

intersections online

Volume 10, Number 1 (Winter 2009)

Laura Adrienne Brady, "Resisting the National Narrative: Charisma and the Venezuelan Cooperative Movement Within the Context of the Bolivarian Revolution," *intersections* 10, no. 1 (2009): 27-168.

ABSTRACT

The promotion of cooperatives has been a core project of President Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution. Before he came to power there were less than 1,000 cooperatives in Venezuela, but by 2006 that number had risen to 108,000. However, in July 2007, Chávez declared the program a failure; a surprise given his critique of exclusionary nationalist rhetoric and his populist appeals. By examining CECOSOLA, one of the most successful cooperatives worldwide, I argue that a cooperative's success is tied to its ability to develop both a sense of personal agency and a collective narrative of resistance. Unlike CECOSOLA, which has maintained organizational and political autonomy, and developed its own narrative of belonging, Chávez's program provided cooperatives with a politicized and state-centric narrative of cooperative identity underwritten by Chávez's personal charisma. My research ultimately suggests that though Chávez discursively encourages citizen mobilization, the Bolivarian narrative perpetuates patterns of exclusion and may consequently undermine the creation of a strong civil society.

http://depts.washington.edu/chid/intersections_Winter_2009/Laura_Brady_Charisma_and_the_Venezuelan_Cooperative_Movement.pdf

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Resisting the National Narrative

Charisma and the Venezuelan Cooperative Movement Within the Context of the Bolivarian Revolution

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Hugo Chavez

I. Introduction¹

I first traveled to Venezuela in August 2006, eager to witness first-hand the country that I was convinced had become the site of a revolutionary social movement. A year prior, Venezuela had invoked little in me beyond a vague notion of oil, Caribbean beaches, and strangely colored rainforest parrots. However, after watching *The revolution will not be televised*, an independent film that followed the 2002 coup attempt on President Hugo Chávez, my interest was instantly peaked. Here, it seemed, were the sprigs of grass roots, community-driven participatory change, without the typical accompaniment of a totalitarian leader and oppressive regime.

The Bolivarian Revolution, Chávez’s name for Venezuela’s movement towards *Socialismo del siglo XXI*, or Socialism of the 21st Century, is the rallying point for these changes. Relying on a newly crafted constitution, globally unique for its protection of certain positive rights such as health and education, Chávez has begun to institutionalize a new norm of “participatory democracy.” The stated goal of the Revolution is to foster citizen mobilization from the ground-up through programs designed to increase literacy, education, and employment. Simultaneously, the government is implementing new infrastructure to engage historically poor and marginalized communities in the political process. Rather than imposing rigid programs and telling groups how to achieve development, the Revolution hinges on the cooperation and empowerment of lower levels of society in the creation of their own pathways to modernization.²

¹ I would like to express my deepest gratitude for the Cramer Scholarship, which funded my field research trip to Venezuela, and the Mary Gates Research Scholarship, which provided financial support during my months of data analysis and writing. Their financial support allowed me to dedicate myself fully to this project. I extend my gratitude for the support and advice of my two thesis advisors, Deborah Porter and Anand Yang.

Many thanks to all of the associates of Cecosesola who shared their experiences and wisdom. The associates in the Escuela equipo helped make my stay in Venezuela as safe and comfortable as possible. A lifelong friend, Callie Arnold, had the brilliant idea of being my research assistant in Venezuela. This project would never have been possible without her help.

Mijail Benitez offered assistance as a friend and a critic. Calla Hummel edited my full draft. I would also like to acknowledge the debt in friendship I owe to Kalila Jackson-Spieker, and to Alice, Anna, Ariana, Brittany, Claire, Junko, Kris, Joel, and Lucy from the P-Patch house.

² This is the rhetoric of the Revolution—as expressed through new laws, the Constitution, and governmental speeches/propaganda—not necessarily the reality.

Organizational Abbreviations

AD	<i>Acción Democrática</i> . Venezuela's Democratic Action political party.
CECONAVE	<i>Central Cooperativa Nacional de Venezuela</i> . National Central Cooperative of Venezuela.
CECOSESOLA	<i>Organismo de Integración Cooperativa</i> . Organism for Cooperative Integration, formerly <i>Central Cooperativa del Estado Lara</i> , or Central Cooperative of Lara State.
COPEI	<i>Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente</i> . The Social-Christian Committee for Independent Political Electoral Organization (Venezuelan political party).
MINEC	<i>Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Economía Comunal</i> . Ministry of Popular Power for the Communal Economy (formerly MINEP).
MINEP	<i>Ministerio para la Economía Popular</i> . Ministry for the Popular Economy (now MINEC).
PDVSA	<i>Petróleos de Venezuela</i> . Venezuela's state-owned petroleum company.
SUNACCOOP	<i>Superintendencia Nacional de Cooperativas</i> . The National Superintendence of Cooperatives.

The Revolution has so far been distinguished by the creation of many new social programs. These include the *Misiones*, “mission” projects with goals that range from increasing literacy to providing housing to teaching technical job skills, the *Círculos Bolivarianos*, community governance groups funded by the government, and the *Mercal*, a state-run discount supermarket chain. In efforts to promote

Venezuelan independence from historically dominating neighboring countries,³ Chavez has also nationalized the state oil company (PDVSA), called for endogenous development,⁴ and promoted agrarian reform aimed at redistributing wasted land and encouraging domestic food growth.⁵ The aspect of the revolution that struck me most, however, was the implementation of incentives for the creation of cooperatives. Though cooperatives constitute an important form of social organization (according to the United Nations, 800 million people belong to cooperatives, and for 100 million, cooperatives are the primary means of employment⁶) they are by no means a prominent feature in most development discourse.⁷ Additionally, except for in Cuba, they have rarely been adopted as a central aspect of a given state's policy.⁸

Chávez's interest in cooperatives seemed natural, however, given his goals of fostering endogenous development, community participation, and a strong social economy. Cooperatives, by definition, are conceived as tools for achieving these transformations. According to the International Alliance of Cooperatives, a cooperative is:

an autonomous association of people that have come together voluntarily to face their shared economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through the means of a business with communal property and democratic decision-making.⁹

³ In particular, the United States.

⁴ A new form of import substitution development that does not limit exports but does seek to promote internal sovereignty.

⁵ Historically, Venezuela has imported close to 80 percent of its food products, despite possessing plenty of arable land. See Chesa Boudin, Gabriel González and Wilmer Rumbos, *The Venezuelan revolution* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006), 132.

⁶ Erin Gamble, "Cooperative Development: Enhancing Empowerment Through Cooperation," ACDI/VOCA, http://72.14.253.104/search?q=cache:V_XsVQDNgioJ:www.acdivoca.org/852571DC00681414/Lookup/WRFallWinter05-Page20-21CooperativeDev/%24file/WRFallWinter05-Page20-21-CooperativeDev.pdf+true+to+its+cooperative+roots,+ACDi/VoCA+encourages+cooperative+development+to+increase+incomes+and&hl=en&ct=clnk&d=1&gl=us&client=firefox-a (accessed 21 April 2007).

⁷ Some NGOs have embraced cooperatives as a tool of development, but to my knowledge, very little has been written in the scholarly realm about cooperatives.

⁸ This paper will not address the cooperative movements in China, North Korea, and Soviet Russia given that their authoritarian and centralized nature makes using them as a tool for social attitudes impossible.

⁹ Josefina Herrera, "Análisis del cooperativismo y la relación de trabajo," in *Cooperativas, empresas, estado y sindicatos*, ed. Héctor Lucena, Nelson Fréitez and Aymara Hernández (Barquisimeto: Fondo Editorial Universidad Centroccidental Lisandro Alvarado, 2007), 49 [my translation].

In Venezuela, specifically, the *Superintendencia Nacional de Cooperativas* (SUNACCOOP), or National Superintendence of Cooperatives, contributes the following definition:

The cooperative is a form of organizing businesses with economic and social goals in which the greatest importance is to work by common consent to achieve a benefit. It can be differentiated from other types of businesses in that the work of the associates is more important than the money they generate.¹⁰

Aided by *La Misión Vuelvan Caras*,¹¹ a program aimed at teaching job skills and the basics of forming a cooperative, Chávez has embraced the development of a cooperative program as a means for implementing the objectives of the Bolivarian Revolution. According to the initial cooperative proposal, “while the neoliberal plans are based on the inhuman premise that ‘the best social policy is a good economic policy,’ the *Agenda Alternativa Bolivariana*¹² is based on the principle that the best social policy is that which responds to the population’s needs.”¹³

Though Venezuela has witnessed cooperative growth in the form of a cooperative social movement since the beginning of the 20th century, and though the movement emerged “as an institution formally recognized by the state” in the 1960s,¹⁴ Chávez’s administration has set a new precedent for the level of governmental involvement. Encouraging cooperatives is now an established figment of national policy, with the Constitution actively asserting “that the State should promote and protect cooperatives as a popular economic alternative” and also guarantee “training, technical assistance and appropriate financing.”¹⁵ What is most striking about the current movement in Venezuela, however, is its scope and success. When Chávez came to power in 1998, 762 cooperatives were legally registered in the country. Upon passing the Special Law on Cooperative Associations in 2001, though, and with the Ministry of Popular Economy’s (MINEP) implementation of a loans program in 2003, this number exploded. By

¹⁰ Ministerio de Fomento: Superintendencia Nacional de Cooperativas, “200 Preguntas sobre Cooperativismo,” (Maracay: Industria Gráfica Integral C. A.) [my translation].

¹¹ Literally, Mission “About Face.”

¹² In English, “The Alternative Bolivarian Agenda.” Refers to the reforms undertaken as part of the ‘Bolivarian Revolution’.

¹³ Dick Parker, “Chávez and the Search for an Alternative to Neoliberalism,” in *Venezuela: Hugo Chávez and the decline of an “exceptional democracy”*, ed. Steve Ellner and Miguel Tinker Salas (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, INC, 2007), 67-8.

¹⁴ Froilán Barrios in Lucena et al., 84.

¹⁵ Andy Malinalco, “Is Venezuela Heading Towards Prout?” Prout Research Center of Venezuela, <http://priven.org/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=43> (accessed 21 April 2007).

the end of 2001, there were almost one-thousand cooperatives, by 2002, there were two-thousand, and in 2003, the total had grown to eight-thousand.¹⁶ The latest report from SUNACCOOP, released in 2006, places the current number of cooperatives at 185,000,¹⁷ more than any other country.¹⁸

This fact was enough to overcome anything I had read about Chávez's corrupt regime or secret desire to transform Venezuela into another "Cuba." I knew that I needed to see the country in person to decide for myself whether Chávez was indeed revolutionizing participatory democracy and mobilizing the poorer classes. Against the better judgment of friends and family, I boarded a plane in August 2006 to study abroad in Mérida, Venezuela for four months. Though research was not the explicit purpose of my trip, I hoped that my time on the ground would reveal the nature of the Bolivarian Revolution and the actual substance of these booming cooperatives. I was convinced that the spectacular growth in cooperatives represented a new Venezuelan social obsession¹⁹ and could not be ignored for its implicit commentary on the condition of the Venezuelan social fabric and the national psyche. I was prepared to witness cooperatives mobilizing the popular classes to re-write themselves into the narrative of a nation from which they had been historically excluded. By examining cooperatives, which embodied the Bolivarian Revolution, I hoped to finally provide a scholarly witness to the success of Venezuela's transformation.²⁰

Needless to say, my experience did not progress as planned. During my time in Venezuela, I encountered one small cooperative, a women's baking collective,

¹⁶ Betsy Bowman and Bob Stone, "Venezuela's Cooperative Revolution: An economic experiment is the hidden story behind Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution," *Dollars and Sense*, July 2006, <http://www.rebellion.org/noticia.php?id=36452> (accessed 22 April 2007).

¹⁷ Oscar Bastidas-Delgado in *La autogestión como innovación social en las cooperativas. el caso de las ferias de consumo de Lara en Venezuela* (Caracas: Centro de Estudios de la Participación, la Autogestión y el Cooperativismo, 2007), 13.

¹⁸ Malinalco.

¹⁹ In the style of Laura Kipnis, who argues in *Against love* that the emergence of a US obsession with adultery and the private lives of its politicians indicates a deeper mistrust of US political institutions, I hoped to propose that cooperatives are equally important social features for understanding the emergence of the "new" Venezuela.

²⁰ Information about Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution is limited, but in general, can be characterized as extremely biased. Most accounts originate from either leftist or *anti-Chavista* sides and the scholarly literature tends to follow this pattern (or is, in most cases, absent). Information about cooperatives, specifically, is generally purely qualitative or only available in unscholarly personal accounts. Quantitative data, although available from SUNACCOOP, does not reveal specifics about cooperative successes or failures. According to Bastidas-Delgado, interviewed in the article "Cooperativas pierden fanaticada" by Ramón Sahmkow, "The census only measures how many cooperatives exist and their type of activity, but it does not work with figures that reference volume of operations, management of finances, [or] cooperative capital; it does not allow the integration of cooperatives from a financial perspective to provide a vision of their true contribution. It is a census that does not contribute anything" [my translation].

with friendly women but no apparent cooperative network or social vision that extended beyond their economic success. Several times, I was lucky enough to glimpse the international cooperative symbol, two evergreen trees, perched at the edge of a restaurant or sewing shop name plaque. The majority of my contact with this social movement that I had read so much about came from the multitude of governmental billboards plastered with Chávez's smiling or defiant face.

Where were all the cooperatives? Though the disjunction of my expectations and perceptions troubled me, it was not until my return home that I began to fixate more on these confusing elements of my Venezuela trip. Why did the reality of my tangible experience contrast so vividly with what I had read regarding the Venezuelan revolution?

Unable to let go of my hopes for how Chávez was reshaping Venezuela, and still a fierce believer in the potential for cooperatives to create true community-mobilized change—in contrast to traditional top-down models of development—I returned to Venezuela this summer to get to the bottom of my discomfort about the apparent invisibility of the cooperative movement. My plan was to start my research with a visit to Cecosesola, *Organismo de Integración Cooperativa*²¹ (Organism for Cooperative Integration), one of the oldest and, according to everything I had read, most successful cooperatives in Venezuela.²² It is also distinguished by its separation from government programs, and therefore appeared to be a strong indicator of pure citizen mobilizations. I then planned to move on to build a comparative analysis with several of Chávez's new cooperatives. I hoped to gather data to argue that cooperatives were popular because they allowed Venezuelan citizens to express their disillusionment with their historic lack of power and exclusion from the rhetoric of what "being Venezuelan" meant.

My first day in Venezuela, however, I received the first of many shocks throughout my trip. Despite the unprecedented growth in Venezuelan cooperatives and significant applause from the international leftist community, I

²¹ Formerly, *Central de Cooperativas del Estado Lara* (Central Cooperative of Lara State). The cooperative chose to preserve the initials CECOSOLA because they have played an important role in the history of the group's formation.

