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## The Rise of Causa R in Venezuela

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### Introduction

This chapter analyzes the rise of an alternative popular actor in the Venezuelan political system, Causa Radical, better known as Causa R. This organization first emerged on the Venezuelan political scene following the 1988 national elections, when the party won three seats in the Chamber of Deputies. The first elections for state governors, held in December 1989, led to victory for Andrés Velásquez, its candidate for the state of Bolívar. Three years later, in 1992, municipal and state elections enabled Causa R to retain that office, and increase its hold over mayoralties and city councils throughout the state. One of its more charismatic leaders, Aristóbulo Istúriz, whose political career began as a leader of the Venezuelan teachers' association, earned a surprising victory in the contest for mayor of Caracas. This provided an additional impulse to the organization, and running as its presidential candidate in the December 1993 elections, Governor Velásquez obtained 22 per cent of the vote in a tight race among four candidates.

To understand the remarkable and growing role of Causa R, we must take into account the severe sociopolitical crisis that has affected Venezuela in recent years. This crisis was expressed most dramatically in the 'Caracazo' of 1989 and two failed coup attempts which took place in 1992. Yet this is not a sufficient explanation: the process of state reform which has unfolded since the mid-1980s, and the evolution of Causa R itself from its origins in the early 1970s to the present, are key to explaining the party's recent success.

The first part of this chapter briefly reviews the decentralizing reform implemented at the end of the 1980s. The second part describes the birth and evolution of Causa R through 1989, when it began its sustained transformation into a political party, first at a regional level and then on a nationwide basis. The third section follows the development of Causa R since 1989, analyzing its triumphs in various elections and identifying shifts in its discourse which have resulted from the rapid expansion of its influence in the Venezuelan political system. The final section offers some conclusions about the rise of Causa R and its future as a representative of popular sectors in national politics.

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## 1. Reform of the State and Decentralization<sup>2</sup>

The emergence of Causa R was facilitated enormously by the process of state reform initiated in 1984 by the decree establishing the Presidential Commission for State Reform (COPRE). The reforms, which were enacted in 1988 and 1989, following numerous delays, helped to establish new channels of mediation between state and society during a period when a critical economic situation and the deterioration of traditional political parties threatened to bring about the collapse of the political democracy that had functioned in Venezuela since 1958.

Indeed, since the close of the administration of Social Christian President Luis Herrera Campíns (1979–83), Venezuelan society increasingly exhibited signs of disequilibria, which directly undermined the prestige of hegemonic actors. Relations among these actors were characterized by growing tensions derived from government efforts to bring about changes in the economic model. The 1982 takeover of the Banco de los Trabajadores de Venezuela revealed the first in a series of corruption scandals; in February of the following year the national currency, the bolívar, was devalued following twenty-two consecutive years of stability, a measure that for many observers symbolized the end of an era during which Venezuela prospered through oil rents.

These developments led the candidates in the 1983 presidential campaign to promise solutions to overcome the crisis. The eventual winner, Jaime Lusinchi of Acción Democrática (AD), offered a Social Pact, consisting of a negotiated accord between the state and the various organized social forces. In the short term the Pact aimed to resolve the economic crisis, and in the longer term it purported to correct the social and political ills which affected Venezuelan society.

In December 1984 the newly elected president fulfilled his campaign promise by decreeing the creation of COPRE and naming thirty-three members representative of elites across the Venezuelan political spectrum. With a mandate to advise the Executive on any matters requested of it, and to develop comprehensive proposals for state reform, COPRE worked intensively from its creation to the end of the Lusinchi administration in early 1989. In 1985 it drafted a series of reports offering a comprehensive and coherent diagnosis of the principal obstructions to sociopolitical development in Venezuela as they had emerged since 1958. At the same time, building on consultations with individuals and organizations from all sectors of the political arena, in 1986 COPRE began to present the Executive—and thus shape public opinion—with a series of proposals that had generated a strong consensus within the Commission. From the outset, COPRE emphasized that the decentralization of power was an essential aspect of any expansion and rationalization of democratization. From 1986 onward, decentralization emerged as

<sup>2</sup> This section summarizes freely the results of research carried out by the Area Sociopolítica of CENDES, portions of which have been published in at least three publications, including López-Maya *et al.* (1989); Gómez Calcaño and López-Maya (1990), and López-Maya (1991). Citations are provided for texts other than those mentioned above.

one of the crucial elements of state reform in Venezuela. Three COPRE documents merit attention as critical elements to the development of major proposals for decentralization.

In May 1986, COPRE published its first document entitled 'Proposals for Immediate Political Reforms' (COPRE 1986). Beginning with proposals to democratize parties and to modify existing electoral mechanisms, the document went on to propose the implementation of a constitutional provision, suspended since 1961, which called for direct elections of governors of federal entities or states. For COPRE, the failure to apply this provision both contradicted the principles of the constitution and encouraged excessive centralization. In addition, the document pointed out the need to modify the Organic Law of Municipal Government in order to restore the municipality as a 'primary and autonomous political unit'; achieve a division of powers at the municipal level of government; and to create the office of mayor, elected by secret ballot and by universal, direct suffrage.

Two documents related exclusively to decentralization were proposed in 1987 (COPRE 1987a, 1987b). The first outlined a brief diagnosis of the situation facing federal bodies, that is, the states, the Federal District, and Federal Territories established in the 1961 Constitution, and recognized that in practice, they had lost their autonomy, since their constituent communities did not participate decisively in the choice of governing officials.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, these authorities lacked real power, since they had lost faculties in favor of the central government and did not have the institutional capacity to raise resources necessary to permit self-administration.

This first document analyzed the existing centralization of public services and concluded that Venezuela maintained a fictitious federal structure. The federal units did not provide services to residents—that was being done by the central government. Nevertheless, they spent the resources allocated to them in reproducing this federal structure, which generated bureaucratic employment of little utility that impeded efficient administration and lent itself to clientelist practices.

In response to this general diagnosis, the Commission first recommended the restoration of the federal and municipal entities as the ideal units for channeling a coherent process of decentralization. By doing so, COPRE rejected other models of regionalization which had shaped national planning policies, proposing instead a return to the territorial division envisioned in the constitution. It noted that the suprastatist approaches that had been developed in the area of planning only sought to decentralize administration but never had the purpose of transferring political power.

In addition, COPRE recommended a series of complementary reforms, some of which were already present in the 1986 document, including: strengthening the

<sup>3</sup> Governors were designated by the President, while deputies to the Legislative Assemblies of each federal unit were elected by direct, secret, and universal suffrage through a system of closed lists. Each voter cast only one vote, which in addition to the slate for legislative assembly deputies, included the slates for the Senate, the Chamber of Deputies, and the Municipal Council. Thus, voters expressed a preference for a party, and the parties chose who would serve.

decision-making powers of state and municipal governments; direct election of governors and mayors; electoral system reform enabling regional and local officials to be chosen by their constituents, rather than by political parties; and reforms in the administration of federal entities to guarantee a professionalized civil service (entrance exams, job security for efficient functionaries, adequate salaries and guarantee of employment rights, and judicial access).

COPRE did not recommend increasing the economic role of regional state administrations, but suggested instead that mechanisms be established to redistribute available resources. For example, COPRE called for a restructuring of local tax systems in order to improve collection. COPRE argued that if political and administrative reforms were implemented, they would generate the sense of local identity and commitment of local authorities and their constituents necessary to bring about improvement in regional governance.

Some of these proposals stimulated strong opposition from President Lusinchi and the AD. The traditional leadership of the governing party saw, correctly, that the reforms had the potential to change the rules of the political game, and thus the prevailing distribution of power. In contrast, these same proposals obtained a great deal of support from opposition parties, and especially from interest groups of all types, including neighborhood associations, the media, and professionals, all of whom saw in reform the possibility of opening spaces for political expression and action. Causa R could be included among these groups, although at this point it was just one of many microscopic (except for the MAS) groups on the left of the Venezuelan political spectrum.

The result of this confrontation was a broad debate and significant tensions, as the governing party used a strategy of delay in an effort to sink the reforms. Nevertheless, during the electoral campaign of 1988, the government was forced to make concessions. Moreover, the Caracazo of February 1989 further pressured the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez to keep some of its earlier promises. The period between 1988 and the first year of the Pérez administration witnessed the approval of the Law of Election and Recall of State Governors (1988 and 1989), the Law on the Time Periods of the State Authorities (1989), the Organic Law of Decentralization, Delimitation, and Transfer of Policy Responsibilities (1989), and the New Organic Law of Municipal Government (1988 and 1989). These measures opened new possibilities for changing the functioning of the state and the political system.

