cultural gap that ensures the perpetuation of cultural conflict. In addition, an aggressive communications strategy to maintain governmental hegemony (López Maya, 2011, p. 234) as well as the use of symbols, such as Chavez’s signature on huge murals on popular housing projects built – for dignity of life— in the core areas of cities, all show that political conflict
is strongly linked with the maintenance of the destructive and competitive cultural dynamic that became evident in the aftermath of *El Caracazo* riots in 1989.

Therefore, beside economic, social and political factors, cultural differences have played and are still playing a leading role in the political conflict of Venezuela. Attitudes of denial or ignorance towards the cultural dynamic in Venezuela solely favor the perpetuation of the conflict, which is currently serving the political and ideological purposes of the government. Those who are seeking a more peaceful society and lessening the confrontation in the political arena are called on to develop new categories in order to readdress the Venezuelan cultural dynamic and guide it towards a more collaborative and creative dynamic.

**Suggestions**

In light of the discussion above on the importance of culture in the current political climate in Venezuela, a political solution is not enough to solve the political conflict in the country. In other words, relying solely on the results of elections and other political strategies, Venezuela will not achieve harmony and peace in the nation. Thus, it is necessary that there be an intervention in the cultural conflict in which the political conflict is rooted. Through this intervention, the dynamic of conflict can go from destructive to creative and collaborative.

This intervention cannot be seen just as an “educational” project, so that people from the barrio can appreciate the “lenses” of the elites. Nor is it suggested that people from the elites just have to change their worldviews by experiencing an economy of subsistence in which life is not taken for granted, as the people from the barrio have experienced for many years, developing their culture in response. On the contrary, it is necessary to find alternatives
to the loss of face, and threats to one’s dignity from “the other side” can be dealt with collaboratively and without resorting to competition.

For this purpose the creation of spaces, in which esteem for the other and self-esteem are achieved outside the political game, will entrench mutual exploration and common needs can be recognized and satisfied. These spaces cannot be forced from a member of one culture onto those of the other. Mutual recognition of each other as cultural subjects would happen when people from the barrio would feel safe enough to open the doors of their house, allowing those identified with the elite culture to build a relationship that seems valuable in itself, and not only to receive the response the elite would expect, based on their market-based, westernized perceptions (Trigo, 2012, p. 95).

Training for the acquisition of cultural and conflict fluency skills (LeBaron, 2003) by members of the Elite/Urban and Rural/Barrio cultures seems necessary. However, they will be achieved not like a pragmatic strategy to regain or maintain political power, but to develop an accurate trans-cultural communication. Lack of satisfaction and cultural conflict are inextricably linked in this conflict. This channel of communication will make it possible to share and mutually validate the common needs of both groups, whose lack of satisfaction keeps the flame of the conflict alive, and extends permanently the invitation to see the productive side of the cultural conflict (Augsburger, 1992, p. 64).

Venezuela needs to escape from the illusion of harmony (Lozada, 2008, p. 94) that has blurred the vision of many in addressing the cultural conflict. Only by the recognition of each other as concrete persons, with attention and respect exercised from one party to the other in ordinary activities and life, respect will become reciprocated. This social and cultural maturity in recognizing and accepting the differences and ambiguities in all situations will forge not only tolerance of contradictory impulses, yet also spark creative “insights”
(Augsburger, 1992, p. 66). These insights will be helpful for finding shared bridges, mutually defining fences and spaces for the preservation of the two cultures and their collaborative development to achieve the fullness of humanity to which they are called. Needless to say to achieve this level of cultural maturity in the Venezuelan conflict can take years, or maybe, generations. However, the length of the process is no excuse for delaying an appropriate culturally aware intervention process to develop.

Conclusion

In conclusion, cultural differences and the destructive cycle in the Venezuelan cultural dynamic is an important cause of the current political and social conflict in Venezuela. In fact, based on the theoretical framework provided by Augsburger’s explanation of cultural dynamics and Mazrui’s characteristics of culture, it is possible to distinguish two main cultures interlocked in a destructive cycle in Venezuela: one coming from an adaptation of the Western-Global culture labeled here as Urban/Elite, and other ignored by it called Rural/Barrio culture.

For this reason, an appropriate intervention in the cultural conflict is necessary for resolving social conflict in Venezuela, because the ignorance of the cultural dynamic in Venezuela solely favors the perpetuation of the conflict, which is currently serving political and ideological purposes. Those who are seeking a more peaceful society and a lessening of the confrontation in the political arena are called on to add this new perspective to look at the complexity of the Venezuelan social conflict and to develop new categories in order to readdress the Venezuelan cultural dynamic and guide it towards a more collaborative and creative dynamic. However, as the cultural conflict took years to develop, cultural maturity and mutual acceptance will also take time, yet there is no excuse to delay the creation and implementation of an intervention process, at least on a small scale and right now.
Bibliography