²² Michael Fox, "CECOSOLA: Four Decades of Independent Struggle for a Venezuelan Cooperative," *Venezuelanalysis.com*, June 19, 2006, <http://www.venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/1793> (accessed 30 November 2007); See also Héctor Lucena, Nelson Fréitez, and Aymara Hernández, eds., *Cooperativas: empresas, estado y sindicatos: una vinculación necesaria* (Barquisimeto: Fondo Editorial Universidad Centroccidental Lisandro Alvarado, 2007), 123.

learned that during the summer, Chávez had declared the program a failure, condemning it for its inability to truly eliminate capitalistic relations within the economy. In his assessment, the cooperative program had not been contributing to the development of a “social economy.” It also appeared that cooperatives could not be quite the social obsession that I hoped for—rather than creating cooperatives as a response to exclusion, Chávez’s analysis declared that people had instead been forming cooperatives to take advantage of government money for personal gain.

Devastated, more for my crushed hopes about a socialist reform than for lack of a thesis topic, I wallowed briefly in despair only to gradually awaken and take notice of my surroundings. Though not a new cooperative, I began to realize that Cecosesola was a community locus for a brand of development, organization, and participation that I had never read about or expected to encounter. Every day I spent with the cooperative convinced me more of the transformative potential for a social organization without hierarchy to construct strong communities and support the participation of historically underrepresented sectors of society.

Cecosesola is an umbrella organization for cooperatives, with 350 core members and roughly 1,000 total associates²³ distributed among the 75 associated cooperatives and civil associations. Over the past forty years, Cecosesola has become a strong economic force in Barquisimeto, Venezuela. The cooperative runs three large *Ferías de Consumo Popular* (discount food markets for ‘popular consumption’) throughout the city, primarily stocked with fruit, vegetables, and goods produced by affiliated cooperatives; six community health centers, which provide free primary care to Cecosesola associates and greatly discounted rates to the public; a funerary service; a savings/loans and financing service; and is in the process of constructing a hospital, which will be communally owned by all 1,000 associates.

Cecosesola’s activities play a large role in the surrounding community and the Barquisimeto economy. In 1998, the *ferías* alone served 40,000 families, and as of August 2007, every week they serve 55,000 families and distribute 450,000 kilos of produce a week.²⁴ As such, the *ferías* serve roughly one-third of Barquisimeto’s 1.5 million residents.²⁵ According to Luis Gómez Calcaño:

²³ See Appendix A for a fuller description of the roles of these various actors. Though I distinguish there between ‘direct members’ and ‘associates,’ I use these terms interchangeably throughout because Cecosesola members/associates do not make such a distinction themselves.

²⁴ Cecosesola, “Que es Cecosesola?” (August 2007).

²⁵ Fox.

The market system is the main supplier of groceries and commodities for Barquisimeto on a range comparable to the large national marketing chains, and at prices considerably lower than retail. This implies direct annual savings for approximately \$11 million.²⁶

Furthermore, Cecosesola's funerary service is the largest in the region, serving 17,400 families, and its health network reaches 155,000 community members and associates.

Most astounding is that Cecosesola provides these services without the guidance of any hierarchical organizational structures, such as a board of directors or president, or even set jobs. Each member participates in every aspect of the cooperative that he or she desires through rotating *equipos*.²⁷ In meetings that occur nearly every day of the week, members assemble to discuss problems, politics, and the goals of the cooperative. Freedom of information is widely practiced, with all associates granted equal access to budget information and no decisions made 'behind doors.' Though several of the original members are still involved, the cooperative is now primarily maintained through a continuous influx of new, young members and, as a result, appears to be functioning sustainably without reliance upon the direction or guidance of Cecosesola's founders.

The more I saw of Cecosesola, the more convinced I became that this was a successful cooperative²⁸—and the exact model for what Chávez's program had attempted to accomplish. However, Cecosesola had emerged external to any governmental program and without large government loans, quite unlike Chávez's

²⁶ Luis Gómez Calcaño, *Family markets in Lara, Venezuela: a participatory initiative* as part of the seminar "Social Programs, Poverty and Citizen Participation," co-sponsored by Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden in Cartagena, Colombia March 12-13, 1998 (Inter-American Development Bank, State and Society Division), 3.

²⁷ In English, "teams." See Appendix A for a fuller description of this element.

²⁸ I will draw from the guidelines outlined by Bastidas-Delgado as well as the collection edited by Lucena et al. to formulate my definition of a successful cooperative. I will define a cooperative as successful if it follows the following guidelines:

- » Combats social exclusion (Lucena in Lucena et al., 75)
- » Operates without a hierarchical structure, or if set positions are allocated, that such a structure does not impede a process of consensus decision-making
- » Exists for the benefit of a communal good, rather than personal or group profit and gain, and develops social responsibility (Bastidas-Delgado, 32)
- » Is sustainable—can persist without outside financial support
- » Fosters the participation of all members
- » Members share equally in all profits
- » Is an organization of the social economy and functions along its logic (Bastidas-Delgado, 32)
- » Develops cooperation with other cooperatives
- » In the language of the International Cooperative Alliance, is based "in the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity...[consisting of members who] assume the ethical values of honesty, transparency, responsibility and social vocation" (cited in Bastidas-Delgado, 49 [my translation])
- » According to Bastidas-Delgado, Cecosesola is a prime example of a cooperative that meets these guidelines.

cooperatives, which received bountiful resources. With this realization, my final research question emerged: *In light of Cecosesola's survival, why did Chávez's cooperative movement end in widespread failure?*

In this thesis, I argue that cooperatives permit the contestation of exclusionary national narratives and in fact emerge as means through which marginalized groups and individuals can write new narratives to facilitate their empowerment and participation within the nation. Most importantly, these elements define, and are necessary for the creation of, successful cooperatives. My case study of Cecosesola suggests that the presence of individual purpose and initiative in a self-managed process of narrative construction can foster strong communities and create a new dialogue²⁹ between the state and civil society.

Following from these observations, I argue that the failure of Chávez's cooperatives resulted from the overt politicization of the program with the national narrative of revolution. The presence of Chávez's charismatic linkages with the masses furthered a national narrative that removed the role of individual agency³⁰ and prescribed a set "narrative of resistance." As a result, Chávez's program actually stifled citizen mobilization through the imposition of a new—yet still state-centric—national narrative.

These conclusions provide many insights into the Bolivarian Revolution as a whole. Although the Revolution espouses a powerful rhetoric of change, and even goes so far as to conceptualize a new idea of Venezuelan citizenship, the experience of Chávez's cooperative program suggests that the Chávez's administration may be founded upon yet another exclusionary national narrative. Poor Venezuelans are discursively included as never before (and have certainly received many important benefits from Chávez's social programs), but Chávez's presence as a charismatic leader contradicts his stated goals to foster citizen mobilization. Though Chávez defends popular power, his simultaneous insistence that all change take place under the Bolivarian banner undermines citizen agency—and thus resistance—in engaging with the state vision of Venezuela's future.

²⁹ By dialogue, I mean filling in the void of civil society (historically absent in Venezuela) through a new relationship between traditionally excluded citizens and the government. This concept will be explored further in the section of the literature review titled "Chávez's Cooperatives and Cecosesola: Background for the Case Study."

³⁰ By agency, I mean an individual's ability to shape and envision his or her own life's course. See the "Structure and Agency" section for a further analysis of this concept.

II. National Narratives and Social Exclusion

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Pro-Chavez graffiti prior to the December 2006 presidential election.

A discussion of the role that cooperatives play in contesting and re-writing national narratives must begin with an analysis of what role such narratives play in the nation and how they may be related to the social exclusion of certain groups. In the sense that I will be using it, a national narrative includes all of the symbolism, rhetoric, and communication within a given nation that serves as the “language” of nationalism and legitimizes the current structure of power within society. Thus, discussions of national narratives are intimately connected to studies about the formation of national consciousness or nationalism in the context of the nation-state system.

Benedict Anderson and Thongchai Winichakul focus on how national identity is constructed through both internal modes of connection³¹ and exclusion of the ‘other.’³² Anderson argues that internally, the development of print technology and the proliferation of accessible literature, newspapers, and other communication forms allowed individuals to begin “to identify with public communities that were vastly larger than the local world in which they lived their daily lives.”³³ Winichakul focuses on the other side of nation formation or, namely, how nations create unity and a cohesive sense of identity by dehumanizing other nations. Nationalism, therefore, is generated largely through emphasizing what a given nation “is not.”

Though these scholars are important for the attention they have drawn to the concept of nationalism and, more significantly, to the state narratives that uphold it either through fortifying connections or emphasizing exceptionality, they do not adequately address the relationships between different sectors of society. E.J. Hobsbawm, particularly, points to the importance of understanding the role of economic transformations in modern nationalism. He argues that national identity is not as homogeneous and powerful as Anderson stipulates. Rather, modernization and the expansion of capitalism have complicated the social picture within which national narratives are situated. In his analysis, nationalism “is a powerful political and cultural expression of modernizing economic processes that have destroyed older social hierarchies, generated new social anxieties, and produced new legitimating ideologies.” National rhetoric, in this sense, becomes a tool of new capitalist elites to justify social changes related to modernization. This approach melds well with work by Liah Greenfeld, who

³¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

³² Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam mapped: a history of the geo-body of a nation*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1997), 1-19.

³³ Lloyd Kramer, “Historical Narratives and the Meaning of Nationalism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58, no. 3 (1997): 529.

sees social modernization and nation-building as virtually inseparable.³⁴ If this is the case, Anderson's analysis fails to critically question the role that national narratives may play in modernization and the legitimization of the social divides that result.

This perspective is important because it takes into account the reality that the nation is not always "a deep, horizontal comradeship." National narratives frequently emerge to combat societal divides and their strength is often derived from internal processes of exclusion. Julie Skurski's work is especially relevant in this regard. She critiques Anderson's analysis that a cohesive national identity or an "imagined community" actually exists, for one, and also, how such ideas are upheld. In her analysis, Anderson is naïve in assuming that "the "fraternal" bond that unites the national community... is achieved *apart from* existing practices of domination."³⁵ According to Anderson, "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship."³⁶ Skurski, conversely, argues that such an analysis is weak because it assumes that an elite construct will be unanimously accepted across multiple social boundaries. In other words, Anderson presumes that the idea of nation is inclusive enough to equally motivate "masses and elites to fight on its behalf."³⁷ Consequently, Skurski, as well as Carol Pateman, argue that Anderson's preoccupation with fraternity as the primary means of creating communal associations ignores the role that social exclusions have in fact played in the development of the national narrative.³⁸

For this reason, some scholars have recently begun to focus on a so-called "multicultural" explanation of nations "that focuses on the competing languages and narratives within a society rather than the unity of communications or the unity of 'imagined communities.'"³⁹ Though the strength of the state or dominant groups' "language of nation" (used to strengthen nationalism and uphold norms) is not disregarded in this analysis, extra focus is directed towards the fact that multiple layers of society exist within a nation. Most importantly, it recognizes that these excluded groups generally contest, in some manner, the national narrative. As Lloyd Kramer describes:

³⁴ Liah Grenfeld, *Nationalism: five roads to modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 18.

³⁵ Julie Skurski, "The Ambiguities of Authenticity in Latin America: Doña Bárbara and the Construction of National Identity," *Poetics Today* 15, no. 4 (1994): 609.

³⁶ Anderson, 6-7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Carol Pateman, *The Disorder of women: democracy, feminism and political theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 78-81.

³⁹ Kramer, 537.

The history of nationalism is thus a history of conflicts over competing narratives that seek to define a social community. More specifically, it is a history of contestation between those who seek a fully coherent narrative of the community's existence and those whose presence, ideas, color or culture undermine the possibility of that coherence.⁴⁰

It is this contestation that becomes particularly relevant to my analysis of the cooperative movement in Venezuela, largely because some scholars have begun to move beyond purely economic or "populist" explanations for social movements. Instead, some, such as Ariel and Victor Armony and Donald E. Pease, have proposed that social upheaval occurs as part of a process of contesting an idea of nationalism from which some are excluded. As national narratives serve to perpetuate and deepen national norms and the strength of the "imagined community," social resistance is frequently an expression of excluded-group resentment to a national reality so distanced from their own. Pease, for example, argues that movements materialize "with the collective recognition of the marked disequilibrium in the allocation of social empowerments and resources in the national narrative."⁴¹ Specifically avoiding economical or political explanations for public outburst, A. and V. Armony propose, instead, that "citizen mobilization and the "indictment" of the political class are connected to longstanding conceptions of national identity, particularly to national myths."⁴² A. and V. Armony and Pease both agree that these social movements fight not only for the inclusion of marginalized communities in the national narrative, but also seek to contest the most basic social arrangements that permit the narrative's existence.⁴³ In this way, Pease argues that social movements "expose national identity as an artifact rather than a tacit assumption, a purely contingent social construction rather than a meta-social universal."⁴⁴ As such, "National identities are always contested, always political, and always a choice between narratives."⁴⁵ This sort of analysis demands a fresh look at both the stimulus for the Bolivarian Revolution and, in regards to the cooperative movement, some aspects of its failure. Using Pease and Armony as a basis, I will take this argument one step farther and propose that in the case of Cecosesola and the Venezuelan cooperatives, contestation of national narratives becomes an important factor in also gauging the *success* of a movement.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 537.

⁴¹ Donald E. Pease, "National Identities, Postmodern Artifacts, and Postnational Narratives," *boundary 2* no. 15 (1992): 3.

⁴² Armony, 27.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Pease, 5.

⁴⁵ M. Lane Bruner, "Rhetorics of the State: The Public Negotiation of Political Character in Germany, Russia, and Quebec," *National Identities* 2, no. 2 (2000): 161.

National Narratives in Venezuela

Understanding national narrative contestation in the context of Venezuelan cooperatives requires taking one step back to examine the historical development of nationalism and exclusion in Venezuela. Venezuelan national narratives can be separated into three historical discourse groups: anti-colonial discourse, the discourse of authenticity epitomized by the novel *Doña Bárbara* during the middle of the 20th century and, more recently, the narrative of Venezuelan exceptionalism. These narratives—and the exclusion of the poor majority that I will argue they have all generated—will provide the basis for my analysis of the role that cooperatives play in Venezuela and explain the specific significance of Chávez and his cooperative program.