## **2. The Origins of Causa R and its Trajectory until Implementation of the Decentralization Laws**

The original nucleus of the political organization, officially registered in the 1970s as the Causa Radical, consisted of a small group that split from the Venezuelan

Communist Party (PCV) in 1970 and that did not join the majority of party dissidents in founding the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) in January 1971.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were a period of great social effervescence in Venezuela. The first government of Rafael Caldera (1969–74) faced significant mobilizations of students and workers. By now efforts to reach power and to bring about 'revolution' through armed struggle had been defeated, and as a result the government took the initiative of granting an amnesty to guerrillas in a so-called pacification policy. Meanwhile, the political parties involved in the armed struggle, the PCV and the Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR), were torn by internal disputes, a logical outcome of the failure of their sociopolitical project (López-Maya *et al.* 1989).

The most important offshoot of the PCV gave rise to the MAS, which would soon become the third most important actor in the Venezuelan party system. The ideological positions of the MAS were derived both from a fierce criticism of the conception of the party which had characterized the PCV—and which was widely blamed for the failure of the armed struggle—and from the ideas of the Venezuelan student movement, which had been influenced by its European counterpart and by the 1960s 'New Left' (Ellner 1988: 43 *et seq.*). The ideas of democracy and socialism became the new focus for debate on the left during this period. While the MAS did not obtain sufficient votes during the 1970s and 1980s to be able to compete with the two major parties for control over the Venezuelan government, it played a relevant role in the Congress and participated in the multiple alliances and traditional negotiations of the political system.

At the founding convention of the MAS in January 1971, one of its leaders, Alfredo Maneiro, clarified his differences with his comrades. As one of the *comandantes* of the armed struggle in the eastern part of the country, Maneiro had for eighteen years been an activist in the PCV, where he rose to become a member of the Central Committee. He was also one of the protagonists of the party's internal rupture, and he had been named a member of the Central Committee of the MAS for the convention. Nonetheless, Maneiro was a reluctant participant in the meeting, disagreeing on a wide range of matters such as inclusion in the MAS of sectors of the PCV that he considered more conservative than those of himself and of Teodoro Petkoff.<sup>4</sup> These were the sectors of the party that had been least critical of the PCV's actions and most willing to reconcile with the past. As a result, Maneiro chose to break with the MAS, though only about ten people would leave along with him.<sup>5</sup>

Within this small nucleus, comprising former mid-level militants or rank-and-file activists of the PCV, Maneiro would become the undisputed leader. His papers

<sup>4</sup> Teodoro Petkoff, the founder of the MAS, is one of the best-known and most prestigious representatives of the Venezuelan left, and has been President of his party as well as its presidential candidate.

<sup>5</sup> Among them, Pablo Medina, José Lira, and Lucas Matheus, all of whom are today key leaders of the Causa R.

reveal his own intellectual talents and political instincts (Maneiro *et al.* 1971; Maneiro 1986). As he notes in his writings, although during 1971 informal contacts continued among the members of the group, the idea of establishing a party seemed implausible in those initial months. In his words, 'There existed nine chances out of ten that the group would lose its initial character, its confidence in itself, and would end up no longer insisting on the political principles it was based upon' (Maneiro *et al.* 1971: 9).

#### 'VENEZUELA 83' AND CAUSA R

Even though Maneiro hesitated in establishing a political organization that would embody elements that seemed absent from either the PCV or the MAS, he quickly decided to act to ensure the continuation of ideas that he and a series of other people, most of them youth linked to popular movements, had been discussing. The result was the publication in 1971 of a collection of the group's writings in a book called *Notas negativas* (Maneiro *et al.* 1971).

This group was known as 'Venezuela 83', and it constituted the immediate antecedent to La Causa R.<sup>6</sup> In *Notas negativas* Maneiro analyzed the failure of the armed struggle in Venezuela, sharply criticizing both the structure and functioning of the PCV, and reflected on one of his obsessions, the role of the vanguard of the popular movement. He also discussed the problems of efficiency and the revolutionary quality of organizations which purport to represent the people. He stated that very few organizations were notable for their internal organization, their freshness, creativity, or their relations with and sensitivity to the masses (Maneiro *et al.* 1971: 29–33). The final writings of *Notas negativas* laid out the conceptual framework of what would later become Causa R.

In effect, Maneiro believed that the formation of a party should not be conceived as the beginning of a revolutionary movement, but rather the other way around, a party was the product of a revolutionary movement at a certain level of its development (Maneiro *et al.* 1971: 39). He said that it was necessary to give political content and shape to the awesome and spontaneous capacity of the masses to mobilize and to participate in the infinite and various forms of the popular movement, with the conviction that the masses themselves would resolve the question of their political leadership. Instead of departing from a given political structure, it was necessary to believe in the capacity of the popular movement to take in its own hands the task of producing a new leadership from within its own ranks. The construction of a vanguard linked to the mass movement, rooted in its practice and experience, was also, in Maneiro's view, an ideological construction (Maneiro *et al.* 1971: 39–41).

<sup>6</sup> Maneiro named it Venezuela 83 to associate it with the year (1983) in which the majority of oil contracts in the hands of transnational oil companies would revert to the Venezuelan government. Maneiro understood that this process would be crucial for Venezuelan society and argued in favor of moving up the date for the process.

These ideas should be seen in the context of the debate about forms of revolutionary struggle that took place among intellectuals and activists of the Venezuelan left during the 1960s, a debate that was, in turn, inserted into the broader context of the Latin American left. In the Venezuelan case, given the magnitude of the guerrilla defeat, but also the intellectual capacity and political diversity of its leaders, the debate generated a profound questioning of *foquista* strategies, of extrapolations from other experiences, and of the authoritarianism of Communist parties. It should be noted that the Venezuelan guerrillas were drawn for the most part from middle-class and university backgrounds, and that the PCV and its offshoots were not the only participants in the armed struggle. On the contrary, dissident factions of Acción Democrática, the so-called MIR, were also involved. Moreover, by the end of the decade, much of the membership of these groups recognized that the conditions prevailing at the time, and the military defeat they had suffered, precluded any return to a revolutionary struggle. Thus, *comandantes* such as Maneiro and Petkoff, the latter one of the founders of the MAS, strove to achieve a new articulation with the popular movement through theoretical and practical proposals adapted to the specific conditions of Venezuela and to the impossibility, in the short and medium term, of using violence as an instrument of struggle.

In keeping with these ideas, the small group that formed Venezuela 83 decided not to create an organization with a formal charter, bureaucracy, and statutes, but rather emphasized the need for a party to be in a permanent process of formation. For this they believed it necessary to dedicate all of their efforts to the construction of a type of vanguard that would ensue from the encounter between their own group, which they characterized as a product of the crisis of Marxism, and the leadership that emerged from the spontaneous movements of the masses. Maneiro often said that popular leadership was being developed constantly in everyday activities, in popular baseball games for instance, and that it was essential to seek out and interact with this kind of leadership.

During 1971 Maneiro and his group sought to evaluate what type of mass movements existed in Venezuela that could be tapped in order to create a vanguard. The three they selected were the student movement of the Central University (UCV), the workers' movement of the Orinoco Steel Works (Sidor), and the popular movement in the Catia district in Caracas. The UCV was at the moment enjoying considerable dynamism as a result of the process of university reform. Sidor had recently experienced a highly significant, albeit unsuccessful strike that had resulted in the dismissal of 514 workers. There was much discontent among workers, and an alternative labor movement was being formed outside the traditional union organizations. The community of Catia, Maneiro said, was virtually a city inside Caracas, with half a million inhabitants and its own upper, middle, and lower classes. It had a long tradition of militancy, was relatively free of the political riff-raff so widespread in other communities, and its population was more stable than the poor neighborhoods of Petare in the east of the city (Maneiro 1986: 146–52).

Although the project may have seemed far-fetched given the ragged nature of

the initial group, Maneiro and his colleagues envisioned a slow, meticulous process which, over the short and medium term, might begin to have a positive impact on the political system. Thus, in 1972 Pablo Medina, one of the group's members, went to Ciudad Guayana with the task of creating an organization within Sidor.

The state-owned Orinoco Steel Works has been one of the principal industrial projects of Venezuelan democracy. Located in a sparsely populated region in the south of the country, the steel works derived a set of comparative advantages offered by the location, among them a large supply of hydroelectric power. Thanks to the dynamism generated by this industry, and later by the establishment of an aluminum industry, Guayana City became from the 1960s onwards a pole that attracted internal migrants who, over time, constituted a population without historic ties to the region and defined by its status as laborers in state industry and employees in the public sector. However, in contrast with the industrial areas of the central and coastal regions of the country, working and living conditions in Ciudad Guayana were hard, workplace safety and hygiene were poor, and the state had been disinclined to play the role of paternalist owner. The workers of Sidor endured these conditions for years before gaining a collective contract. The potential for militancy anticipated by Venezuela 83 was derived from these characteristics of the community. Thus, when Medina set out for Ciudad Guayana this was also the destination of other left organizations, although the traditional parties appeared not to have anticipated what was to result from conditions in the region.