Anti-Colonial Discourse. The foundations of modern narratives of nation in Venezuela developed during the struggle for independence and can be traced most specifically to the role of The Liberator, Simón Bolívar. Anderson attributes the birth of modern nationalism to the Creole elites who engineered the anti-colonial movement in Latin America. Venezuela was distinct from other nations, however, in that it lacked an indigenous past with one visible institutionalized state and culture. Rather, Venezuela was marked by a collection of different indigenous cultures, smaller and less culturally homogenous, with a “strong rebellious spirit” as revealed through their tough resistance against Spanish civilization. In the elite’s eyes, these native cultures were “of a lower order than the acknowledged great civilizations of ancient Mexico and Peru.”⁴⁶ Therefore, anti-colonial discourse could not rely on reconstructing a cohesive “original” identity or appealing to common origins. Instead, Bolívar and others conceptualized of the nation through the very act of forgetting the past, defined as barbaric, and moving forward to a new phase of civilization based upon the principles of reason and citizens’ rights. This new concept of citizenship gave birth to the notion of an “imagined” nation space, composed of equal citizens bonded by “horizontal and undifferentiated unity.”⁴⁷ From the beginning, new narratives emerged to defend the principles of nation and unity. In his concluding injunction to the Republic, Bolívar remarked:

All our moral powers will not suffice to save our infant republic from this chaos unless we fuse the mass of the people, the government, the legislation, and the national spirit into a single united body. Unity, unity, unity must be our motto

⁴⁶ Skurski, 611.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 608-9.

in all things. The blood of our citizens is varied: let it be mixed for the sake of unity.⁴⁸

Bolívar's statement is key in that it defends the possibility of "mixing," or drawing together the different racial and social groups into one conglomerate of nation. Additionally, it clearly represents his goal to create "a single united body," in other words, a strongly bonded nation. This statement also highlights the fact that the concept of unity in anti-colonial discourse became quickly associated with patriotism.⁴⁹

Despite Bolívar's emphasis on unity, nevertheless, from the beginning, the Venezuelan notion of "nation" possessed internal sources of deep contradiction. The dual roles of the Creole elite created fragmentation—this class existed as an elite group, thereby inherently linked to the colonizing presence of the Spanish, but existed equally as a force of resistance *against* the Colonial Power. In what Skurski deems "duality and ambiguity" in the system of collective authority,

Venezuela's colonial elite, composed largely of slave-owning cacao planters, opted for independence from Spain in part because they believed that the metropolis's recent policy of relaxing the caste system threatened their control over slaves and free people of color.⁵⁰

Thus, the anti-colonial process, while discursively upholding the principles of reason and citizenship, was by its very nature linked to the Creole elite's quest to maintain power and influence in the wake of Spanish rule. Rather than seeking independence purely for political freedom, the elite saw this change necessary for the protection of its own interests. For these reasons, "violent conflicts over citizenship, including civil wars infected by class and race campaigns to suppress indigenous peoples,"⁵¹ as well as the Creole elite's attempts to consolidate continued influence over labor and land, continued well through the end of the century, acting as a continuous reminder of the contradictions inherent in the national identity. The result, ultimately, was an institutionalization of "a divorce between the state's unifying claims and the exclusionary practices and beliefs they sustained."⁵² In essence, though a national narrative espousing unity became

⁴⁸ Simón Bolívar, Vicente Lecuna, and Harold A. Bierck, *Selected Writings of Bolívar*, Vol. 1 (New York: Colonial Press, 1951), 191.

⁴⁹ Marixa Lasso, "Race War and Nation in Caribbean Gran Colombia, Cartagena, 1810-1832," *American Historical Review* 111, no. 2 (2006).

⁵⁰ Doug Yarrington, "Populist Anxiety: Race and Social Change in the Thought of Rómulo Gallegos," *The Americas* 56, no. 1 (1999): 67.

⁵¹ Skurski, 609.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 611.

discursively engrained, it relied upon, and inherently created, exclusion. More importantly, such exclusion was considered discursively ‘invisible’ because any acknowledgment of its existence would be questioning the unity, and therefore validity, of the nation.⁵³

Narrative Redrafted: Doña Bárbara and the Discourse of Authenticity

The abstract systems of rhetoric and law that emerged from this internally fractured idea of nation were unsuccessful at creating a stable state and thus resulted in decades of successive strong-man regimes. These dictatorships would not end until General Juan Vicente Gómez (in office from 1908-35) came to power. His rule marked the end of this system as the post World War I era ushered in a new set of demands for reform and modernization. Such demands threatened the deeply imbedded structure of oligarchic rule and in an effort to preserve historical power arrangements, middle class elites, “a class composed largely of *mestizos* (in Venezuela, persons of some combination of European, indigenous and African heritage),”⁵⁴ began to espouse a new narrative of nation: the discourse of authenticity. Dependent on both idealist and “rationalist” thought influences, this discourse criticized the traditional Creole elite for ignoring the *pueblo*⁵⁵ and called instead for the creation of a “new” elite that could adequately represent the people. This new elite would facilitate the symbolic marriage between the state/elite and *pueblo*, creating a stronger and more civilized nation. According to Skurksi, “From this perspective, the hybrid racial makeup of Latin America was both a source of creative energy and a threat to civilized order.”⁵⁶ Venezuela was re-imagined as a unique conglomerate of disparate cultures that, if brought together, “could revitalize world civilization.”⁵⁷ Such transformation would only be possible, however, with the taming of the *pueblo*, which was still conceived of as dangerous and barbaric. As Yarrington argues, those of white or even mixed ancestry feared the potential of the poor, darker skinned masses to rise up and overcome their society with

⁵³ Lasso.

⁵⁴ Yarrington, 68.

⁵⁵ In Spanish, *pueblo* means “village,” but it is also used in common speech to refer to the everyday “people” that make up the nation. The usage of this word is somewhat charged. According to Coronil and Skurksi (in “Dismembering”), “The term *pueblo* has a dual set of meanings. On the one hand, it encompasses the entire citizenry of Venezuela and is invoked in relation to the nation's defense and the memory of its independence. On the other hand, the term refers to people who have lower-class (popular) origins and is widely used as a substitute for social class categories when referring to the poor, who are the majority of the population. Its connotations, charged with ambiguity, vary with context, speaker, and audience.”

⁵⁶ Skurksi, 606.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

violence. Symbolic marriage, in this sense, became the encouragement of immigration by white Europeans and, most importantly, miscegenation. Thus, “unity” in the discourse signaled exclusion and cultural suppression in practice.

The 1929 novel *Doña Bárbara*, written by Rómulo Gallegos, became the focal point of this discourse in society and the main symbolic proponent of such a solution. The book tells the story of Santos Luzardo, a cultured lawyer from the city, who seeks to reorder *los llanos*⁵⁸ by imposing a civilized rule of law. To accomplish this goal, he must contend with Doña Bárbara, a “primitive mestiza . . . who devours land and men,”⁵⁹ and her voracious Yankee companion, Mr. Danger. Luzardo’s cultivation and domestication of Marisela, Doña Bárbara’s abandoned daughter, and their union, ultimately suggests the symbolic modernization of the nation into a harmonious whole. Written during Gómez’s regime as a critique of his despotism,⁶⁰ it is ironic that Gómez in fact deeply appreciated the novel, going so far as to appoint Gallegos as a Senator (a position that he declined in favor of exile until Gómez’s death). Gallegos returned to Venezuela in 1936 to found and become president of Acción Democrática (AD), a new political party that claimed to be neither conservative nor Marxist. With democratic rule at last, and AD in power from 1945-48, the state “launched a capitalist reform project that party followers believed mirrored the novel’s vision.”⁶¹ By this point, Gallegos’ book had already been dubbed “national novel,” by no subtle means becoming in every shape and form the national narrative, and Gallegos had been elected president in the first fair elections.

As Doris Sommer argues in her innovative analysis:

this novel is the populist version of the national romance. It allegorically depicts the political union between the state and popular classes as simultaneously reflected in and dependent on the achievement of a romantic union between lovers of disparate class and racial origins. By bridging vertical class differences to create a bond based on love, the couple ultimately legitimizes the “nation-family.”⁶²

From this perspective, the narrative suggests that the possibility of Venezuelan progress depends upon watering down the poor, colored, rural masses with a

⁵⁸ In English, “the plains.”

⁵⁹ Skurski, 617.

⁶⁰ Some scholars argue that the character Doña Bárbara, despotic ruler of the plains, represents the tyranny of Gómez.

⁶¹ Skurksi, 621.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 607.

strong dose of white, cultured civilization. Venezuela's poor, conceived of through a feminized lens, can only become true Venezuelans if their simultaneously wild and passive nature is submitted to the masculine forces of progress. By both relying on and creating exclusion—namely, delegitimizing the realities of a Venezuelan majority—this narrative, which coincided with the birth of the Venezuelan cooperative movement, is important for understanding the role of the cooperative in Venezuelan society. Additionally, by once again minimizing the agency of the marginalized classes, it forms yet another piece in the fabric of exclusion that Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution allegedly attempts to counter.

Narrative of Venezuelan Exceptionalism

This discourse of authenticity eventually fed into and became the basis for what Steve Ellner terms the "Venezuelan exceptionalism thesis," a new national narrative upheld by elites and foreign scholars alike that touted Venezuela as an exemplary case of Latin American development and democracy. The end of Gómez's dictatorship and the rise of the AD party in what became Venezuela's first democratic system was highlighted "as a veritable 'revolution,' a break with one hundred years of backwardness."⁶³ Though this democratic period lasted only from 1945-48, in 1958, with the overthrow of General Marcos Pérez Jiménez (who ruled in the intermediary years), a stable era of Venezuelan democracy appeared to have finally emerged.

In little time at all, Venezuela became heralded as the "model" of Latin America for its stability, class and racial unity, strong political parties, and civic culture.⁶⁴ In the dominant rhetoric, the taming of Doña Bárbara had been achieved, the *pueblo* had at last become governable, and the vestiges of a wild past had been abandoned in the pursuit of progress. This new narrative of exceptionalism reduced the regime changes and struggles that had characterized Venezuelan society after 1830 to "personalism in the form of ambition to gain power," or *caudillismo*,⁶⁵ "which was made possible by the state of backwardness of the population."⁶⁶ This idea of Venezuela having been "re-born," or having finally moved beyond an unstable past to optimize its possibilities, gained strength through the rhetoric of AD (founded on the premises of *Doña Bárbara*) and

⁶³ Ellner and Salas, 6.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁵ A political system in which *caudillo* strong-men hold power.

⁶⁶ Guillermo Morón, *Historia de Venezuela* (Caracas: n.p., 1961).

various Venezuelan administrations. President Carlos Andrés Pérez remarked during his initial presidency (1974-1979):

Our history was characterized by perpetual personalism...the same authoritarianism, oppression and reduction of the people to insignificance...The people were apathetic spectators and failed to control their destiny, as if their lives and futures were the booty of the caudillo.⁶⁷

This sort of rhetoric, which downplayed past struggles of “the people,” served to create a new discursive reality in which the present symbolized fresh representation and, finally, the unity and democracy that had so long been sought.

The narratives of unity and exceptionalism did not flourish entirely without substance. With the end of authoritarian regimes in 1958, the dominant parties, AD and the social-Christian *Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente* (COPEI), instituted policies of import-substitution that increased government intervention in the economy and dramatically amplified social services. According to Ellner, these policies “enhanced regime legitimacy and the popularity of pro-establishment political leaders.”⁶⁸ Additionally, the expansion of the Venezuelan oil industry, which experienced its greatest rents between 1973 and 1978, led to a significant change in the overall Venezuelan standard of living. Indicators measured improvement in health standards, levels of education, life expectancy, infant mortality, and employment.⁶⁹

Though by the early 1980s per capita oil income had begun to decrease,⁷⁰ state narratives continued to celebrate democratic changes that set Venezuela apart from other developing nations. Declining state legitimacy (discussed in further detail later), however, prompted a new style of governance. Seeking to separate the “new” Venezuela from an unstable past, politicians upheld a discourse emphasizing reform through modernization, democratization, and decentralization in an effort to distance the government from past corrupt party control. The new goal was to reduce the state role in social support, thereby creating an antipolitical Venezuela upheld through traditionally absent citizen

⁶⁷ Carlos Andres Pérez, *El quehacer y la historia* (Caracas: Alfadil, 1988).

⁶⁸ Ellner and Salas, 4.

⁶⁹ Edgardo Lander, “Venezuelan Social Conflict in a Global Context,” in *Venezuela: Hugo Chávez and the decline of an “exceptional democracy”*, eds. Steve Ellner and Miguel Tinker Salas (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 21.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

participation, directed through the figure of the “neighbor-citizen.”⁷¹ According to Lander:

An antipolitical and antiparty discourse was reflected in the media, establishing a Manichean opposition between the state (characterized as corrupt, inefficient, and clientelist) and a mythical civil society (which included the media), understood as a synthesis of all virtue: creativity, initiative, efficacy, honesty, and participation.⁷²

This narrative celebrated Venezuela’s new wealth and democracy as well as the final incorporation of the entire population into a participatory system. It was, in every sense, a narrative of exceptionalism. At the same time, however, it soon became clear that this narrative, though perhaps representing mild changes on behalf of privileged sectors of the population, had not materialized for the grand majority. Instead of creating a new civil society and participation, it was yet another narrative that ignored and disguised exclusion.

The Narratives Shatter

The riots of 1989 called the celebrated stability and ingrained social cohesion of Venezuela into question, rupturing the myth of exceptionalism and triggering significant changes to the national narrative and the idea of being Venezuelan. From February 27th to March 3rd, an estimated one million Venezuelans took to the street in Caracas and other major cities, looting thousands of stores and factories and taking control of the streets. The government retaliated with military force—killing 277 people by official count, though thousands are estimated to have died.⁷³ According to Fernando Coronil and Skurski, the massacre, named the *Caracazo*, constituted “by far the most massive and severely repressed such riots in the history of Latin America.”⁷⁴ The explanation given at the time for the massive social upheaval relied on simple economic logic: bus fares had been increased by over one hundred percent after the government doubled gasoline prices, and the poor were angry. Coronil and Skurski, however, have moved beyond such arguments and instead analyze the action as the “accumulated frustration with the nation’s rapid economic decline

⁷¹ This name emerged from the growth of neighborhood organizations in middle and upper-class neighborhoods. Initially established to uphold democracy, their “central concern...has been defence of property and protection from threats by the excluded sectors of the population” (Ibid., 24).

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Lander, 25.

⁷⁴ Fernando Coronil and Julie Skurski, “Dismembering and Remembering the Nation: The Semantics of Political Violence in Venezuela,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 33, no. 2 (1991): 291.

and its political and economic corruption.”⁷⁵ In their perspective, the trigger for this explosion was newly elected president Pérez’s decision to sign on with the International Monetary Fund and accept the accompanying stringent structural adjustment program, part of his overall restructuring of the economy along neoliberal lines (which ran in direct opposition to promises he had made during his campaign to explicitly avoid such reforms).⁷⁶

In my own analysis, this event is significant as a tangible example of the public responding to disillusionment with the national narrative. By breaking his promise and implementing reforms that had direct and dire consequences for the majority of the Venezuelan population, Pérez provided the necessary fuel for a long excluded group, the poor *pueblo* majority, to express frustration. Though the dominant narrative preached inclusion, and even went so far as to deem this group nearly assimilated into national culture (due to democratic reform and growth in wealth), the *Caracazo* revealed the continued presence of exclusion and spoke to the continued disillusionment of the *pueblo* with the national identity. In this sense, the *Caracazo* was not a random, inexplicable fluke—it was merely an expression of repressed feelings of social exclusion.

While building and exploding from the platform of an unrepresentative national narrative, the uprising also had profound effects after the fact in changing Venezuelan perceptions of nation and the national narrative. Most significantly, the *Caracazo* deeply questioned the prominent notion of Venezuelan exceptionalism in regards to other Latin American and impoverished nations. According to Ellner, “Those who had previously defended exceptionalism generally came to recognize that the system of “pacted democracy” was fashioned by political elites and was therefore inherently exclusionary.”⁷⁷ Beneath a powerful rhetoric of progress, modernization, and democracy dwelt a much more deeply ingrained stratum of decidedly undemocratic behavior, including widespread corruption, electoral fraud, repression, and most importantly revealed, state violence. Political exclusion was perhaps the norm, not the exception, in Venezuelan society.

⁷⁵ Coronil and Skurski, 291.

⁷⁶ Lander, 25.

⁷⁷ Ellner and Salas, 8.

Lead-Up to the Riots: Stories the National Narrative Didn't Tell

An examination of the *Caracazo* in the context of the national narrative upheld through *Doña Bárbara* and the exceptionalism thesis reveals how exclusion from nation identity may spur social action. Despite a narrative of cohesion and democracy, the harsh day-to-day reality of poverty in Venezuela continued virtually unabated throughout the period of wealth. These realities are important for understanding public perceptions about being Venezuelan, both in the lead-up to the *Caracazo* and, eventually, in the election of Chávez. A brief examination of the history leading up to this uprising and the shattering of the myth of Venezuelan exceptionalism will provide an important lens for understanding the current state of the narrative and the role that cooperatives play in the contestation process.

Despite the relative increases in wealth during the 1960s and 1970s with the oil boom in Venezuela, by the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s the country found itself deep in the midst of the economic debt crisis that characterized so many other developing countries during this time. In Venezuela, however, it took hold and dramatically transformed society throughout the rest of the century. Between 1970-1997, per capita income decreased by eight percent and workers' income was reduced by roughly half. Income distribution changed markedly, reducing the relative power of labor as capital's share of production income increased 15 percent. Perhaps most revealing, Armando Martel estimates that the percent of the population living in poverty increased from 36 percent to 68 percent between 1984 and 1991.⁷⁸

In this manner, though the debt crisis came later to Venezuela, Edgardo Lander argues that it was even more profound than in other Latin American countries because the "expectations of sustained growth and improved living conditions had sunk deep roots in the Venezuelan mode of thinking."⁷⁹ In other words, though the exceptionalism thesis had not signified tangible changes in inclusion for much of Venezuela's excluded lower social classes, it had begun to gain importance because it offered a source of hope for future change and possibility. Thus, the contrast of the debt crisis to what had been discursively portrayed as the beginning of a "golden age" signaled not merely an economic recession but, rather, the failure of an idea of continued progress and, for the excluded

⁷⁸ Armando Martel, "Metodologías de estimación de la pobreza en Venezuela," paper presented to the CO-PRE-ILDIS Workshop on Methodologies on Poverty in Venezuela, Caracas, February 1993.

⁷⁹ Lander, 22.

majority, confirmation that they had never truly belonged within the national narrative or story of national advancement. According to Lander, “poverty and exclusion ceased to be seen as temporary phenomena in a “developing” or “modernizing” society or as conditions that might be overcome through individual effort. These crises-like conditions increasingly became permanent features of society.”⁸⁰ In the face of such realizations, the *Caracazo* represented the turning point—or place of no return—in regards to the myth of exceptionalism and also uncovered many of the exclusions beneath the façade of the national discourse that had formed the secret base of Venezuelan society. As Lander summarizes, “Historical and more recent forms of social division and exclusions that had been forgotten in the dominant political discourse and political culture became increasingly difficult to ignore.”⁸¹ According to Chesa Boudin et al., the years following the *Caracazo* were characterized by an average of 4.5 protests per day across the country.⁸² Clearly, at this moment, exclusion in Venezuela was at least somewhat revealed, and for the first time it became increasingly evident that two countries existed: “a ‘*Venezuela imaginaria*’ that was disconnected from ‘*Venezuela profunda*’—the everyday life of the majority of the population.”⁸³

The Rise of Chávez and the “Bolivarian Narrative”

Then Lieutenant-Colonel Hugo Chávez Frías would answer the dire call for change in Venezuela with his coup attempt against President Pérez in 1992. Although unsuccessful, his statement on national television before being sent to jail that the coup had failed only “*por ahora*”⁸⁴ circulated rapidly among poor sectors of the population, soon becoming a mantra of hope that a true revolution was nearing.⁸⁵ Tension continued to build in the country, leading to the impeachment of Pérez in 1993. In 1994, newly elected president Rafael Caldera pardoned Chávez, freeing the man who had quickly become a national hero.⁸⁶ Released from jail, and now with significant support generated by his famous parting words, Chávez entered the presidential race in 1998, espousing a radical

⁸⁰ Ibid., 23.

⁸¹ Ibid., 22.

⁸² Boudin, González, and Rumbos, 1.

⁸³ Lander, 24.

⁸⁴ In English, “for now.”

⁸⁵ In a 74 second television clip, Chávez said: “Comrades, the objectives we have set for ourselves to achieve have not been possible to achieve for now—“*por ahora*”—but new possibilities will arise again, and the country will be able to move forward to a better future... I alone take responsibility for this Bolivarian military uprising,” (cited in Boudin, González, and Rumbos ,2).

⁸⁶ Boudin, González, and Rumbos ,2.

narrative of potential Venezuelan political and social reform. Unlike his competitors, who failed to distance themselves from the traditional political parties, Chávez ran on an anti-corruption and anti-*puntofijismo*⁸⁷ platform, speaking directly to the *pueblo* with promises to increase social services and end poverty. To worldwide surprise, given the extreme nature of his rhetoric, he was elected president in 1998 with 56.20 percent of the votes in an election with 63.76 percent voter turn-out. His main competitor, Henrique Salas Römer, received a mere 39.97 percent of votes.⁸⁸

Though it is beyond the scope of this thesis to argue explicitly for why Chávez was elected, my analysis of national narratives until this point suggests the importance that his new discourse and platform may have played: Chávez spoke directly to excluded Venezuelans, promising to include them in the restructuring of Venezuelan society. His narrative at his time of election was, and has continued to be, significantly different from any previous Venezuelan national narrative in his assertive attention towards the poor and renewed emphasis on the birth of the nation. Ellner describes:

The key word in Chávez's speeches, to which he returns again and again in the most diverse contexts, is *pueblo* (people), which is a synthesizing term taking in the popular and the national. He often uses the concept "el soberano" (sovereign) synonymously with "el pueblo." [In] this reiterated appeal to the popular and the national...he defends sovereignty by invoking the founding myths of the nation....⁸⁹

By speaking directly to the poor and invoking their power through the lens of historical precedence—that is, the legendary birth of Venezuela during Bolívar's time—Chávez's discourse holds both the appeal of empowerment and the return to a past glory of popular nationalism. Though former Venezuelan narratives did attempt to appeal to the excluded poor through promises of change and a "new elite," Chávez's rhetoric can be clearly distinguished by the fact that it is in many ways directly threatening to "the upper-middle and upper classes and a large proportion of the country's intellectuals."⁹⁰ His promises and most basic intents

⁸⁷ This term references a 1958 pact between Venezuela's political parties that essentially limited future elections to a competition between two parties. Initially seen as a positive reform, the term emerged in a derogatory sense to encompass the negative consolidation of power in what was seen as a corrupt, two-party system.

⁸⁸ Political Database of the Americas, Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, "República Bolivariana de Venezuela Resultados Electorales," <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Elecdata/Venezuela/ven.html> (accessed 27 November 2007).

⁸⁹ Lander, 27.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

have, thus far, largely been taken seriously, likely because his discourse has been accompanied by tangible governmental actions designed to at least visibly restructure Venezuelan society. As mentioned earlier, these changes include both symbolic reforms, such as rewriting the constitution to defend previously ignored rights, and concrete reforms, such as guaranteeing free healthcare and education and creating a government-supported cooperative program. For this reason, even though material living conditions did not improve markedly during the initial years of the Chávez administration,⁹¹ Chávez has “continued to be popular among nonprivileged sectors because his symbolically integrative discourse cultivates an extraordinary sense of identity.”⁹²

Given Chávez’s focus on creating a social economy through direct citizen mobilization and participation, however, the failure of his cooperative program to accomplish such a transformation on a mass scale remains puzzling. After the popular power expressed during the *Caracazo* and the continued deepening gulf between rich and poor since then, the lack of energy or social change stimulated through the cooperative program is counterintuitive. In the following section, I suggest that the relationship between the state and the cooperative movement— influenced greatly by a new narrative founded upon Chávez’s charisma—is key to understanding the failure of Chávez’s cooperative movement.

⁹¹ The exact percentage reduction in poverty during this time period is highly contested.

⁹² Lander, 28.

III. Social Movements and the State

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Volunteers form a barricade in preparation for Chavez's arrival at a campaign event in Mérida, Venezuela (November 2006).

Linkages with the State

Arguments abound for how states should or should not involve themselves in social movements. Many European scholars have historically focused on the negative repercussions of social movements connecting with the state. However, much scholarship that originates elsewhere has continued to take the alternate perspective, namely that social movements benefit significantly from linkages with the state. Rather than restricting independence, Joe Foweraker proposes that linkages can strengthen the identity of movements, particularly after social victories. Sidney Tarrow, similarly, argues that movements benefit from governmental ties because they can expand during certain political opportunities, such as inter-elite fragmentation.⁹³

Recently, nonetheless, some scholars have begun to move beyond explanations that explain movement success by linkages with the state or political parties. Though he acknowledges the importance of state involvement, Ellner sees the structural cohesion and organization of a movement as the most significant factor in permitting influence at the state and local level. From his perspective, national structure can strengthen a social movement without weakening its message. He writes:

Just as cooperation with political structures may represent a middle ground between dependence on political parties and the state, at one extreme, and a skeptical apoliticism, at the other, nation-wide organisations may stop short of the extreme centralism of the ‘old’ social movements.⁹⁴

Ellner applies this argument to his analysis of the failure of the Venezuelan Neighborhood Movement to become widespread and influential.

Kirk A. Hawkins and David R. Hansen, who write about the *Círculos Bolivarianos*, community groups that the Chávez administration has supported to further the goals of the Revolution, take a slightly different approach to understanding why social movements may have less power than expected or, in the case of the *Círculos*, do “not significantly enhance the level of pluralism in the broader civil society.”⁹⁵ They move even farther beyond Ellner by suggesting that linkages

⁹³ Steve Ellner, “Obstacles to the Consolidation of the Venezuelan Neighbourhood Movement: National and Local Cleavages,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 31, no 1 (1999): 96.

⁹⁴ Ellner, 96.

⁹⁵ Kirk A. Hawkins and David R. Hansen, “Dependent Civil Society: The *Círculos Bolivarianos* in Venezuela,” *Latin American Research Review* 41, no. 1 (2006): 102.

with the state can actually be harmful to a movement, and in this way share more commonalities with the European social movements perspective. Hawkins and Hansen argue that the institutionalization of civil society is key for the success of movements and organizations in effecting the democracy.⁹⁶ They argue that the *Círculos* lacked a strong level of institutionalization and, more specifically, that they “embodied a *charismatic mode of linkage* between Chávez and his supporters,”⁹⁷ meaning that votes and support were given primarily in exchange for Chávez’s promises of reform as a charismatic leader and less for the strength of particular policies or in relation to received benefits. As a result, “this mode of linkage created an internal contradiction or tension between the *Círculos*’ stated goals of autonomy/internal democracy and serving Chávez, and it undermined their efforts at institutionalization.”⁹⁸ Though the *Círculos* increased the plurality of civil society *within* the *Chavista*⁹⁹ movement, they largely excluded and disenfranchised citizens and other groups who did not espouse a political orientation or who identified *con la Oposición*. Thus, in the particular case of Venezuela, Hawkins and Hansen show that symbolic connections with the state, or in this instance, Chávez, can weaken the autonomy and power of social movements across society.

Charisma as Narrative: A New Form of Social Exclusion?

Building from Hawkins and Hansen, I propose that state linkages can undermine social movements because the existence of charismatic linkages impedes groups from independently challenging national narratives through the creation of alternate narratives. In this process, the role of charisma is particularly relevant. Critics and fans alike frequently characterize Chávez as possessing a strong charismatic appeal and some authors, such as Hawkins and Sylvia and Danopoulos, consider this a significant factor in his electability and continued high popularity ratings:

First, charismatic appeal. Chávez began forming his strongman populist image with his defiance in the face of defeat during his 1992 coup. Second, his dark complexion and coarse hair identifies him racially with the vast majority of Venezuelans. Third, he invokes the image of Bolívar and the spirit of revolution against foreigners. . . .¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Hawkins and Hansen, p. 119.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ In popular rhetoric, a “Chavista” is anyone ardently in favor of Chávez, and anyone who feels differently is *con la Oposición*, or with the “Opposition.”

¹⁰⁰ Sylvia and Danopoulos, 67.

What, though, is charisma? According to Ariel de la Fuente, charisma has too often been dismissed as a mere “phenomenon of personal magnetism,”¹⁰¹ which thereby attributes the degree of popular support almost purely to the personal qualities of the leader at hand. A more recent trend, thus, has been to view charisma “as a reciprocal relationship between leaders and followers.”¹⁰² In other words, the very act of conferring the status of ‘charismatic’ to a leader represents a social decision and reflects the values and needs of the followers. As such, “cultural and social expectations...exercise a controlling or, at least, limiting influence over the would-be charismatic figure.”¹⁰³ In Chávez’s particular case, it therefore becomes important to consider why he is so frequently cited as charismatic and appealing to the poor masses. Clearly, this charisma has more to do with the degree of symbolism that ‘the followers’ have attributed to Chávez than his actual personal magnetism. Hawkins describes this appeal through the Venezuelan book *Habla el Comandante*, which he says “paints a picture of [Chávez as] a humble yet gifted leader, a messiah likely to end the cycle of ‘pillaging, appropriation, and extermination of the *pueblo-pobreza*’ that Venezuela has experienced since the arrival of Columbus and the conquest of American lands...”¹⁰⁴ The elevation of Chávez to charismatic leader is thus tightly bound to the desire of the *pueblo* to find a strong president capable of reversing their historic social exclusion.

As such it is by no means insignificant that Chávez has been frequently compared to the legendary *caudillos* of Venezuela’s past, also celebrated for their charisma and ability to lead the masses. Chávez is in fact “the purported great-grandson of a revolutionary *caudillo*.”¹⁰⁵ In *Habla el Comandante*, Muñoz writes:

It should not be forgotten that we are standing before a spent model, in conditions of existence that herald new times. Nevertheless, at the beginning, the agent of change that comes into action is one that we could call traditional, that is, the old and familiar savior-caudillo with its messianic accent, purpose, and projection.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ Ariel de la Fuente, “Facundo and Chaco in Songs and Stories: Oral Culture and the Representations of Caudillos in the Nineteenth-Century Argentinean Interior,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 80, no. 3 (2000): 504.

¹⁰² Fuente, 505.

¹⁰³ Scott, 221.

¹⁰⁴ Hawkins, 1147.

¹⁰⁵ Ronald D. Sylvia and Constantine P. Danopoulos, “The Chávez Phenomenon: Political Change in Venezuela,” *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (2003): 65.

¹⁰⁶ Blanco Muñoz, *Venezuela del 04f-92 al 06d-98: habla el Comandante Hugo Chávez frías*, Testimonios Violentos, vol. 12 (Caracas: Fundacion Catedra Pio Tamayo, 1998).