Pablo Medina took a job as a worker on the night shift and began to publish a newspaper entitled *El Matancero*. At first the paper was clandestine, due to the authoritarian practices of local unionism, dominated by the corrupt bureaucracy associated primarily with AD (Medina 1988: 47). The first issues were written by Medina virtually on his own, with the help of a few activists from Caracas who came down on weekends.<sup>7</sup> However, by the end of 1972 *Matancero* included ten workers. A year later, an electrical worker, Andrés Velásquez, had begun to collaborate with the group. In 1974, Velásquez gave his first speech before the Portón de Sidor,<sup>8</sup> speaking in favor of the *Matancero* slate in the union elections. It was around this time that he met Alfredo Maneiro (Sesto 1992: 18).

Five years later, in 1977, Tello Benítez, another leader who had arisen, as members of the Causa R would put it, from the popular movement, gained a seat on Sutiss, the Sidor union. This initiated the rise of the 'new unionism' represented by *Matancero*. In addition to the honesty they exhibited in contrast to the traditional unionism, the *Matanceros* struggled for goals such as democratic participation of workers in union decisions that affected them, an issue that was

<sup>7</sup> Morella Barreto, interview of 25 Oct. 1993.

<sup>8</sup> The Portón de Sidor is the principal door through which workers enter and leave the plant. This is where the buses stop to take workers home or to bring them to the factory. At the beginning and end of each shift there is a considerable concentration of workers and employees, and for that reason it was an excellent place from which to address them. Velásquez was known as 'the leader of the Portón'.

non-existent in unionism in the region, and workplace safety and hygiene, which were ignored by other labor leaders. At the negotiating table Benítez debated with both management and with the mainstream union, while Velásquez kept the workers informed at the Portón (Sesto 1992: 47).

Two years later, in the 1979 elections, the El Matancero slate, headed by Velásquez, won control over the Sidor union. In response, following a series of conflicts, in 1981 the union was taken over by FETRAMETAL, the parent union of Sutiss, which has always been controlled by AD unions. Velásquez, Tello, Benítez, and several other workers were dismissed from their jobs, but seven years later, in 1988, the union regained its autonomy and union elections again were held. Matancero triumphed anew, and traditional unionism had lost the battle. It was during this period that the fame and expansion of the alternative unionism, which by this time encompassed some forty unions and labor organizations across the country, began to grow (Sesto 1992: 43).

The other mass movements which Venezuela 83, or Causa R, sought to influence enjoyed occasional successes, but never consolidated the organizational nucleus achieved in the case of the Matancero unionism.

In the case of the UCV, while the process of university reform was under way, the group organized around the newspaper PRAG played an important role in the Schools of Engineering and Architecture. PRAG was founded in mid-1971 by José Rosales and José Lira, and continued later by a leadership coming out of the League of Students, most notably by Edgar Yajure in Engineering and Federico Villanueva in Architecture.<sup>9</sup> Offering a harsh critique of the *politiquería* of the political parties and of the corruption of some parties—including the PCV and the MIR—in the University, PRAG demanded a restoration of student dignity, trampled by the government's 1969 seizure of control over the university.<sup>10</sup>

The incorporation of the PRAG into Causa R gave the latter a significant presence in the UCV, but introduced tensions inside the organization, stemming primarily from leadership struggles and personality differences between Maneiro and Yajure. The tensions culminated in a confrontation over whether to place more or less emphasis on theoretical and conceptual debates.<sup>11</sup> In September 1976, PRAG was expelled from the Causa R after Maneiro rejected the trajectory of its demands regarding goals and strategies. Among other things, PRAG favored the creation of a research center and greater attention to the training of cadres, something that Maneiro considered inconsistent with his vision of Causa R as a 'movement of movements'.<sup>12</sup> After publishing a few more issues of the paper, PRAG was dissolved in 1979.

Maneiro attributed the failure of Causa R to consolidate an intellectual movement such as PRAG to the negative impact that the Venezuelan oil boom after 1974 had on the country's intellectuals (Maneiro 1986: 241-7). For those who departed,

<sup>9</sup> Farruco Sesto, interview of 18 Nov. 1993.

<sup>10</sup> Edgar Yajure, interview of 26 Nov. 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

however, the absence of intellectuals was a result of the excessively pragmatic tendencies of the organization founded by Maneiro, a characteristic which over time would encourage an *ouvriériste* bias and a lack of clarity in its political programs.<sup>13</sup> In the Universidad de los Andes, BAFLE, a group similar to the PRAG, was created, but it had less impact and disappeared once its founders left the university.

In 1980 Maneiro sought again to open space to facilitate interchange and debate among Venezuelan intellectuals. Known as 'La Casa del Agua Mansa' (Maneiro 1986: 241-7), this project involved thirty to forty people and included the Agua Mansa publications, edited by Farruco Sesto. Agua Mansa was to organize, develop, and present the ideas and key characteristics of Causa R.<sup>14</sup> Once again problems emerged similar to those which affected the previous expansion of Causa R and PRAG. Thaelman Urguelles and Angel Cacique, among others, led one group while Sesto headed another. The debate over the role of Agua Mansa became especially heated, with Sesto seeing it as a space for promoting open discussion, and Urguelles arguing that it needed to take positions on issues facing the intellectual and artistic community. These difficulties of deriving a consensus regarding conception and leadership led to the downfall of the project.<sup>15</sup>

The group known first as 'Catia 83', and later as Pro-Catia, had a long and difficult beginning during the early 1970s as it attempted to launch a publication entitled *Pro-Catia*, but it eventually came to oversee a wide range of activities. Maneiro believed that newspapers were the most appropriate and democratic medium for recruiting militants, in contrast to what he called the 'convince by promising' practices of the traditional parties (Maneiro 1986: 50). The initial group that composed Catia included, among others, the Mora brothers and Denis Favier and Alberto 'the scientist' Luquen.<sup>16</sup> Pro-Catia supported a wide range of community activities and political initiatives, among the most noteworthy of which was the collection in 1976 of 24,000 signatures to promote a reform of the Organic Law of the Municipal Council. Pro-Catia also sought to make Council members representative of their constituencies and to establish procedures for popular recall (Medina 1993: 47). Even though more than half a million people lived in Catia, no member of the Caracas City Council had ever come from that community. In addition to political demands, Pro-Catia launched a campaign to establish popular grocery stores for the neighborhood; requested trash compactors to resolve sanitation problems; argued for the construction of a public park; and organized *pelotica de goma* tournaments in response to the lack of sufficient recreational facilities (Resumen 1982a). The Pro-Catia group weakened and was finally dissolved during the early 1980s, primarily because of the tension and eventual division within the Causa R which occurred in 1983 after Maneiro's death. Conflict over the presidential candidacy of Andrés Velásquez would be the principal cause.<sup>17</sup> It is worth emphasizing that each of these groups or movements operated

<sup>13</sup> Barreto, interview of 25 Oct. 1993.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Luis E. Lander, interview of 11 Nov. 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Sesto, interview of 18 Nov. 1993.

<sup>17</sup> Sesto, interview of 18 Nov. 1993; Barreto, interview of 25 Oct. 1993.

relatively independently from what was known first as Venezuela 83 and, beginning in 1973, as Causa R. This identity became a mechanism for establishing linkages among them. The newspaper *Causa R* began to appear in February 1973 and increasingly served to give an identity to the organization of the same name.<sup>18</sup> The R was written backwards purely by accident, according to its founder, Sesto, but later it became common to assert that this was because Venezuela was a backwards (upside down) country. And though many say that the symbol had no meaning,<sup>19</sup> nothing was done to block its association with the concept of 'revolution'. According to Yajure, the organization lacked formal structures, and had no founding charter, not to mention any statutes, but it did have a selective mechanism for incorporating new members. As reflected in the writings of Maneiro, it was a movement of movements, or 'a sort of complex of autonomous organizations . . . distinct among themselves . . . (and with) . . . a minimum of ideological and political agreement which links it together' (Maneiro 1986: 151–2). There was a political team<sup>20</sup> and a National Leadership (instead of the Central Committee structure used by the PCV) formed by the leaders of the three movements, but in practice they met at most two or three times throughout the entire decade of the 1970s.<sup>21</sup>

#### THE DIVISION OF 1983

At the beginning of the 1980s the two successful Causa R movements were the alternative unionism in Sidor, which controlled one of the most important unions in the country, and Pro-Catia, which had become known for its community affairs initiatives. Nevertheless, Causa R was still a small group centered exclusively around two specific locations in the diverse landscape of Venezuelan society. In 1978, to fill a requirement of the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE), the R was assigned the meaning of radical, in the sense of 'enrooted' (Sesto 1993).<sup>22</sup>

From the time of the first oil boom of 1974–9 Maneiro had been reflecting upon the difficulties of political expression which plagued Venezuelan popular movements. For example, in the elections of 1973, he criticized the MAS for, as he saw it, diluting the concept of socialism in such a way as to strip it of any transformative meaning, thus ensuring that the electorate did not see it as a viable option for effecting real change. He also admitted as a mistake the abstentionist position adopted by Causa R and other leftist groups, since the population went to the polls in any event, thus demonstrating their confidence in the political system's institutional mechanisms (Maneiro 1986: 103–16). Maneiro understood early on that in Venezuela it would be necessary to seek transformation through these very mechanisms.