Invoked among the *pueblo* as a legendary figure arisen from the past, Chávez is imbued with a deeply symbolic charismatic power. As Scott points out, however, charisma is a relationship, and Chávez fulfills his side of the bargain. According to Sylvia and Danopoulos:

When international media observers review Chávez as a politician they acknowledge that his dark skin resonates with the *mestizo* masses. They also note his fiery rhetoric and televised diatribes and suggest that he is unstable and possibly dangerous. What they fail to appreciate is the level of desperation among the masses and *Chávez's mastery of the symbolic and practical uses of politics*¹⁰⁷ [emphasis added].

In other words, Chávez is able to present himself as the leader that represents the “cultural and social expectations”¹⁰⁸ of Venezuela’s excluded poor. Given the context of Chávez’s arrival into Venezuelan politics and his efforts to symbolize popular concerns and ideas, his elevation to the place of charismatic leader among the excluded majority is not surprising. This particular milieu also explains in large part the presence of the charismatic linkages that Hawkins and Hansen identify. According to Max Weber, “charismatic linkages are the product of crises or period of ‘distress,’ moments when existing institutions have clearly failed to generate solutions to society’s deepest problems.”¹⁰⁹ Such linkages are detrimental, according to Hawkins, because they “are based upon a Manichean discourse of ‘the people versus the elite’ that naturally encourages an ‘anything goes’ attitude among Chávez’s supporters.” As such, he finds that “these populist qualities undermine the [Bolivarian] movement’s democratic potential.”¹¹⁰

Hawkins, however, does not adequately address how, specifically, such charismatic linkages undermine democracy. In my analysis, I delve deeper into the role of charisma as regards the mobilization and formation of a participatory civil society. As such, I propose that connections to Chávez’s charisma explain the weakness of the *Círculos* because their dependence on Chávez’s populist and socialist narrative prevented their independent formation and power as an empowering social mechanism for the excluded classes. Though Chávez’s narrative may preach inclusion in an attempt to distance itself from past exclusionary narratives and gain popular support, his elevation to charismatic

¹⁰⁷ Sylvia and Danopoulos, 75.

¹⁰⁸ Scott, 221.

¹⁰⁹ Hawkins, 1139, in reference to Max Weber, Hans Heinrich Gerth, and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber: essays in sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

¹¹⁰ Kirk Hawkins, “Populism in Venezuela: The Rise of Chavismo,” *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 6 (2003): 1137.

leader in fact legitimates a state model that is equally reliant upon historic patterns of exclusion and ‘otherness.’ By fulfilling the charismatic criteria of his followers, Chávez receives high popular support but, as a consequence, he in turn imbues his social programs with an already scripted narrative of being and resistance that is innately politicized. In this manner, though Chávez’s verbal narrative is new, his charisma is a vehicle that carries the Bolivarian narrative forward in the same exclusionary pattern of past Venezuelan narratives.

I will argue that Cecosesola’s experience sheds light on how important it may be for social movements to maintain distance from government structure and interference and for leaders to not assume positions of legendary status. The failure of Chávez’s cooperatives, not only regulated by the government but also *initiated* by the government, must thus be explained by the role of the state in the narrative resistance process and its impedance of group-initiated alternative narratives.

Cooperatives as Sites of Resistance and Alternative Narrative Construction

The next step in understanding this phenomenon naturally involves an analysis of the role that cooperatives play as social movements questioning exclusionary national narratives. In this section, I first discuss the origins of the cooperative model, both internationally and in Venezuela, while orienting my analysis within the history of Venezuelan national narratives that I proposed earlier. I argue that cooperatives can serve as vehicles for social inclusion because they allow members to contest historic power arrangements implied by the national narrative. I then delve more deeply into the goals and structures of Chávez’s cooperative program, reviewing several preliminary explanations that have been offered for the failure of the program. Finally, I discuss briefly the history and development of Cecosesola, placing emphasis on why it is defined as a successful cooperative.¹¹¹

Background on Cooperatives

Though the birth of the term “cooperative” in development discourse is a rather new phenomenon, the concept itself has a much longer history; in fact, the cooperative is arguably one of the oldest structures of human society. Studies

¹¹¹ Refer to footnote 28 [page 36] for my rubric of what constitutes a successful cooperative.

suggest that the earliest human communities centered primarily on cooperative operations for their daily existence. In what Riane Eisler terms “partnership models” of society, individuals worked together in egalitarian relationships to achieve greater prosperity than would have been possible through mere isolated efforts.¹¹² In ancient Babylonia, for example, peasants practiced cooperative farming and, in China, early cooperatives appeared in the form of savings and loan associations.¹¹³

Cooperative modes of living survived in various forms despite the huge transformations away from this structure during the last several thousand years, but they did so primarily in isolated, sporadic episodes or in societies still primarily untouched by the changing global community. Dissatisfaction with the pervasiveness of capitalism as the new world language of commerce, and its multitude of negative effects, however, has triggered a resurgence in the idea of cooperatives since their modern birth during the Industrial Revolution, and they have become the basis of a global cooperative movement which now serves, in some way, half of the world population.¹¹⁴ Today, though, they exist in a much more formal and defined sense than previously, when cooperatives persisted as normal modes of interaction rather than as part of an established ideology. Unlike cooperative movements during the 19th and early 20th centuries,¹¹⁵ many of which possessed a decidedly radical Marxist flavor, the contemporary global

¹¹² Riane Eisler, *The chalice and the blade: Our History, Our Future* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1988), xix.

¹¹³ Brian Oleson, “History,” New Generation Cooperatives on the Northern Plains, http://www.umanitoba.ca/afs/agric_economics/ardi/history.html (accessed April 21, 2007).

¹¹⁴ Alianza Cooperativa Internacional para las Américas, “El cooperativismo en el Mundo,” <http://www.aciamericas.coop/spip.php?article44> (accessed 2 May 2008).

¹¹⁵ Cooperatives, in the modern sense, emerged from growing dissolution among working class people in Europe during the Industrial Revolution (late 18th and 19th centuries) as increased polarization of wealth and heightened migration into cities escalated class tensions and poverty. Families that moved into cities and could no longer grow their own food became dependent on storeowners for their basic needs, often with disastrous results as these businessmen adulterated their products or paid workers in “chits,” credit at their own company stores. In frustration, workers began forming collectives to purchase goods wholesale to distribute among themselves. Eventually, these ideas came to full fruition in Rochdale, England in 1843 when mill workers went on strike. Although the strike failed, several individuals decided that the most effective means to improve their lives was to create a worker-run store as an alternative to the company store. Though not the first co-op, the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society is considered the true origin of the cooperative movement because it was the first group to make its co-op “succeed and endure” (Karen Zimbelman, “The History of Cooperatives,” *Employee Orientation Handbook on Co-op History*, Cooperative Development Institute, <http://www.cdi.coop/historyofcoops.php> (accessed April 21, 2007).). Its list of operating principles has become a guide for defining the contemporary global cooperative movement. Since then, cooperatives have continued to grow in popularity and strength around the world. Spain is famous for its Mondragón Cooperative Corporation (MCC), accepted as “the largest and most successful cooperative network” to date (“Visit to Mondragón,” Prout Research Center of Venezuela, <http://priven.org/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=49> (accessed April 21, 2007).).

Cuba has also been heralded for its cooperative development, mainly in regards to the sustainable agriculture cooperatives that now feed a significant percentage of the population. France, Mexico, and Canada are also prime sites of recent cooperative endeavors.

movement shares a common rhetoric nestled around a slightly different ideological underpinning and ultimate goal. Though critical of capitalism, cooperative language does not herald “socialism” as the necessary solution to social exclusion and lack of worker power over labor. Instead, it often takes a less politicized stance, promoting cooperatives as a necessary step forward in the creation of a social economy,¹¹⁶ an alternative system of production and exchange that attempts to hold the economy to the service of the people (in contrast to seeing workers as the engine of the economy).¹¹⁷ Within the framework of the social economy, the goal of production is not to create a profit, but rather to support the health and needs of the community. In this manner, the cooperative movement is in fact a transnational social movement driven by the goal of reordering global systems of production and exchange.

Cooperatives in Venezuela

My focus on cooperatives in Venezuela before and after Chávez’s initial presidential election will explore 1) the history of cooperatives in this region and how cooperatives emerge from situations of social exclusion, 2) the aspects of the cooperative (more generally) that foster social inclusion, and 3) how cooperatives ultimately cultivate new community narratives that resist national narratives. Contrasting the motives, inclusive practices, and narratives within Chávez’s cooperatives and Cecosesola will illuminate the underlying reasons for the failure of his program.

The first cooperative in Venezuela was founded in 1903, but the formal Law of Cooperatives did not emerge until much later, in 1946. According to San José Obrero, however, it was not until 1960 with the Cooperativa de Ahorro y Crédito Tacuato¹¹⁸ and the Cooperativa del Transporte del Estado Portuguesa¹¹⁹ that the new conception of *cooperativismo*¹²⁰ as a form of social resistance was born in Venezuela.¹²¹ Primarily introduced by Jesuit priests from the Antigonish cooperative movement (associated with the Universidad de San Francisco Javier

¹¹⁶ This term has occasionally been critiqued for lack of clarity on the basis that any economy is social, and as a result, alternative names have been proposed, some of which include “supportive economy” and “economy of solidarity.” However, given that “social economy” is the name most often referenced in cooperative literature, I will use it throughout my paper with the understanding that it may not be the only name for this concept.

¹¹⁷ Bastidas-Delgado, 45.

¹¹⁸ In English, “Savings and Credit Cooperative of Tacuato.”

¹¹⁹ In English, “Transportation Cooperative of Portuguesa State.”

¹²⁰ This word has no direct English translation, but can be read as “cooperativism,” or “sense of being a cooperative.”

¹²¹ San José Obrero, *Una cooperativa que nació para servir a sus asociados* (Coro: Encuadernaciones Mario, 2007), 19-20.

in Canada) and further supported by the US government's Alliance for Progress,¹²² these initial cooperatives sprung up in poor, urban *barrios* as savings and loan associations to provide basic financial capital. Though the cooperative idea and basic structure were ideas imported from abroad, cooperatives soon witnessed significant growth and separated from their initial religious foundations to target "the problems of that time: poverty and exploitation."¹²³ The number of cooperatives grew so tremendously in these initial years that the need for national organization became necessary, leading to the creation of SUNACCOOP in 1966. By the 1970s, cooperatives had begun forming strong federations and regional *cooperativas centrales*, or central cooperatives, resulting in a network of cooperative activity across the entire country. Cecosesola, officially founded in 1967, became one such center, and is unique for having survived in a similar (or enhanced) capacity to this day.

The success of this initial cooperative movement in Venezuela cannot be separated from the historical development of exclusionary national narratives. The first cooperatives emerged and gained force during the onset of the Doña Bárbara narrative, a time particularly marked by narrative rejection of "poor" barbarism, rural values, and a backward past. However, efforts to modernize and create democracy excluded large portions of society, particularly the influx of lower-class people that migrated to urban centers in a massive exodus that changed the rural-urban balance in Venezuela from 33 percent urban to 82 percent urban within a manner of years.¹²⁴ Rather than contributing to a modernization process as national narratives promised, thousands of rural poor found themselves living in squalid, slum conditions in large cities. These social upheavals in the context of an exclusionary national narrative are important factors for understanding the birth of the cooperative movement. According to Orland Fals Borda:

In Latin America, cooperative movements have generally been stimulated by political motives: they are a means to pacify an uprising *pueblo*. They look to soften the bad effects of a depression or at least promote a new life in backward, unstable areas... For this reason, the most important campaigns to

¹²² Fox.

¹²³ Obrero, 20 [my translation].

¹²⁴ "The 1941 census indicated that about two-thirds of the population resided in rural areas. By 1950 a major shift had occurred, as the census showed that more than 53 percent of the population was urban. By 1975 the urban population was estimated at over 82 percent; the figure surpassed 85 percent in the late 1980s" ("Venezuela Migration," http://www.photius.com/countries/venezuela/society/venezuela_society_migration.html, December 1990 (accessed 2 December 2007)).

promote the cooperative movement in the continent have taken place principally during time periods of economic crisis and violence.¹²⁵

Though Bora focuses more on why priests or US government programs may have undertaken to *promote* cooperatives, the independent explosion of the movement away from its initial roots also speaks to the political and social motivations for cooperative development in the context of exclusion and the re-scripting of Venezuelan national identity during the years of the Doña Bárbara narrative and narrative of Venezuelan exceptionalism.

Within this context, cooperatives became particularly significant for the role they promised to play in countering social exclusion. According to Lucena et al., this purpose is the primary reason for their promotion¹²⁶ and, in my analysis, it is the most important factor in understanding their historical and contemporary emergence and success or failure. Confronted by a national language of identity foreign to their lived experience, cooperatives have given excluded populations the power to change their own circumstances and define their own understanding of progress and modernization.

Several key aspects of the cooperative model can be highlighted for their generation of social inclusion. Cooperatives have been shown to provide solid economic stability, bond members into a politically powerful force, enhance the social integration of members, and give members a position of responsibility within a greater social construct.¹²⁷ I argue that cooperatives, most importantly, rely on individual initiative directed towards a community-centric purpose and thereby stimulate agency. Through the agency that members assume as part of a cooperative, they gain the necessary power to define their own life position in direct opposition to national narratives that either exclude them discursively or ignore their social and material realities. The cooperative becomes a site of resistance as members collectively “write” new narratives that meld with their own lives and history. These new narratives separate members from the exclusion of the nation and, ultimately, through the added strength of the cooperative, allow them to re-engage with the state in a process that strengthens

¹²⁵ Orlando Fals Borda, *El reformismo por dentro en América Latina* (Mexico, Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1976) cited in Lucena et al.

¹²⁶ Lucena, Fréitez, and Hernández, 75 [my translation].

¹²⁷ John S. Petterson, “Fishing Cooperatives and Political Power: A Mexican Example,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (1980): 64-74.

civil society¹²⁸ and may eventually write them back into the narrative of nation.¹²⁹

Structure and Agency

In targeting ‘agency’ as a key aspect of Cecosesola’s success and the basis for its unique narrative, yet another aspect of its success, my work contributes to the evolving literature about what constitutes agency. Generally speaking, such discussions focus on the contrast between structure, or the systems that define society, and the ways in which this structure shapes or is shaped by individuals. The heart of this debate is the degree to which individuals act as agents that re-imagine their social structure versus the degree to which they are shaped into pawns that further the structure of which they are a part.

The main challenge at the root of this debate is how to define structure and agency. For example, while most of us have a vague idea of what structure may constitute in our own society, when it comes to developing a precise definition, the meaning of the word becomes much fuzzier. Sharon Hays presents a succinct summary of the variety of ways in which scholars have attempted to decode structure:

Gusfield, for instance, refers to social structure as “institutions”; in Skocpol’s view it consists of the relations between states, between classes, and between state and class; to Berger it means material circumstances; for Bellah et al., it is said to include such features as the economy and the state; Geertz equates it with “political instruments,” “institutions,” and the “power element”; and for Willis it is the system of “production.”¹³⁰

For the purposes of my research, I will define structure in Venezuela as the political and economical structures that influence the relationships between the state and social classes. As my discussion of national narratives has highlighted, many aspects of this structure can be pinpointed as fairly static over time, despite a continuous change in state discourse. These aspects, then, namely social

¹²⁸ According to Ellner in “Obstacles,” social movements such as the Venezuela neighborhood associations (and in my analysis, cooperatives) are important because they mark “a sharp contrast with the traditional weakness of civil society [in Venezuela]—a near vacuum that had been occupied at an early date by political parties” (77). Arguably, however, this “earlier” civil society likely failed to represent the majority of Venezuelan citizens, given the elite nature of the political parties and administrations.

¹²⁹ My case analysis of Cecosesola will provide evidence in favor of this argument.

¹³⁰ Sharon Hays, “Structure and Agency and the Sticky Problem of Culture,” *Sociological Theory* 12, no. 1 (1994): 58.

exclusion and distribution of power, present themselves as several potential measures of structure.

Agency is equally challenging to define. However, in general, “agency always implies that an array of alternative forms of behavior [is] possible and that people make (conscious or unconscious) choices among those alternatives.”¹³¹ In essence, agency refers to individuals’ ability to choose their own life’s course. As Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische summarize in “What is Agency?”:

We define it as the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations. . . . Such a categorization gives analytical expression to Mead’s conception of the positioning of human actors within temporal passage, involving the continual reconstruction of their orientations towards past and future in response to emergent events.¹³²

Critical in this definition is the aspect of re-imagining past, present, and future: agency permits human actors to conceive of their own temporal meaning. Equally important is that agency refers to the degree to which individuals are able to shape or influence the social structures that they inhabit. Here, however, lies the crux of the difficulty in distinguishing between agency and structure.

On one side of the divide lie structuralists, functionalists, and Marxists, all of whom generally minimize the role of human agency in their observations of social phenomena in order to highlight the degree to which the overall structure of society determines our social existence and behavior. Though the actions of individuals are not considered irrelevant, these theorists argue that society cannot be explained purely as the sum of the actions of all individuals present. Thus, some greater structure must exist to order human behavior and reproduce certain social norms. As Hays describes:

According to this logic, a “structural argument” is one attentive to the determinism of the “material” structure of social life—that is, a given set of social relations, natural resources, or identifiable economic and political institutions:

¹³¹ Hays, 62.

¹³² Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, “What is Agency?” *The American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 4 (1998): 970-1.

structural factors that are (allegedly) “scientifically” observable and “objective”.¹³³

The primary criticism of this perspective, however, is that social change occurs. In other words, structures change—and according to many scholars, this is because individuals exert agency to challenge their social structure. Steven Lukes has termed this phenomena ‘structurally transformative agency.’¹³⁴ Within this perspective, individual “agents” have the ability to construct and reconstruct their surroundings, systems of meaning, and interpretation of the world. Also known as ‘voluntarists,’ these scholars oppose “such ‘structuralists’ by emphasizing the agency of human beings who tacitly understand and creatively choose the cultural values guiding their action.”¹³⁵

Though both extreme perspectives of structure and agency contribute to a greater understanding of these two forces in human society, a more recent trend in the literature has been to view structure and agency as complementary forces, with each becoming more or less important at different times and in different contexts. Under this perspective, structure shapes human behavior to some extent, but humans are also able to influence the social structure in which they exist. Peter L. Berger and Thoman Luckman are frequently cited for their analysis in *Social construction of reality* in which they described the relationship between structure and agency as dialectical. As Ruth A. Wallace explains, “According to Berger and Luckmann, everyday life is socially constructed by the continuous creation, through actions and interactions, of a shared reality that is experienced as objectively factual and subjectively meaningful.”¹³⁶ In this sense, though individuals are no doubt shaped and influenced by the social reality around them, they can simultaneously exert agency to influence these surroundings. A good test of agency within this perspective is Paul Willis’ analysis of working-class ‘lads’ in London. In this example, he observed boys attempting to challenge the social stratification that made them poor by “refusing to accept the school’s achievement ideology.”¹³⁷ However, their behavior in fact undermined their ability to succeed, ultimately guaranteeing their continued social powerlessness.¹³⁸ Thus, a key aspect of pinpointing agency involves examining the real-world impacts. In Willis’ case, though the lads appeared to be

¹³³ Hays, 60.

¹³⁴ Steven Lukes, *Essays on social theory*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977) cited in Hays.

¹³⁵ Hays, 60.

¹³⁶ Ruth A. Wallace, “Catholic Women and the Creation of a New Social Reality.” *Gender and Society* 2, no. 1 (1988): 26.

¹³⁷ Hays, 63.

¹³⁸ Paul Willis, *Learning to labor* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

exercising agency, their actions resulted in the furthering of the current social system. Agency, therefore, can be tested for the role it plays in somehow challenging or combating the social structure, rather than reproducing it.

My analysis of agency within Cecosesola draws from and contributes to this historic discussion of structuralism versus agency. My data strongly support the work of modern theorists such as Berger and Luckman who recognize the dynamic relationship between structure and agency, and also deeply question the application of a structuralist perspective of society that minimizes the role of agency. Cecosesola exhibits the clear presence of agency as a form of resistance to the greater Venezuelan social structure. Not only does Cecosesola create a direct alternative to this structure, the presence of constant organizational flexibility, movement, and change, all upheld through agency, actually stalls the formation of a rigid group structure. Though Cecosesola is clearly a product of Venezuelan society—members frequently reference their inherent internalization of capitalism—as a whole its behavior and activities stand out as a sharp contrast and act of resistance to the greater societal structure.

My work does, however, suggest the need to broaden or reevaluate the current conception of agency and structure. Building from Sharon Hay's work,¹³⁹ I will show that rather than the activity of only individuals, agency can also be exercised on the level of a collective as a form of resistance to a greater structure, in this case the structure imposed by the Venezuelan state. Agency signifies the act of making a choice between two or more options, and such a choice can be shaped by a community or made as a collective decision.¹⁴⁰ My research also suggests the need for a broader analysis of structure that includes the notion of culture. This can be seen in my own work through the efforts of Cecosesola cooperative members to resist what they define as typical Venezuelan cultural tendencies, a part of the greater structure that they seek to transform.

In this manner, I will argue that neither structure nor agency can be ignored in understanding the development of the Venezuelan cooperative movement. Though Cecosesola is a site of both individual and collective agency directed

¹³⁹ As Hays writes, "Contributing to the problem is the fact that "social structure," like many sociological concepts, is often defined by contrast: its meaning then becomes dependent on the concept which it is set against. One of the more prevalent forms of contrast is that between "structure and agency." In this formulation the interconnections between structure and agency are lost. Further, this contrast is often mapped onto another set of dichotomies common in social theorizing and interpreted to mean, for instance, that structure is systematic and patterned, while agency is contingent and random; that structure is constraint, while agency is freedom; that structure is static, while agency is active; that structure is collective, while agency is individual" (57).

¹⁴⁰ Hays, 64.

towards resisting the current Venezuela social structure, the cooperative is influenced by the greater national structure and also partly defined by its own structure and collective culture. However, as regards Cecosesola's own structure, my research suggests the significance of Hays' analysis that "structures should be understood as enabling as well as constraining; they are the very basis of human power and self-understanding."¹⁴¹ As such, though structures within the cooperative may to some degree define acceptable behavior, ideologies, and speech, I will argue that as self-formulated structures that contrast with the national narratives these structures are in fact symbols of members' agency (though they themselves may not have created the structure). In other words, by choosing to orient their lives within an alternative structure, members exercise agency. As Hays explains what she considers a false conception of agency: "people are agents in that they are the carriers or instruments of social structure."¹⁴² Though Hays rejects this notion as the basis of agency, my research suggests that there are many levels of structure within society and that by opposing some and accepting, or constructing, others, individuals can exercise agency.

To recognize these dual forces of structure and agency, in presenting my data I distinguish between agency exercised on the level of the organization and agency exercised on the level of the individuals who compose the organization. This format acknowledges the validity of structure—that is, that Cecosesola is more than the sum of the agency of its individuals—but permits me to ultimately suggest that the importance of agency within the cooperative outweighs structure in the degree to which Cecosesola individuals constantly challenge existent realities in order to form their own social vision.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 61.

¹⁴² Ibid., 62.

IV. Chávez's Cooperatives and Cecosesola: Background for the Case Study



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A mural on the *Feria Central* compound commemorating Cecosesola's 37th anniversary. "Pescando Juntos," the cooperative's slogan, translates literally as "fishing together" refers to the Chinese fable in which a man comes across a poor beggar who asks him for food. Rather than give the beggar a fish, which he would soon eat up and then be forced to return to begging, the man decides to teach the beggar how to fish. Cecosesola critiques this story as it assumes that the man possesses more knowledge than the beggar and must "instruct" him. Thus, the cooperative promotes the concept of "fishing together" to highlight the egalitarian structure of the cooperative as well as the cooperative's function in the greater Barquisimeto community.

Chávez's Cooperatives

Cooperatives became a part of the Bolivarian Revolution's agenda within the first year of Chávez's presidency as the administration chose to incorporate recognition and promotion of cooperatives into the new constitution (1999).¹⁴³ Though organisms such as SUNACCOOP had long existed to register and regulate cooperatives, Chávez deepened state linkages with the superintendence and its funding capabilities and also created MINEC (previously MINEP), the Ministry of Popular Power for the Communal Economy, to promote and provide training for cooperatives. Through these mediums, the government organized training programs and provided loans to encourage people to form cooperatives.¹⁴⁴ Additionally, "by 2005, Chávez traveled through the country to authorize loans for cooperatives in televised "Regional Cabinet Meetings," where beneficiaries discussed their plans and answered questions."¹⁴⁵ The administration's stated goals for fomenting cooperatives were to:

develop mechanisms for the democratization of wealth, combating the neoliberal and privatizing visions that generate underdevelopment; to put into practice the concept of the *economía popular*¹⁴⁶ as integrated in the Bolivarian Constitution; [and] to dignify productive labor and the quality of life of Venezuelan families.¹⁴⁷

In essence, cooperatives constituted part of Chávez's stated goal to end poverty, foreign influence, and the rich elite's domination of *el pueblo*. They were promoted as a way for normal citizens to further the Bolivarian revolutionary ideals and to assume popular control of the country. According to Article 70, cooperatives are an important piece of promoting the "participation and involvement of people in the exercise of their sovereignty in political affairs."¹⁴⁸

Government promotion produced rapid results. As mentioned earlier, the number of cooperatives expanded from 762 in 1998 to 185,000 in 2006, the most of anywhere in the world (even surpassing the number of cooperatives in China during the 1970s). However, within the last year, the number of cooperatives has dropped dramatically. A newspaper article in *Venezuela Real*

¹⁴³ Protections for cooperatives appear in Articles 70, 118, 184, and 308.

¹⁴⁴ Steve Ellner, "The Trial (and Errors) of Hugo Chávez," *In These Times*, 1 September 2007.

¹⁴⁵ Ellner, "The Trial."

¹⁴⁶ Chávez's new term for the social economy [my italicization].

¹⁴⁷ "MINEC Objectivos," < <http://www.minec.gob.ve/contenido.php?id=2> > (accessed 2 December 2007).

¹⁴⁸ Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (in English translation from the original text), 1999, <http://www.vheadline.com/readnews.asp?id=6831> (accessed 4 December 2007).

remarks that “the country also possesses the largest cemetery of cooperatives, because while China lost nearly half of its cooperatives in the last thirty years...the 117,448 that have disappeared in the SUNACOOOP census represent nearly three-fourths of the official register.”¹⁴⁹ According to a SUNACOOOP report from this year (April 2007), 184,000 cooperatives are registered in the country but only 60,000 are in operation, which is barely 33 percent of the total.¹⁵⁰ A more recent census suggests that only 48,000 may be active.¹⁵¹ Of those that are active, the credibility of their behavior as cooperatives and use of government funds is highly questionable. According to Ellner, “many cooperatives never got off the ground, and in other cases, cooperative members pocketed the money they received from loans or the down payments for contracts.”¹⁵² He measures the cost of these failures “in the loss of tens, if not hundreds of millions of dollars.”¹⁵³ As a result of these factors, Chávez has labeled the program a failure. In the words of a *Chavista* congressman, “Up until now, no one can say the cooperative program has been successful. In fact, there is little to show considering all the money that has been spent.”¹⁵⁴

Explanations for the failure so far have been scarce. One argument, proposed by Ellner, suggests that these cooperatives have relied too heavily on the state for funding and support. He writes, “The cooperatives are heavily dependent on the state. Government incentives include generous credit, lenient terms of payment and exemption from all taxes.” From a similar angle, Ellner also supports the argument that cooperatives grew rapidly due to the ready supply of government money, but because the use of funds was never effectively regulated, cooperatives without effective organization either failed or simply stole their loans. So far, no cooperatives have been penalized for illegal use of funds.¹⁵⁵ Finally, the Chávez administration proposes the argument that the cooperative program failed to stimulate a true “socialist mentality” among the new *cooperativistas*. According to Ellner, “Chávez and his followers generally attribute the problems facing cooperatives to their members’ lack of social

¹⁴⁹ Ramón Sahnkow, “Cooperativas pierden fanaticada,” *Venezuela Real*, November 15, 2006.

¹⁵⁰ Suhelis Tejero Puentes, “Disminuye en 3.7% el número de trabajadores de cooperativas,” *El Universal*, April 10, 2007.

¹⁵¹ Ellner, “The Trial.”

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ According to Ellner in “The Trial,” “Mechanisms have been created to monitor cooperatives, but to date there no cooperative member has been penalized for failing to comply with their legal obligations. Although Minister of the Popular Economy Pedro Morejón announced late last year that he had taken 300 cases of cooperatives to court, it is unclear whether Chávez, who claims to be the president of the underprivileged, will be willing to jail, or seize the property of, poor people who have misspent public money.”

consciousness.”¹⁵⁶ As a result, in the new cooperative program that Chávez has recently designed, “they call for a cultural transformation along the lines of what Ché Guevara called the ‘New Socialist Man.’”¹⁵⁷

Through my case-study of Cecosesola, a successful cooperative that emerged prior to Chávez, I enrich current explanations for the failure of this program. In line with Bastidas-Delgado, who said that “the cooperative project was orientated to encapsulate the people based on political interests, to find out who is with me and to orient them in line with my interests,”¹⁵⁸ I suggest that the political orientation of Chávez’s program imbued his cooperatives with a state narrative, in many respects no different from past Venezuelan national narratives, which prevented agency and the formation of new narratives. Though there are undoubtedly various factors that contributed to the failure of the program, the role of narrative in Cecosesola’s success, and in the resistance process in general, suggests the importance of this direction of analysis.

Cecosesola: “Pescando Juntos”¹⁵⁹

Cecosesola, or the *Organismo de Integración Cooperativa*, is a cooperative of cooperatives. Besides possessing its own activities, it is also the central organizing mechanism for a host of producers, families, and affiliated cooperatives with similar goals and values. Within Cecosesola’s informational handouts, usually included in workshop folders or provided to interested individuals, a section titled “Reason for Existence” reads:

We are an untraditional organization where we work with what we are, what we have, and what we continue being in the search for personal and collective transformation. The object of our organization is the formative process. This formative process develops through the different relations that are constructed by concrete work and the reflections that this work generates. Within this

¹⁵⁶ Ellner, “The Trial.”