<sup>18</sup> Sesto, interview of 18 Nov. 1993.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*; Barreto, interview of 25 Oct. 1993.

<sup>20</sup> Yajure, interview of 26 Nov. 1993.

<sup>21</sup> Barreto, interview of 25 Oct. 1993.

<sup>22</sup> 'Radical' in this sense of enrooted or deep is distinct from the more common use of the word in English, which alludes to 'the most distant from tradition' or 'the extreme'. Causa R never sought to be confused with extremists.

But the key theme that arose during the late 1970s and in the elections of 1983 was that Venezuelan politics was frozen. AD had lost its capacity to convey its message to the general population, and COPEI could not generate enthusiasm following the woeful government of Luis Herrera. This, according to Maneiro, was producing a phenomenon of 'electoral homelessness' for some 2 million Venezuelan voters. The time was ripe to unblock this situation by appealing to the electorate in the center of the political spectrum. In order to do this, it was necessary to produce a centrist option rather than a leftist one, since the organizations of the left lacked the capacity to mobilize the population and had reached a limit beyond which they seemed incapable of further growth (Maneiro 1986: 252–7).

Causa R began at this juncture to make overtures to such centrist individuals as Jóvito Villalba, to whom it initially offered its presidential candidacy.<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, the candidate nominated in July 1982 was a journalist, Jorge Olavarría, the editor of the journal *Resumen* (*Resumen* 1982*b*). Of wealthy background and essentially conservative leanings, Olavarría had played an important role in denouncing all kinds of corruption, particularly that which plagued unionism in Guayana. Olavarría defended the positions of the new unionism and his articles contributed to publicizing the movement in Matancero and the role of its leader, Andrés Velásquez. Although this alliance appeared surprising, Olavarría gave Causa R access to one of the most widely read journals of the time.

For as long as Alfredo Maneiro remained alive the popular movements of Causa R backed this nomination, apparently without conflict.<sup>24</sup> His unquestioned leadership and the autonomy and ideological ambiguity of the movements ensured his ability to manage any difficulties that these measures could provoke. But all this changed in November 1982, when Maneiro died suddenly at the age of 45. His death was a severe blow to the organization, for it came at a time when it seemed to have gained a degree of visibility, thanks to the candidacy of Olavarría and the resulting publicity given its activities through the journal *Resumen*. Many feared that Causa R, as a political project, would disappear as a result of Maneiro's death. There was dismay in Pro-Catia, for it was believed that many years of work were now to be lost.<sup>25</sup>

Olavarría thought that he could fill the void left behind by Maneiro. While it was true that he enjoyed good relations with the Pro-Catia movement, where the movie director Thaelman Urguelles had some political weight, he had conflicts with the founding leaders of the organization, especially with Pablo Medina and Lucas Matheus. Moreover, Olavarría had a domineering personality and had little in common with the workers of the Sidor.<sup>26</sup> Shortly before the deadline for submitting candidacies, Olavarría placed a series of conditions on the Causa R, including a demand that he be given the post of General Secretary. Urguelles was willing to support him, but others within the Directorate rejected the proposal and managed to prevail.<sup>27</sup> Olavarría resigned and launched his campaign through an organization known as Opina. For the Causa R, problems had only just begun.

<sup>23</sup> Sesto, interview of 18 Nov. 1993.

<sup>26</sup> Barreto, interview of 25 Oct. 1993.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Sesto, interview of 18 Nov. 1993.

Following the strategy of seeking out the center, Urguelles and his group advocated uniting behind the candidacy of ex-president Rafael Caldera. In a plenary session of Causa R held at the Central University the candidacy was debated, and the group even released a press communiqué. For the Matancero movement, Caldera was unacceptable, since it was during his government that 514 workers had been fired from Sidor. Instead, they supported the candidacy of the president of their union, Andrés Velásquez.<sup>28</sup> Maneiro was no longer available to mediate the dispute.

Once Caldera's candidacy had been rejected, Urguelles together with Pro-Catia and the majority of the intellectuals who remained in the group abandoned Causa R. Thus was lost the neighborhood branch of the movement and the remnants of its intellectual constituency. This reduced the organization to those who had originally left the PCV in 1970 plus the leadership of the Matancero movement. The *ouvriériste* profile that characterized the group from this point onward was inevitable.

After the 1983 elections, Causa R appeared to be mortally wounded (Medina 1988: 61). Andrés Velásquez received some 6,000 votes for the presidency, and in what many observers believed to be the result of fraud, the party lost the governorship of Bolívar. Six months later, however, in the 1984 municipal elections, Causa R achieved second place in Bolívar. The organization then decided to concentrate on that state, basing its strategy on, and mobilizing efforts around, the workers of the iron regions in order to defeat the two-party hegemony of AD and COPEI (Medina 1988).

From this point onwards Causa R evolved slowly, attempting to strengthen itself as a local organization in the most populous townships of the state, and to extend the influence of the Matancero movement among the unions. Without Maneiro, Causa R did not try again to develop new popular movements, basing its efforts instead on Matancero unionism. At the same time, the organizational dynamic and limited breadth of the party meant that recruitment of new members was slow. This continues to be the case, for recruitment is highly selective and depends, to a large extent, on individual commitment since each prospective member is expected to be a political activist.<sup>29</sup> During this period, the only significant group to join the party was a small group that had split of from the Party of the Venezuelan Revolution (PRV) in 1987, led by Alí Rodríguez. Aristóbulo Istúriz, today one of the most important leaders of the Causa R, joined basically on his own in 1986, though he had founded the teachers' union SUMA and part of this union joined the Causa R.<sup>30</sup>

### 3. Causa R after 1989

Causa R played a relatively insignificant role in the elections of 1983 and 1988. While the presidential candidates of AD and COPEI split a total of 87 and 93 per cent of

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

**Table 5.1.** Presidential elections by party, 1983–1993 (in total votes and in percentages)

| Party                     | 1983      |       | 1988                 |      | 1993      |       |
|---------------------------|-----------|-------|----------------------|------|-----------|-------|
|                           | Votes     | %     | Votes                | %    | Votes     | %     |
| Causa R                   | 5,917     | 0.09  | 26,870               | 0.4  | 1,232,853 | 21.97 |
| AD                        | 3,680,549 | 55.32 | 3,859,180            | 52.8 | 1,304,849 | 23.23 |
| COPEI                     | 2,166,467 | 32.56 | 2,932,277            | 40.1 | 1,241,645 | 22.11 |
| MAS                       | 223,194   | 3.25  | 198,361 <sup>a</sup> | 2.7  | 595,042   | 10.59 |
| Convergencia <sup>b</sup> | —         | —     | —                    | —    | 958,529   | 17.07 |

<sup>a</sup> For these elections MAS made an alliance with the Movimiento Izquierda Revolucionario (MIR), a party that later merged with MAS.

<sup>b</sup> Convergencia is a new party that participated for the first time in the elections of 1993, backing the candidacy of Rafael Caldera, now president.

Sources: Consejo Supremo Electoral, Dirección de Estadísticas, *Elecciones 4 de diciembre de 1983*, Caracas: Ediciones del CSE, Sept. 1984; *Elecciones 1988*, 2 Ts, Ediciones del CSE, Sept. 1990; 'Elecciones 1993. Votos Grandes', Caracas (mimeo), 1994.

the vote, respectively, in the two elections, the MAS, left alliances, and electoral movements such as those of Olavarría in 1983 or Vladimir Gessen in 1988 easily surpassed the vote of Velásquez and his party (see Tables 5.1, 5.2, and 5.4). But in Bolívar the vote for Causa R was significant. In 1983 it obtained 7.96 per cent of the vote, an increase of 178 per cent over the previous elections. In addition, six months later, in 1984, it reached 17.11 per cent in the elections for municipal councils, earning it four council posts in the municipality of Caroní and one in Heres (Yépez Salas 1993: 59). In December 1988 Causa R gained a deputy from Bolívar in the National Congress and unexpectedly added two more from the Federal District and the state of Miranda. Causa R was growing in Guayana and had made inroads in Caracas as well (see Table 5.3).<sup>31</sup>

Within this context two processes developed that would bring Causa R to the forefront of the political arena: the severe social and political crisis affecting Venezuela and, in close relation with it, the approval of the decentralization laws. We have already discussed the latter, but let us now turn briefly to the manifestations of the former.