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Sahmkow.

¹⁵⁹ Literally, “fishing together.” This is the cooperative’s slogan and refers to the Chinese fable in which a man comes across a poor beggar who asks him for food. Rather than give the beggar a fish, which he would soon finish and then be forced to return to begging, the man decides to teach the beggar how to fish. Cecosesola critiques this story, however, as it assumes that the man possesses more knowledge than the beggar and must “instruct” him. Instead, the cooperative promotes the concept of “fishing together” to highlight that everyone has something to learn and contribute in making the world a better place.

formative process the activities do not constitute an end in of themselves but rather a means through which we continue to realize our transformation.¹⁶⁰

Cecosesola functions with two levels of purpose. Its most basic intention is to “satisfy the needs that the community may possess.”¹⁶¹ With this in mind, it strives to promote community health and self-sufficiency through the supply of significantly discounted health services and goods. As one member expressed, “Our purpose is to give the most provisions to people as possible.”¹⁶² On a second level, the cooperative strives to build consciousness and change the framework of societies that are primarily profit and power-driven: in the words of the organization, patriarchal cultures. Within the patriarchal system, Cecosesola identifies hierarchy and inequality of wealth, knowledge, and power as negative outcomes. Thus, the organization also strives to “change the world without taking power”¹⁶³ by initiating a process of self and communal transformative evolution that will improve the ways in which humans interact. In the words of one associate, “We are going to construct a different world. This is our politics.”¹⁶⁴

Though originating as a funerary service in 1967, Cecosesola has grown tremendously over time. Today, in addition to the original funerary service, it organizes three large *ferias* throughout Barquisimeto, operates six community health clinics, offers financing as well as savings and loans services, and acts as a distribution facility for affiliated cooperatives and families to acquire items for smaller *ferias* in the surrounding towns. The organization also encompasses groups of producers from the five main regions around Barquisimeto (within the states of Lara, Portuguesa, Barinas, and Trujillo), all of whom grow fruits and vegetables for sale at the *ferias*, as well as local families and cooperatives who produce other items for market, such as coffee, cereals, and bread.¹⁶⁵ Cecosesola possesses 350 or so associated workers and is comprised of roughly 75 cooperatives (savings, agricultural, production, civil associations, organizations), which brings the number of associated members to around 1,000.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁰ Cecosesola: Organismo de Integración Cooperativa, “Cecosesola,” *Encuentro Internacional: Nuevas Organizaciones para Nuevos Tiempos* workshop handout.

¹⁶¹ Interview 39, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, 4 September 2007.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Interview 49, cooperative associates, informal conversation at Regional Cooperative Meeting, Carora, Venezuela, 7 September 2007.

¹⁶⁴ Interview 40, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, 4 September 2007.

¹⁶⁵ See Appendix A for a more thorough description of Cecosesola’s organization and services.

¹⁶⁶ Cecosesola, “Que es Cecosesola?” (August 2007).

The organization is a significant presence in Barquisimeto's economy. Weekly, the cooperative moves about \$800,000 in the ferias alone, totaling nearly \$40 million in sales annually. In 2001, roughly 55,000 families relied weekly on Cecosesola *ferias* as their source of basic dietary products, and the markets serve about one-third of Barquisimeto's 1.5 million residents.¹⁶⁷¹⁶⁸ Though my interviews with customers revealed many reasons behind their preference for shopping at Cecosesola's ferias, a large part of their popularity clearly stems partly from the fact that most products are sold at prices 30 percent cheaper than other markets in the region, a number that Cecosesola is able to maintain because it is not a profit-seeking organization. Rather, its goal is to provide the lowest-priced products possible to the community at any given moment, no matter the existence of national scarcities or price hikes.¹⁶⁹

As a result of its longevity and success in offering these services, Cecosesola is frequently labeled one of the most successful cooperatives in the world.¹⁷⁰ However, scholarly attempts to explain its success have so far been limited to two principle arguments and have not accounted for the role of narrative in cooperative development and resistance. Though I will not disagree with past explanations, this thesis will propose two new elements—agency and narrative—as the most important factors for understanding Cecosesola's prominence.

Oscar Bastidas-Delgado presents the innovations of self-management and decentralization as the main factors permitting the longevity and growth of Cecosesola. He narrows these reasons down to the lack of a power structure and the unique way in which the cooperative's activity is organized.¹⁷¹ Luis Gómez Calcaño adds a similar perspective, arguing that Cecosesola has been successful because it combines two principles that have historically been considered separate: efficiency and equity. In other words, "one of the main economic lessons to draw from this experience is that "by the people" and "the markets" are not necessarily unrelated expressions: that the low-income and marginal sectors are able to enter the markets if they have the appropriate organizational and cultural tools..."¹⁷² These factors are undoubtedly important for the functioning

¹⁶⁷ Fox.

¹⁶⁸ *Cecosesola/CICDA*, "Cecosesola," *Encuentro Internacional de Vivencias Comunitarias* (June 14-23, 2001), Barquisimeto, Venezuela.

¹⁶⁹ Interview 11, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, 24 August 2007.

¹⁷⁰ Cecosesola has been selected by the Inter-American Development Bank as one of the most successful experiences of community development in Latin America.

¹⁷¹ Bastidas-Delgado, 143.

¹⁷² Calcaño.

of Cecosesola, but they do not greatly enrich an understanding of the role that cooperatives play in combating social exclusion. Thus, I will offer a new explanation by arguing that a cooperative's success is tied to its effectiveness in generating a new group narrative.

Methodology

To explore agency as a measure of Cecosesola's success, I will be analyzing the results of my ethnographic research with Cecosesola direct associates and various affiliated cooperative members.¹⁷³ In August and September of 2007, I spent one month living on one of Cecosesola's compounds (Feria del Centro) in Barquisimeto, Venezuela, during which time I conducted 53 semi-structured and informal interviews with direct associates, affiliated cooperative associates (members of Cooperativa Divina Pastora, Central Portuguesa, Cooperativa Mixta Santo Brasil, and several cooperative food stands at Feria del Centro), and community members. These informal interviews constitute conversations conducted casually on site and as well as statements from the many public cooperative meetings that I was able to attend and observe. These meetings included weekly and daily *Reuniones de Gestión*, *Reuniones de Cooperativas Afiliadas*, educational meetings, and *Reuniones de los Chamos*. The meetings I attended took place in the *Escuela Cooperativa "Rosario Arjona"*¹⁷⁴ on the main *feria* compound, Feria del Centro, and were all optional and completely transparent (any cooperative member or visitor can attend). To my knowledge, Cecosesola holds no private or exclusive meetings. During my visit, I was also able to attend a Cecosesola *Asamblea* (General Assembly) meeting, which takes place three-times a year. These Assemblies are service-specific (corresponding to *feria*, funerary service, etc.) and also open to all members. Generally, around 100 members attend. In addition, I observed the year-end Cecosesola meeting, which all direct members are expected to attend, during which members discuss how to use the net earnings of the previous year and set bonuses and salaries for the coming year. Roughly 300 individuals attended, spending half of the day in small groups and then reuniting at the end in one large circle in a warehouse to make final decisions.¹⁷⁵ In September, I also attended a regional gathering of cooperatives in

¹⁷³ I have chosen Cecosesola as my case-study because of its early establishment. However, as a *cooperativa central*, it encompasses many cooperatives, several of which are new (though not government cooperatives). I will include the experiences of these new cooperative members in my study as a means of exploring the living foundation process (which happened 40-years ago in the case of Cecosesola and is therefore more difficult to analyze).

¹⁷⁴ Cecosesola's cooperative school.

¹⁷⁵ Refer to Appendix A for a fuller description.

Corora, Venezuela, partly organized by Cecosesola. The meeting was one of many (others occurred in different regional locations), all of which served as forums for various cooperatives—principally pre-Chávez cooperatives—to formulate a cohesive opinion about the proposed Constitutional Amendments and modifications to the Special Law of Cooperatives (part of the December 2007 election).

The rest of my data is in the form of participant observations and primary source materials from the cooperative, which detail Cecosesola's internal organization, productivity, and history. The *Escuela* has a library full of its historical documents, which provided an invaluable source of information. I also utilized Cecosesola's self-published book, *Buscando una Convivencia Armónica*, as a source of group narrative and historical facts.

My analysis is purely qualitative in nature, due both to the constraints of my study and the nature of the subject matter. Perceptions of purpose, community, and self-management are by nature ephemeral concepts, as is social resistance. I recognize that such qualitative data analysis possesses inherent sources of concern. Foremost among these is what Catherine Kohler Riessman identifies as the difficulty of “*transcribing experience*,”¹⁷⁶ or the question of how to re-convey spoken narratives.¹⁷⁷ Though it is impossible to exactly represent experiences, I strive to portray the original conversations of my investigation with as much integrity as possible, while simultaneously recognizing that my own presence in the re-telling is an important piece of the story this thesis will tell. The same process is true in my act of “*analyzing experience*,”¹⁷⁸ or deciding what my data may signify. I thus do not attempt to give voice to my subjects, but rather accept that “[w]e cannot give voice, but we do hear voices that we record and interpret.”¹⁷⁹ By relying heavily on associates' direct statements, I hope to minimize the role that my own cultural framework may play in my selection of

¹⁷⁶ Catherine Kohler Riessman, “Narrative Analysis,” in *The qualitative researcher's companion*, eds. A. Michael Huberman and Matthew B. Miles (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2002), 225.

¹⁷⁷ This problem addresses both the dilemma of how to convert verbal stories into written text and also the role of the researcher in delineating the importance of certain material over others and its most effective form of presentation. Riessman explains, “There is no one, true representation of spoken language... The form of representation reflects the artist's views and conceptions—values about what's important.” In essence, Riessman is revealing the importance of understanding that the researcher's re-telling of a conversation can never exactly represent the initial exchange.

¹⁷⁸ Riessman writes that this perspective recognizes that “the challenge is to identify similarities across the moments into an aggregate, a summation. An investigator sits with the pages of tape-recorded stories, snips away at the flow of talk to make it fit between the covers of a book, and tries to create sense and dramatic tension” (226).

¹⁷⁹ Riessman, 220.

key concepts. To highlight associates' narratives, I present much of my data in the form of interview panels, followed by analysis.

To explore the correlation between agency and Cecosesola's success, I separate the concept of agency into *purpose* and the presence of group *autonomy* and individual *initiative*. Of interest in these elements is how associates narrate their values and experiences as well as how these statements are executed in practice. Thus, my analysis attempts to compare the discourse of associates to their observed behavior. In the first section, I separate *agency* into two levels: the level of the organization and the level of the individual, performing several tests to measure the presence of the elements of autonomy and initiative. As my discussion of agency and structure proposes, the act of exercising agency need not only occur through the behavior of one individual. Rather, as my observations of Cecosesola suggest, the cooperative has assumed an identity of its own, and though the cooperative is composed of individuals, associates actually connect their own decisions and initiative to the greater idea of the cooperative. Thus, it is important to explore both the collective agency of Cecosesola as a group and the agency of individual associates.

The next section analyzes members' narratives in order to construct the key elements of the Cecosesola group narrative. I then use these two causal factors for Cecosesola's success—agency and narrative—in the final analysis section as measures for characterizing the causes of the failure of Chávez's cooperatives. As no conclusive quantitative data yet exists, to my knowledge, about the exact nature of the failure of his program, my analysis draws upon my interviews, during which members frequently shared observations about the newer cooperatives. Though they cannot substitute for direct studies of member behavior within the new cooperatives, they are useful for drawing broad conclusions about the nature of the governmental program. The consistency of member responses defines them as a strong preliminary source for understanding the causes of failure.

V. The Case Study

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A selection of products made by several of Cecosesola's affiliated cooperatives or civil associations, grouped together for sale at *Feria Central*. Products pictured include coffee, oatmeal, cream of rice, bullion powder, and honey. Local cooperatives also supply bread, noodles, vanilla extract, organic herbs, and all of the fruits and vegetables sold at feria. Cecosesola sources its household goods, basic kitchen staples, and packaged foods from suppliers, but generally sells these items at reduced prices (on average, 30 percent lower than national supermarkets).

Modeling Cecosesola's Success

Given its persistence through several important stages in Venezuelan history, both before and after Chávez, Cecosesola is an intriguing site for a case study aimed at understanding the role of narrative in cooperative resistance and, more importantly, in the context of the at-times contradictory Bolivarian Revolution. In this section, I offer an explanation for Cecosesola's success in mobilizing citizen cooperative engagement. This model of cooperative success will provide an important lens for scrutinizing the contradiction of high popular support but low citizen mobilization for community change both within Chávez's cooperative movement and the Revolution in general.¹⁸⁰

In the first chapter, I construct a model for understanding Cecosesola's success by pinpointing the roles of agency and narrative in the development of a cooperative and a communal identity. Then, in the second chapter, Chapter Four, I use this framework to dissect Chávez's cooperative program and to understand his condemnation, as well as the empirical measure, of its failure. Lastly, in Chapter Five, I provide my final analysis of the contradictions within the Bolivarian Revolution against the backdrop of exclusionary national narratives in Venezuela, ending with several important implications of this study.

Agency

Cecosesola's success draws foremost from the fact that the cooperative was created by, and continues to be maintained through, a process of group and individual self-initiation, which I term agency. Such agency stems from the lived purpose of the organization and individuals' purpose for participation as well as the responsibility that the cooperative and its individuals assume over the success of the services. Ultimately, I will show that this agency is what permits the creation of a unique Cecosesola narrative that provides a direct alternative to the exclusionary narrative of the state.

To conduct this analysis, I examine Cecosesola on two levels: first, on the level of the organization as a whole and, second, on the level of the individuals who compose it. Such a distinction is important because Cecosesola is more than a name to its members and the community—it is a living, tangible creature. To the members whom I interviewed, the use of the pronoun “we” signified

¹⁸⁰ Community mobilization is hard to measure, and Chávez's programs have no doubt encouraged some increased citizen participation. However, they have also created intense polarization and many of his social programs have been accused of internal corruption and lack of effectiveness.

Cecosesola as an organization, whereas the use of “I” singled out the individual. By recognizing this distinction in my analysis, I highlight Cecosesola’s transformation from a name referring to a group of people to a name referring to its very own idea—a community concept whose purpose is carried out by its members.

Agency as an Organization

On the organizational level, Cecosesola exercises agency both through its purpose and its autonomy. These two elements maintain and expand the organization’s power and also account for the high quality of its services. The role of purpose is best understood in the context of the definition of a cooperative. The general understanding of cooperatives is that they differ from conventional businesses because their workers own and control the means of production and the resulting wealth. In this sense, the cooperative exists to maximize the good life of all of its members, rather than to maximize profit. Cecosesola’s experience suggests that this definition is not sufficient to understand a cooperative’s success. Rather, as Bastidas-Delgado has proposed, a new element must be considered: the degree to which the cooperative’s goals include the maximization of the good of the community. Cecosesola’s success draws not simply from its worker-ownership, but also primarily from the fact that workers conduct day-to-day activities with a perspective that reaches beyond their own welfare or the welfare of their immediate family and friends. The presence of a greater sense of purpose has transformed the cooperative’s services into connecting bonds that strengthen and expand the community. These bonds cement Cecosesola’s role, imbuing it with responsibility and, in a positive feedback loop, additionally expanding the cooperative’s ability to offer services. Community purpose, consequently, increases Cecosesola’s success and also its sustainability.