#### DEMOCRACY IN THE BALANCE

On 27 February 1989 and for several days afterwards urban dwellers across the country, impoverished by years of economic crisis and disappointed by Pérez's

<sup>31</sup> The city of Caracas, in addition to the Federal District, extends to include several municipalities of the state of Miranda where Causa R obtained the vote that awarded it a deputy in that federal entity.

**Table 5.2.** Parliamentary elections by party, 1983–1993 (in total votes and in percentages)

| Party                     | 1983      |       | 1988                 |      | 1993 <sup>a</sup> |       |
|---------------------------|-----------|-------|----------------------|------|-------------------|-------|
|                           | Votes     | %     | Votes                | %    | Votes             | %     |
| Causa R                   | 35,304    | 0.54  | 118,700              | 1.7  | 974,190           | 20.68 |
| AD                        | 3,284,166 | 49.9  | 3,115,787            | 43.3 | 1,099,728         | 23.34 |
| COPEI                     | 1,887,226 | 28.68 | 2,238,163            | 31.1 | 1,065,512         | 22.62 |
| MAS                       | 377,795   | 5.74  | 731,179 <sup>b</sup> | 10.2 | 509,068           | 10.81 |
| Convergencia <sup>c</sup> | —         | —     | —                    | —    | 651,918           | 13.84 |

<sup>a</sup> In this year, for the first time in Venezuela, the Congressional election was conducted according to a mixed system of voting for both individual candidates and for party slates. The data in this table are those of votes for deputies on the party slates.

<sup>b</sup> For these elections MAS made an alliance with the Movimiento Izquierda Revolucionario (MIR), a party that later merged with MAS.

<sup>c</sup> Convergencia is a new party that participated for the first time in the elections of 1993, backing the candidacy of Rafael Caldera, now president.

Sources: Consejo Supremo Electoral, Dirección de Estadísticas, *Elecciones 4 de diciembre de 1983*, Caracas: Ediciones del CSE, Sept. 1984; *Elecciones 1988*, 2 Ts, Ediciones del CSE, Sept. 1990; 'Elecciones 1993. Votos Grandes', Caracas (mimeo), 1994.

**Table 5.3.** Parliamentary groups by party, for the periods 1984–1989, 1989–1994, and 1994–1999

| Party                     | 1984–9   |          | 1989–94         |                | 1994–9   |          |
|---------------------------|----------|----------|-----------------|----------------|----------|----------|
|                           | Deputies | Senators | Deputies        | Senators       | Deputies | Senators |
| Causa Radical             | 0        | 0        | 3               | 0              | 40       | 9        |
| AD                        | 113      | 28       | 97              | 22             | 55       | 16       |
| COPEI                     | 60       | 14       | 67              | 20             | 53       | 14       |
| MAS                       | 10       | 2        | 18 <sup>a</sup> | 3 <sup>a</sup> | 24       | 5        |
| Convergencia <sup>b</sup> | —        | —        | —               | —              | 26       | 6        |

<sup>a</sup> For these elections MAS made an alliance with the Movimiento Izquierda Revolucionario (MIR), a party that later merged with MAS.

<sup>b</sup> Convergencia is a new party that participated for the first time in the elections of 1993, backing the candidacy of Rafael Caldera, now president.

Sources: Consejo Supremo Electoral, Dirección de Estadísticas, *Elecciones 4 de diciembre de 1983*, Caracas: Ediciones del CSE, Sept. 1984; *Elecciones 1988*, 2 Ts, Ediciones del CSE, Sept. 1990; 'Elecciones 1993. Votos Grandes', Caracas (mimeo), 1994.

**Table 5.4.** Provincial election results for Andrés Velásquez, presidential candidate of Causa R, 1983–1993 (in percentages)

| Province         | 1983 | 1988 | 1993 |
|------------------|------|------|------|
| Amazonas         | 0.05 | 0    | 15.0 |
| Anzoátegui       | 0.07 | 0.3  | 34.0 |
| Apure            | 0.05 | 0.1  | 3.9  |
| Aragua           | 0.09 | 0.3  | 31.9 |
| Barinas          | 0.04 | 0.1  | 8.2  |
| Bolívar          | 0.5  | 1.2  | 49.6 |
| Carabobo         | 0.09 | 0.5  | 27.6 |
| Cojedes          | 0.09 | 0.1  | 12.4 |
| Delta Amacuro    | 0.11 | 0.1  | 11.6 |
| Falcón           | 0.05 | 0.2  | 9.4  |
| Guárico          | 0.05 | 0.1  | 15.8 |
| Lara             | 0.07 | 0.2  | 8.5  |
| Mérida           | 0.06 | 0.3  | 10.8 |
| Miranda          | 0.08 | 0.7  | 30.7 |
| Monagas          | 0.06 | 0.1  | 21.2 |
| Nueva Esparta    | 0.07 | 0.2  | 15.2 |
| Portuguesa       | 0.05 | 0.1  | 7.3  |
| Sucre            | 0.07 | 0.2  | 16.9 |
| Táchira          | 0.03 | 0.1  | 13.4 |
| Trujillo         | 0.04 | 0.1  | 6.4  |
| Yaracuy          | 0.06 | 0.2  | 6.9  |
| Zulia            | 0.03 | 0.1  | 13.7 |
| Federal District | 0.11 | 0.7  | 35.0 |

Sources: Consejo Supremo Electoral, Dirección de Estadísticas, *Elecciones 4 de diciembre de 1983*, Caracas: Ediciones del CSE, Sept. 1984; *Elecciones 1988*, 2 Ts, Ediciones del CSE, Sept. 1990; 'Elecciones 1993. Votos Grandes', Caracas (mimeo), 1994.

inaugural address, in which he indicated the government's intention to request assistance from the International Monetary Fund, took to the streets in a looting rampage. The protests were followed by a curfew, the suspension of individual freedoms, and severe police and military repression that caused some 500 deaths. The *sacudón*, or *caracazo*, revealed the rupture in state-society relations that had occurred during the previous years. Not only did the parties and unions fail to recognize the depths of popular dissatisfaction, but they had no capacity to channel or to control the ensuing explosion (Carvallo and López-Maya 1989: 48–50).

This open manifestation of protest and discontent did not generate a reaction from the traditional parties, and did not lead the government to change its policies. It did, however, lead to implementation of decentralization measures that had remained on hold since the middle of the Lusinchi government. The persistence of the blockage of mediations, we argue, is related directly with the extreme political situation of 1992 as well as the 'political phenomenon' which Causa R has become.

During the dawn of 4 February 1992, a coup attempt was launched by middle- and lower-level officers in the army. The coup's goals were to overthrow the Pérez government, end corruption, and replace the market-oriented policies that were being implemented by alternative measures that were never clearly defined. The coup attempt received significant popular support, and for some sectors the young leaders of the uprising gained heroic status. Pérez and AD suffered an additional blow when, on the day after the military *putsch*, they called an urgent session of Congress to adopt emergency measures. Although they attempted to secure a unanimous declaration rejecting the military and giving unconditional support for the government, they were forced to modify the language of the resolution due to harsh criticism from ex-president Caldera. Caldera's position was seconded by the Causa R deputy Aristóbulo Istúriz, who held the government responsible for having brought the country to this situation. After 4 February the Pérez administration went into a deep crisis from which it would never recover. Meanwhile, both Caldera and Istúriz saw their political fortunes rise.

A second coup attempt took place months later, on 27 November. This uprising was not as well coordinated, but clearly involved high-level military officials. Though it was said that the image of the government and of democracy emerged strengthened from this failed attempt, both the government and AD remained unable to gain the confidence of the population. Finally, in May 1993 Carlos Andrés Pérez was suspended from his post by the National Congress following a Supreme Court ruling that there were grounds to try him for embezzlement and secret diversion of funds (López-Maya 1993).

#### CAUSA R IN THE 1989 AND 1993 GUBERNATORIAL AND MAYORAL ELECTIONS

The first regional and municipal elections were held in December 1989, ten months after the dramatic events of the Caracazo. These elections reflected the degree of popular rejection of the AD government led by Carlos Andrés Pérez. This electoral rejection explains, in part, why the AD, which had won nineteen of Venezuela's twenty states in the national elections a year earlier, lost control of nine crucial governorships, including those of Miranda, Carabobo, and Aragua (which together with the Federal District are the principal sites of manufacturing industry), Zulia (where most of the oil industry is located), and Bolívar (headquarters of the Corporación Venezolana de Guayana and of the basic aluminum and iron industries).

But alongside the vote of censure cast by regional voters the first gubernatorial elections also suggested the potential significance of regional leadership, which until that time had been irrelevant in the choice of public officials. If in the past candidates were evaluated on the basis of their skill in providing favors and weaving together the coalitions needed in order to secure support from the party kingpins (*cogollos*), those barons now needed to consider the charisma and regional appeal

of their candidates if they wished to compete electorally.<sup>32</sup> This development began to create tensions at the heart of the hegemonic parties and produced numerous confrontations between the national leadership and local party elites. In Aragua and Bolívar, the regional strength of the MAS and Causa R candidates, Carlos Tablante and Andrés Velásquez, played a major role. To a lesser degree, this also contributed to the victory of the COPEI candidate, Oswaldo Alvarez Paz, in the state of Zulia (López-Maya 1993: 259).

It is worth noting that the state of Bolívar, where Causa R had concentrated its efforts since the beginning of the decade, had always been an AD stronghold. Nonetheless, serious charges of corruption affected party leaders as well as the unions linked to them. In addition, conflicts among the regional leaders had brought AD to a point of serious crisis, and many rank-and-file members seem to have crossed over and voted for Causa R (Yépez Salas 1993: 60). This internal strife may have been sufficient to account for the narrow winning margin for Velásquez, who received 40.3 per cent of the vote compared to 36.69 per cent for the second place AD candidate. Abstention was the fourth highest in the country, reaching 55.82 per cent of the potential electorate (CSE 1990: 19–22 and 259).

In addition to the gubernatorial election of Velásquez, Causa R gained two mayoralties. Clemente Scotto won in Caroní, in the state of Bolívar, with 27,200 votes, or 33.86 per cent of the total, and Luis Lorenzo Aguilar won in Miranda, in the state of Carabobo with 975 votes, or 37.75 per cent. The latter was a small town, in which the number of votes received was less than anticipated by the Causa R leadership (Medina 1993: 48).

The triumph of Causa R in Bolívar was a surprise to the rest of country, but according to Velásquez, the AD leadership in the region learned days beforehand that they would be defeated, and undertook measures to perpetrate electoral fraud. Causa R, mindful of its past experience in Sidor, began early in the afternoon to denounce fraud, while the population of Ciudad Guayana took to the streets in support of fair elections. Velásquez recalls that after going to Radio Caroní to denounce the fraud, he was met by a throng of supporters and a caravan of vehicles, as word of what was occurring swept factories across the region and workers abandoned their posts. The next day, with the winner still unannounced, Sidor was paralyzed as a demonstration in front of the Electoral Center drew thousands of people. Velásquez flew to the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) in Caracas to publicize what had occurred and to seek an official declaration. Upon his return, he reports, there were no fewer than 10,000 people waiting at the airport. These demonstrations were the deciding factor, for soon afterwards AD called a press conference to recognize the Causa R victory in the state. Velásquez says that people were prepared to defend the victory with their lives, and Causa R was with them (Sesto 1992: 137–9).

<sup>32</sup> In Venezuela *cogollo* refers to a small group of party and union leaders who control virtually all political decisions. The most notorious *cogollo* is that of the AD, along with that of the CTV labor organization, but the system is generalizable to the COPEI and, to a lesser degree, other parties as well.

The situation was similar in the mayoral race in Caroní. There, too, it was suspected that AD and COPEI were planning to commit fraud, and there as well people mobilized to defend the Causa R victory. Tensions were such that the votes could not be counted on site, and ballots had to be transported to the Caracas offices of the CSE to be counted. The Electoral Council in Caroní, however, awarded the victory to AD, and even swore in its candidate as mayor, while in Caracas the Causa R candidate, Clemente Scotto, was declared the winner (Sesto 1992: 142–3).

Three years later, the political crisis had grown more acute as a result of the two coup attempts. In December 1992, just eight days after the last uprising, Andrés Velásquez was re-elected governor with 63.36 per cent of all valid ballots, a total of 135,673 votes. Causa R also gained mayoralties in the three most populous cities in the state. Scotto was re-elected with 68.36 of the valid ballots. In the capital city of Ciudad Bolívar (municipality of Heres), Causa R received 47.88 per cent of the valid votes, compared to 39.84 per cent for the alliance of AD and FPI. In Piar, Amerigo Grazia of the Causa R won 45.77 per cent against the 41.55 per cent awarded to AD. Of the ten mayoralties in Bolívar, only these three have more than 60,000 eligible voters. The other seven have fewer than 25,000. AD won three of these on its own, and COPEI won the four others in alliance with other parties. In the municipalities won by Causa R abstention remained high, surpassing the average across the state: 52.71 per cent in Caroní, 49.73 per cent in Heres, and 53.85 per cent in Piar (CSE 1993).

The triumph of Causa R in Bolívar was expected, as the administrations of both the governor and mayor Scotto had received broad popular support. Nonetheless, the expansion of Causa R surpassed even its own expectations. It could be said that the organization which had for so long guarded jealously its status as different from other Venezuelan political parties now began to reap the fruits of its strategy. Determined to punish the traditional parties and political system, the urban population of Caracas, as well as that of the surrounding state of Miranda, found in abstention and the vote for Causa R two means for leaving a clear message. On 6 December, against all predictions, Causa R pulled ahead in the vote count from the municipality of Libertador. The popular neighborhoods in Caracas had tended toward Causa R.<sup>33</sup> Once again, rumors that fraud was about to occur mobilized hundreds of people who gathered in front of the CSE awaiting official bulletins.

On the morning of the 7th, the CSE still had not given definitive numbers, but it was made known that the AD and Causa R were running very close. Thousands of people filled Plaza Caracas, in front of the Council, to defend Istúriz's victory. At around 3.00 p.m. the President of the CSE called the two candidates in an effort to secure an agreement to respect the results, whatever they might be.<sup>34</sup> Claudio Fermín of AD accepted happily, but Istúriz rejected the proposal, arguing that he

<sup>33</sup> *El Nacional*, 'Aristóbulo Istúriz, Alcalde de Caracas', 7 Dec. 1992, p. A-1 (Caracas).

<sup>34</sup> *El Nacional*, 'Manifestación popular proclamó ante el Consejo Supremo Electoral triunfo de La Causa R', 8 Dec. 1992, p. D-1 (Caracas).

had not broken the rules and that 'the only thing that needs to be respected is the vote of the people'.

Aristóbulo Istúriz won with 34.45 per cent of the valid votes. Null ballots accounted for 3.59 per cent of the total. Even though abstention reached 62.57 per cent, the popular sectors took to the streets to celebrate the victory.

Outside the state of Bolívar and the Federal District Causa R would win only two more mayoralties, both of them quite small. These victories came in Miranda, in the state of Carabobo, where Causa R repeated its winning performance of 1989 by 30.05 per cent of the valid vote, and in Arismendi, in the state of Nueva Esparta, where its 1,823 votes accounted for 27.74 of the valid ballots. Elsewhere, Causa R received a low percentage of the vote, averaging in the single digits except in some municipalities in the state of Miranda, Cabimas in the state of Zulia, and Santos Michelena, in the state of Aragua. Yet even in these cases it did not surpass 16 per cent of the valid votes (CSE 1993).

The bipartisan arrangement that had prevailed in Venezuela since the end of the 1960s broke down in the 1993 national elections. An alliance between the MAS and dissidents from the COPEI joined with a number of small parties in forming an organization known as the 'Convergencia', which won a victory for its presidential candidate, Dr Rafael Caldera, with 30.45 per cent of the valid votes. Second place was closely contested between three candidates, with the official results placing Causa R in fourth place with 21.94 per cent of the vote. AD came in second with 23.59 per cent, and COPEI was third with 22.74 per cent. In the Congressional race Causa R came in third, displacing the MAS, and will thus enjoy a significant parliamentary presence from 1994 to 1998, with nine Senators and forty deputies, far more than the MAS had ever received in the past (See Tables 5.3 and 5.4).<sup>35</sup>

#### CHANGES IN DISCOURSE?

It is reasonable to ask whether the process of steady expansion experienced by Causa R over the last four years has been accompanied by a transformation of its objectives and discourse. An initial point stands out as especially noteworthy. During his lifetime the founding leader of the organization, Maneiro, was also its principal political thinker. This was the case not only with respect to evaluations of the Venezuelan political situation for purposes of strategy and tactics, but also in terms of conceiving the kind of organization and ideology that should characterize Causa R. Maneiro's death in 1983 thus represented a very significant loss, and it can be argued that the ensuing void has only partially been filled.

While Maneiro remained at the head of the Causa R he kept debate alive. The various newspapers founded by the group in order to embed Causa R in popular

<sup>35</sup> *El Nacional*, 'Cinco partidos dominan el Parlamento', 9 Jan. 1994, p. D-4; *El Universal*, 'Cifras definitivas sobre voto presidencial', 10 Feb. 1993, p. 1-1.

movements reflected Maneiro's skill at seeding and testing ideas concerning popular movements, the vanguard, and politics in general. Moreover, during the 1970s and the early 1980s PRAG and Agua Mansa also contributed to the circulation of ideas about Venezuelan reality, as well as about the organizational imperatives of a group that claimed to be pursuing 'social revolution' (Causa R 1973).

It is worth noting that the conceptual framework guiding the reflections of Venezuela 83 and the Causa R was fundamentally Marxist, though it was far from orthodox. As noted earlier, Maneiro gave special emphasis to the concepts of popular movement and the vanguard and the relationship between them. One of his constant preoccupations was how it would be possible to guarantee the efficacy and 'revolutionary quality' of the vanguard. His rejection of the PCV led him to conceive of an organization separated from the Leninist framework within which most all of the other Venezuelan parties operated. It was necessary, in his view, to create a party from below, organically linked to popular movements. Causa R would be a party in permanent construction, with an ideology forever in motion, creating and recreating itself alongside popular struggles.

After the 1973 elections and the petroleum boom that began in 1974, Maneiro's writings reveal a number of other key concepts and phrases in his discourse. For example, debate about democracy is needed, he contended, because the prevailing interpretation of the term was that of the AD, which merely entails the renewal every five years of council members, deputies, senators, and the President, and thus constitutes a minimal, purely electoral definition of democracy (Maneiro 1986: 161–9). The difference between types of democracy is developed further with regard to local politics and in relation to human rights, with Maneiro proposing 'radical' democracy as the banner of the left. The oil boom, in turn, forced modifications in the diagnosis of the Venezuelan situation and the conditions under which the popular movement would have to develop. The populist measures implemented at the time by the first government of Carlos Andrés Pérez undermined the negotiating capacity of revolutionary unions, as well as the left as a whole (Maneiro 1986: 123–9).

During these years, despite the clear effort to differentiate itself from the political organizations of the left, Maneiro did not deny his identification with Marxism or the left. In a 1981 interview with Agustín Blanco, Maneiro rejected 'leftism' but said that he was more on the left than many of those who claimed he was not. Asked whether Causa R was Marxist, Maneiro questioned whether it was necessary to have a label at all, and identified the ideology of Causa R as democratic in the sense meant by Marx when he wrote that 'when the revolutionary movement conquers power it conquers democracy'. Later he pointed out that to characterize him or Causa R as Marxist was to present them in a way meant to encourage people to associate them with parties such as the MAS or the Socialist League, neither of which Causa R wanted to be associated with. Maneiro preferred to let the people decide on the basis of the party's actions. He would agree to call Causa R Marxist only if it were accepted as the only Marxist organization in Venezuela (Maneiro 1986: 185–239).

As noted above, Causa R was built on broadly Marxist theoretical bases. Its political actions, in contrast, were shaped by constant assessments, principally by Maneiro himself, of the sociopolitical realities of Venezuela. By the end of the 1980s, the idea of the 'political center' was added, as pointed out earlier in reference to the candidacy of Jorge Olavarría.

What took place after Maneiro's death was essentially the use of these assessments, concepts, and ideas to offer new interpretations in light of new facts: the emergence of Matancero as the principal popular movement of the Causa R and the transformation of the organization into a viable option for government at the local, regional, and national levels.

In 1990, Andrés Velásquez, now governor of Bolívar, said that a fundamental idea of Causa R was that 'the workers can govern' (Sesto 1992: 122). This reference to the category of 'workers', rather than 'the working class', broadened the social sector represented by Causa R, and would remain from this point on. Pablo Medina, Secretary General and one of the founders of Causa R, has stated the point more directly. For him, Causa R is a party of workers. This is reflected in its leadership, which according to him is composed mainly of workers. For Medina, it is clear that in Venezuela the worker leadership is more advanced than that of students, and if it does not surpass intellectuals in knowledge, it does so in political skill (Medina 1988: 31 and 35).

The centrality of workers can be seen as a narrowing of Maneiro's conceptualization of Causa R. Indeed, his better-known writings include no reference to the 'ultimate subject' of this movement of movements. However, his Marxist framework and his conception of a project constructed on the basis of the action of the popular movement is not logically at odds with this manner of conceiving the organization. Indeed, we might say that this is a historical by-product of the hegemony that the Matancero movement gained within Causa R once the other movements disappeared. It is worth noting that there is also no longer any reference to the problem of the vanguard, although membership in the party continues to be conditional on one's being a political activist.

After Velásquez's gubernatorial victory in Bolívar, the demand to address the needs of governing has filled in additional elements that define, however vaguely, the concrete goals of Causa R for Venezuelan society. These elements remain without major theoretical backing or conceptual foundation, reflecting the organization's tendency toward a pragmatic and short-term vision of politics.

Velásquez's program upon taking office in 1990 can be seen as an embryonic version, on a regional level, of the sociopolitical project of Causa R for Venezuela as a whole. It includes four broad orienting principles: first, practicing democracy, not only as a means of electing officials but also of governing. Second, to end corruption. The third point involves efficiency and clarity in the provision of services, especially health, education, and personal security. The fourth aspect entails an approach to the development of the Guayana region that diverges from the vision advanced by the Venezuelan state. Instead of the strategy of mega projects in

support of industry based primarily on exports of raw materials (iron, aluminum, bauxite), Causa R favored development downstream, with medium-sized and manufacturing industries transforming raw materials locally (Sesto 1992: 150–3).

In 1991, with his sights not only on re-election as governor but also on the 1993 presidential campaign, Velásquez presented what he saw as an alternative project for Venezuelan society. The outlines of the project resemble those sketched above with respect to Guayana, though opposition to 'extreme privatization' has been added to the fourth point. In addition, there is a nationalist component that was not evident in the past: 'It is (will be) a government . . . with a love for the fatherland, which in my opinion does not now exist' (Sesto 1992: 233–7).

It is important to point out that the elements of Causa R's discourse relating to the desirable model of economic development are simple, lack detail, and are taken from the opposition discourse promoted during these years by a group of COPEI dissidents, led by Dr Caldera, some independents, and the MAS. The first two of these formed a party, known as 'Convergencia', to ally with the MAS in support of Caldera's successful candidacy in the 1993 presidential elections. In comparison to the Causa R, the group assembled around the Caldera campaign has provided a more elaborated vision of a development strategy opposed to the neoliberal project of AD and COPEI.<sup>36</sup> Nor are the other elements of Causa R's discourse particularly original, though its emphasis on the 'worker' origin of the Causa R government, and its careful management of public resources, afford it more support than other parties among certain social sectors.

During the 1993 election campaign Causa R issued a basic document outlining its project for Venezuela. The introduction underscored the urgent need to overcome the current crisis and to bring about a 'just, balanced, tolerant, efficient, productive, and civilized' society (La Causa R 1993: 2). The project envisions two major ways of achieving this: a profound cultural transformation and a productive revolution. The former envisions a 'society formed by true citizens, who can enjoy the liberty that is their due and receive all the benefits that are offered by societal living' (La Causa R 1993: 3). It commits itself to the democratization of all aspects of social life, a profound educational reform, establishment of a State of Law through reform of the national legal system, urban reform, an anti-corruption program, and a restoration of notions of patriotism and sovereignty (La Causa R 1993).

The 'productive revolution' aims to leave behind the rentier economy and to effect a comprehensive reform of the petroleum sector, recognizing that this industry will remain the centerpiece of the Venezuelan economy but that it must be integrated into the productive economy. The reform is based on three elements, including continued membership in OPEC as long as reciprocity is maintained; development of strategic alliances needed to ensure financial support; and access to markets and technology. This means that relationships are possible with domestic as well

<sup>36</sup> See e.g. *Economía Hoy*, 'Respuestas al reto: Rafael Caldera', 5 Nov. 1993, pp. 17–24 (Caracas).

as international capital, and that hydrocarbons should be used primarily for manufactured products rather than energy (La Causa R 1993: 6). This petroleum policy is to be complemented by the development of the country's food production capacity and by placing greater emphasis on small and medium-sized industries, which will in turn expand the internal market. The expansion of the internal market is considered to be a necessary condition for a rational insertion of Venezuela into the external market. Other economic issues include the need to foster science and technology as engines for a productive revolution; lower the fiscal deficit through decentralization; re-employ and provide training to displaced workers; renegotiate the debt; privatize non-strategic rather than strategic industries; and implement a progressive tax reform, which would include a tax on Venezuelan capital deposited abroad.

## Conclusions

Causa R has benefited more than any other Venezuelan political force from the current profound crisis of the political system and the loss of prestige of its hegemonic actors. This is the result of a combination of factors.

The first is its clear differentiation from other political organizations, both in terms of its conception of the party and in the priorities it has set out since its origin. Causa R was conceived as a political organization halfway between a movement and a party, which rejected formalism (constituent charter, statutes), organizational hierarchies, and the formation of party cadres, all of which were typical of other Venezuelan parties. A 'party in permanent formation', it functions with minimal ideological agreement and seeks its social base and orientations in the popular movements. The peculiar character of this organization can be considered the fruit of the search by its founding leader, Alfredo Maneiro, for conceptions and strategy that would go beyond the tensions inherent in the Marxist debates and praxis of the 1960s.

In addition to its distinctive conception of the party itself, Causa R also developed a political strategy of clearly distancing itself from the rest of the political groups which emerged from the armed struggle. Maneiro exhibited an almost obsessive determination not to be confused with the remainder of the 'left', which he invariably characterized as timid, mediocre, and exhibiting 'leftism'. He and subsequent leaders would decline, except on rare occasions, to ally with other parties in elections or in parliamentary affairs. In addition, its idea of ideology as a process in permanent construction brought Causa R to reject ideological strait-jackets, such as communism or socialism, granting the organization a flexibility or ambiguity that permitted it to engage even conservative figures when it seemed politically convenient.

These characteristics of Causa R ensured it a unique position once two political

factors external to the organization converged. First, during the 1980s, the urban poor increasingly came to reject the traditional parties and the system they had constructed. In this context, Causa R tended to obtain high dividends, since it was easily differentiated from the hegemonic parties and the pacts that tied them together. Second, the process of political and administrative decentralization, which began to take form after 1989, created a space through which this small organization, with a clear strategy at the local and regional levels, could gain visibility. Causa R had already been working for more than ten years in the Guayana region, specifically in the union and poor-neighborhood movements, when reforms were enacted that would enable it to energize regional and municipal levels of state government. In the first gubernatorial election, aided by an internal crisis of AD in the region, it gained the first magistracy of Bolívar. From this initial victory, and from the mayoralty of Caroní it established a basis for further growth.

The fact that Causa R had a chance to win the 1993 national elections is explained by the continued legitimization crisis of the political system and the hegemonic actors, and by the gradual change in the image of Causa R, which had gone from being a small radical group on the left of the political spectrum to an organization of proven honesty and responsibility in its management of regional and municipal governments. This is especially true in the region of Guayana, since the mayoral administration in Caracas is still too recent to be evaluated.

The consolidation of Causa R will depend on the manner in which its members resolve the problems brought about by its growth. Traits that have until now been a virtue, such as having a barely formalized structure in which votes are not taken and decisions are adopted by a small political leadership tied by bonds of personal friendship, could become a defect hindering the organization's expansion. Similarly, the lack of internal mechanisms for incorporating new activists in decision-making processes carries with it a risk of a certain arbitrariness and even authoritarianism, given that differences will inevitably come up now that the party enjoys significant power in the Congress.

Another problem facing Causa R is the lack of preparedness of its militants for efficiently handling municipal and regional administration. This will become increasingly important should the rapid expansion of Causa R continue. Although it is true that no contemporary political party has sufficient personnel for these new tasks, the rejection of the academic and intellectual world by prominent members of Causa R, and their unwillingness to involve these sectors in forums in which decisions are made, could lead to problems. Honesty alone is not sufficient to govern. There will also be a need for great skill to extend scarce economic resources. This problem is evident at the national level as well, given the significant fraction of the congressional seats that the electorate has awarded to Causa R.

Until now Causa R has developed with minimal contact or negotiation with other actors in the political system. In the past this conferred enormous political benefits, but if maintained as a strategy during the period that is now opening it could prove counter-productive. In light of the importance it has achieved in the Congress,

Causa R will become one of the factions with greatest negotiating potential. This gives it an unavoidable responsibility to formulate proposals or to join other groups in formulating or approving legislation that favors popular sectors in the difficult road toward a solution to the severe economic and political crisis facing Venezuelan society. To find its own style of negotiation and compromise with other political groups is one of the most serious challenges facing Causa R.

To date, the 'popular' character of Causa R would seem beyond question. Its ideological positions, though elementary or simplistic, are based on the search for power for the representatives of the working classes as a means of advancing toward a more just and integrated society. Causa R is based on popular movements, and the political origins and activities of its principal leaders are consistent with the objective of achieving power for the people. Nevertheless, the dismissal of intellectuals, noted above, carries the risk of undermining a popular project to the degree that an excessive pragmatism may obstruct the development of analyses and strategies which could protect the interests of these sectors. Already, in the last election campaign, it was clear that although Causa R could easily mobilize these sectors, it remained a step behind groups such as Convergencia in the formulation of strategic approaches to elaborating an alternative project. As the party further expands this could become one of its greatest limitations.

The success of Causa R, like that of the PT in Brazil or the PRD at some moments in Mexico, reveals the reappearance of popular sectors demanding that they be heard in the political arena. In Venezuela this was made possible by state decentralization and the strategic focus of Causa R on working at the local level. Causa R is not a new political organization; it was already present in unions and poor neighborhoods, where it acted without violating its principles or succumbing to corruption. Finding themselves without channels of mediation with the state, poor and middle sectors reached out to the organization, which in both theory and practice had most clearly remained untainted by complicity with the existing political system. Causa R reaped the fruits of its consistency, but today, when popular sectors have given it power, a series of new challenges await it.

New regional and municipal elections took place in Venezuela on 3 December 1995. Although at the time of writing (18 December 1995) the results remain unclear due to the innumerable accusations of fraud and irregularities, it is nevertheless certain that Causa R has suffered important reverses. It lost the mayoralty of the municipality of Libertador (the seat of Caracas) and the governorship of Bolívar. However, it won for the first time the governorship of Zulia, whence independent Francisco Arias Cárdenas had launched his candidacy. He, together with Hugo Chávez, headed the unsuccessful coup of 4 February 1992. It also increased its presence in other eastern and central states, emphatically in Anzoátegui, Guárico, and Monagas.

A preliminary evaluation of the results would appear to indicate that Causa R, although it lost to AD in Caracas, was strengthened as an alternative political force in the capital. In 1992 the vote for Causa R was circumstantial in the sense that it

was not a vote for Causa R as a party, but rather a protest vote against the traditional parties. This time, however, anti-party protest was repeated, though not through Causa R, but rather through an extremely high abstention rate (according to official figures, over 70 per cent). The men and women of the poor neighborhoods in Caracas simply did not vote. In any case, among the very few voters in these sectors, Istúriz, the mayor, came in second. Among many middle-class sectors, living in residential developments, the majority voted for the Causa R candidate, shortening the distance between the winning Ledezma of AD and Aristóbulo Istúriz. Curiously enough, the municipal campaign had paid the least attention to the middle-class sectors.

The results in Bolívar, independent of the fact that in the next months it may be verified that there was fraud in favor of AD, reveal a weakening of the party in its firmest base. Clumsiness on the part of the regional leadership, held by Andrés Velásquez, appears to have been the cause of the defeat. Velásquez and his followers obstructed the gubernatorial candidacy of Clemente Scotto, mayor of Caroní. The party, in an exhibition of political style from the past, violating the sensibilities of the vast majority of its bases and of the people of the state in general, ran a candidate with no appropriate background to be regional leader, believing that he would win by the party's prestige alone. The electorate responded by giving the majority vote for mayor of Caroní to Pastora Medina, Scotto's wife. However, they abstained from doing the same for the Causa R gubernatorial candidate. With this they sent an instructive message to Causa R: citizens want to elect their representatives, and will not assent to having them imposed by the party machine.

Arias's victory should be viewed from the perspective of what is, at this stage of Venezuela's social crisis, a sociopolitical constant: the electorate votes for whoever best symbolizes a rejection of the traditional system. This factor, which gave Causa R its 1992 victory in Caracas, was one of the main reasons why the poor of Caracas did not vote for Istúriz, nor for anyone else, in 1995. Although AD won the contest, it was with fewer votes than those received in previous elections. In the country's capital, the national is superimposed upon the local, and the majority of the electorate seek to punish 'the government', without differentiating among levels, for the continuing severe economic recession and deteriorating quality of life. The clearest way to send a message was through abstention. In Zulia the choice of Arias as governor could surely be interpreted as a type of protest vote against the political system.

# **The New Politics of Inequality in Latin America**

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