As a result of this purpose, Cecosesola has also been able to assume great autonomy. Driven to continue being able to fulfill its purpose, the cooperative has struggled and overcome great hardships without external aid. When it does require additional help, such aid is accepted explicitly for the purpose of continuing to serve the community. By preserving autonomy, Cecosesola has avoided the corruption that has characterized many of Chávez’s cooperatives and also maintained dignity as an organization. Autonomy generates power within the organization, effectively reversing patterns of donor-recipient relations that have characterized poverty in Venezuela.

Purpose

Cecosesola's success must first be examined through the lens of the organization's purpose. Throughout the course of the *Reuniones de Gestión* and my interviews, associates consistently reiterated Cecosesola's mission to *satisfacer*¹⁸¹ (fulfill) the community's needs. Repetition of similar phrases regarding the cooperative's role in the community appeared to be an important part of grounding the normal, day-to-day activity. Various members made statements that mirror the following:

Our purpose is to give the most food to people as possible, to the community...to *satisfacer* the need that the community has.¹⁸²

The cooperative is the solution of the community.¹⁸³

Members consistently used the words *comunidad*, or 'community,' and *satisfacer* when describing the purpose of Cecosesola's services. These responses suggest that members are able to distinguish between the role of their activities in increasing their own welfare and the role that their activities play in aiding the community. In other words, members see their own work as important for fulfilling gaps in services among a population more comprehensive than purely their own family members or coworkers. Most importantly, members do not envision the cooperative as something external to the community that serves the community—rather, as one member described it, the cooperative is the community's own 'solution.'¹⁸⁴

Members' statements suggest that purpose as a driving factor of the organization functions on various levels. It was important initially in that it provided the stimulus for the creation of Cecosesola and the various affiliated cooperatives: the cooperative itself was born from a need of the community and exists to serve that need. Purpose continues to be important in the present because it provides the necessary energy to ensure the sustainability and expansion of the cooperative. As an associate of Cooperativa Divina Pastora, a cooperative that originated under similar circumstances to Cecosesola and now works closely with Cecosesola, remarked, "The difference is that now, the cooperative has more resources. Always, the purpose has been the same: to provide services, to

¹⁸¹ In English, to satisfy or to fulfill. I retain this word in the original Spanish because members' consistent use signals it as an important part of the Cecosesola narrative.

¹⁸² Interview 39.

¹⁸³ Interview 41, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, 4 September 2007.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

satisfacer the needs of the people.”¹⁸⁵ Though its basic resources have increased, purpose, rather than purely economic concerns, is still the main factor that spurs participation in the cooperative. According to one associate, who is currently in the process of registering her food stand as a cooperative, her purpose is “to give a service to the community... You need to have well-being, but you are not trying to get rich... You’re not here to make a lot of money.”¹⁸⁶ Clearly, members are well educated about the purpose of the organization and able to express it to others.

The other aspect of purpose that members highlighted was the aspiration to imbue all associates with the same goal of serving the community. One associate described this as the main change in his consciousness since beginning to work at Cecosesola. Since joining, he said that he has begun considering “how to help people. One thinks about the ways to help people.”¹⁸⁷ Other members frequently expressed their goal of continually expanding consciousness among new members. One associated explained:

Today we do not have this crisis: we are very sovereign economically. We have always felt that we could develop more clarity in those that continue arriving—not in all, but in many... the sense of this: the importance of what we are doing... this development, this social and humanistic vision... For many *compañeros*¹⁸⁸ ... [Cecosesola is] a space where we work really terrific... and we earn well our part. What we receive is about three times greater than the people who work in companies, in other jobs... Thus, one of our preoccupations is this: how to expand in the rest of the *compañeros* the vision of what we are doing... and the importance of what we are doing...¹⁸⁹

In this way, the main preoccupation of the members I interviewed was either how to better serve the community or how to increase the consciousness of all Cecosesola members with regards to the purpose of serving the community. Such verbal acknowledgement of purpose is significant and suggests a high level of development towards valuing the welfare of the greater population. However, actual *practice* is the ultimate test of the degree to which purpose is imbedded in

¹⁸⁵ Interview 52, Cooperativa Divina Pastora associate, Carora, Venezuela, September 8, 2007.

¹⁸⁶ Interview 25, Cecosesola affiliated cooperative associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 28, 2007.

¹⁸⁷ Interview 18, Cecosesola Associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 25, 2007.

¹⁸⁸ In English, “companion.” I have preserved this word in the original Spanish because of its high volume of usage and significance within the group narrative of inclusion.

¹⁸⁹ Interview 33, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 29, 2007.

the cooperative. To examine the implementation of this stated purpose, I will turn to an analysis of the role of purpose by performing the following tests:

1. Did Cecosesola emerge *for the purpose of* providing a service to the community?
2. Do the services that the cooperative provides correlate to needs within the community?
3. During times of economic crisis, does the cooperative make sacrifices in order to continue providing the valued services?
4. Do shoppers perceive of Cecosesola as part of their own community?
5. Is Cecosesola an integrated part of the community?
6. Does Cecosesola value the preservation of community services over increasing the salaries of individual members?

As the following examples show, my research suggests a highly sophisticated belief in, and practice of, purpose within Cecosesola as an organization.

Did Cecosesola emerge for the purpose of providing a service to the community?

Historical records, Cecosesola's own book, and my interviews with various founding members support the statement that Cecosesola emerged to fill a need in the community. Cecosesola has by no means traversed a stable path, but the driving desire to provide services for those in need distinguishes Cecosesola from its conception through today.

Cecosesola is the outcome of a partnership between several smaller cooperatives, many of which performed savings and loans functions in poor, urban *barrios*. These cooperatives emerged in large part due to promotion and assistance from Centro Gumilla, a Jesuit organization located in Canada, and US President John F. Kennedy's program Alliance for Progress. These early cooperatives fulfilled the need among poorer Venezuelans for access to credit. In the words of one associate, even though they received initial support from these organizations, "Cooperatives have surged on a base of particular motivations, concrete motivations of a community."¹⁹⁰

Despite the success of the early cooperatives, a time came in which members of the community began to realize that other important services were lacking in

¹⁹⁰ Interview 33.

their *barrios*. As one Cecosesola member, who has been involved in the cooperative movement since the beginning, explained:

...[W]e in Cecosesola are made from the integration of various cooperatives that were in different communities, in different *barrios*, and cooperatives of different types, and were born in function of several needs felt in that moment, which was the need to decently bury the people that died.¹⁹¹

During this period, large, profit-driven businesses monopolized control over all funerary services and charged high prices that were largely unaffordable to *barrio* residents.¹⁹² However, government laws at the time prohibited cooperatives from providing this service. Thus, in order to bypass these laws, the cooperatives united to form a Central Cooperative with a directorship, which could legally fulfill the community's need. The cooperatives began their discussion in 1966, and by June of 1977, "already the creation and functioning of Cecosesola was official."¹⁹³ Thus, rather than a cooperative formed to fulfill an economic need among its associates, Cecosesola was born from the hard labor of many cooperatives and individuals who sought to return control over death and burial rituals to their own communities.

As Cecosesola expanded over the years, it continued to do so for the betterment of its community. In the late 1970s, bus fare spiked dramatically (in fact doubling in price).¹⁹⁴ Recognizing the need for an economically accessible public transport system that could be managed by the community—not for profit, but rather for the sake of providing the service—Cecosesola negotiated a loan with the government to purchase the buses. In 1976, it began operating a communal transport service that soon serviced the entire city. As one member explained, "That generated for us a force worth speaking of, a communal force. A very impressive relationship with the community..."¹⁹⁵ The development of this service reinforced Cecosesola's commitment to the community and also its greater goals of restructuring hierarchical relationships. Though Cecosesola initially began the service in collaboration with Cooperativa el Triunfo, differing opinions about how to structure the system ultimately became a formative moment:

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Interview 37, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 30, 2007.

¹⁹³ Interview 33.

¹⁹⁴ Cecosesola, *Buscando una convivencia armónica*, (Barquisimeto, Venezuela: Escuela Cooperativa, 2003), 24.

¹⁹⁵ Interview 33.

When we went out with the buses, they (Cooperativa el Triunfo) were not in agreement because we proposed that it was an organization of collective vision and participation. But they proposed that every driver be owner of his own bus. We were not in agreement with this because it was simply creating more businessmen... And our *lucha*¹⁹⁶ was not to create more businessmen, but rather a distinct relationship...¹⁹⁷

As a result of this disagreement, “In terms of the cooperative movement a broader aspect was opened: it was no longer the funerary service and the cooperatives, it was a more expansive dimension in regards to the relationship with the community in general...”¹⁹⁸ This moment added a new component of purpose to Cecosesola’s activities.

Once Cecosesola put the service into place with this vision, however, ensuring continued governmental support of the cooperative transport system became difficult. According to a Cecosesola associate, “This meant that we were always engaged in popular mobilizations. And thus, this brought distrust ...envy ...among the politicians because we moved the people that they didn’t move...”¹⁹⁹ Cecosesola maintained much lower prices than the private bus companies. As a result, the politicians, persuaded by the private companies, “campaigned and came to agreement and usurped the administration of buses”²⁰⁰ from Cecosesola, in fact physically seizing the buses. Cecosesola’s reaction to this situation is a clear example of the role that purpose has played in the cooperative’s formation. As an associate narrated:

When we recovered the 129 buses, there were no more than 40 that were somewhat broken, that somewhat worked... The debts had increased terribly. We could not recover, in economic terms. And the service that we were providing was really poor, because with 40 units, it was as little as one bus passing each hour by a site. Thus, people had to wait a long time at the stops. This was causing discomfort among the community and so we decided it was for the best to cripple this service. This was in 1983. We decided to cripple this service and then began helping to develop the *Ferias de Consumo Popular* through Cooperativa el Triunfo.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁶ I have chosen to preserve the Spanish *lucha* because the English word “struggle” does not adequately translate this concept or its importance to Cecosesola members. *Lucha* is conceived of as the *process* of struggle, the journey of traveling through hardship.

¹⁹⁷ Interview 33.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Interview 33.

In this case, acting for the betterment of the community actually involved removing a service and placing the cooperative's energy elsewhere: in the development of the *ferias*. This new service emerged entirely due to positive reinforcement and need among local residents for access to affordable food. The *ferias* began with nothing more but a few of the recovered buses and one agricultural producer:

We had certain sectors where we would go and park...And people would gather there to buy at different prices than they had in other places. This was the beginning. The participation of the people there continued increasing. So, we opened a local space...and we started to send people inside and sold from in there. Thus, we were already organized. That was Friday afternoons, we had already organized spaces for the sales, and we added Saturdays, and there were a lot of people so we had to go to Sundays, and then we were opening already on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays...Since the people kept increasing, and there were more people from other places, our capacity also continued expanding. Thus, we opened another space, which is there in Ruiz Pineda.²⁰²

In this way, the *ferias* developed as a function of need and demand among the community. Clearly, rather than a profit-driven organization, or a cooperative made to serve purely the interests of its associates, Cecosesola has historically maintained a close link with the greater community, responding to its needs either by downsizing or expanding services.

Do the services that the cooperative provides correlate to needs within the community?

My research shows a strong correlation between the services Cecosesola offers and the needs of the community. As already established, the funerary service, transport system, and *ferias* all emerged due to community support. Today, the funerary service and *ferias*, as well as the newer areas of health and education, continue to conform to the same degree of purpose.

The *feria* system is the strongest example. On average, Cecosesola offers goods priced 30 percent less than other stores and markets. Unlike typical supermarkets, which select products to sell based on their likelihood of turning a profit, Cecosesola sells what the community needs, even when it may mean losing money in order to provide that item. As one founding member of Cecosesola explained, "It's easier to get stuff at *Mercal*, but after that, here,

²⁰² Ibid.

because we make whatever sacrifice is necessary to provide the product.”²⁰³ For instance, a specific section of *feria*, called *mini-feria*, offers a lower price per pound than the main *Verdura*²⁰⁴ section and is designed to provide produce to families with very low incomes. Cecosesola’s various *fondos*²⁰⁵ help to cover the losses that Cecosesola incurs from offering items lower than the government-set price or the price for which it obtained the items. Shortages are common, however, and occasionally Cecosesola can no longer provide a product, or must offer it in reduced quantity, because it is either unavailable or simply too expensive to offer. During my visit, black beans had just reappeared after a long absence, and the *feria* was currently experiencing a shortage in powdered milk and eggs. However, to insure that all families received at least some portion of the scarce goods, Cecosesola was rationing both items by limiting a certain quantity to each family. Through these techniques, the organization strives to act as a reliable source of food for the community in the face of what are often unpredictable national shortages, regardless of the cost.

The addition of the health care service provides another strong example of Cecosesola’s dedication to serving its community.²⁰⁶ As one associate explained during the August 2007 Assembly:

At the level of service, providing health is something entirely new. It is especially important here in Venezuela because health care is not yet resolved. Private health care is very expensive, and public healthcare is precarious. Involving ourselves in healthcare is thus moving beyond just providing food.²⁰⁷

Clearly, Cecosesola sees the health situation among its community as precarious: the cooperative’s decision to expand its services beyond the provision of food reflects its ability to respond to deficiencies in the community. As with the *ferias*, Cecosesola strives to maintain low prices for its health services. Cecosesola associates receive preventative healthcare for free, and community members pay substantially discounted rates as compared to private healthcare. Two young associates working in the reception area of the clinic I visited asserted that the prices at Cecosesola clinics are significantly lower than anywhere else, except perhaps in the government-sponsored *Barrio Adentro* health centers.²⁰⁸ An associate working in the Acupuncture clinic, who has participated in Cecosesola

²⁰³ Interview 11.

²⁰⁴ The vegetables and produce section of *feria*.

²⁰⁵ In English, ‘funds.’ See Appendix A for a fuller description of this funding element.

²⁰⁶ See Appendix A for a fuller description of the community health networks.

²⁰⁷ Interview 21, Cecosesola Associate speaking at Assembly, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 26, 2007.

²⁰⁸ Interview 9, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 23, 2007.

for over 23 years, added, “There is capacity for everyone.” Cecosesola has never had to turn patients away or make them wait a long time for an appointment.²⁰⁹ This is significant given that in 2006, the entire health network²¹⁰ served 155,000 patients. Additionally, in 1999, Cecosesola decided to expand the network further because certain services cannot be offered in the local clinics. Thus, it began plans for the *Centro Integral Cooperativa de Salud*, a hospital-sized health center that will open in 2008. The community has played a significant role in supporting this project, with shoppers and other recipients of Cecosesola’s services providing 8,525,330bs (\$3,972.00) of the 5 billion bolívares (2.3 billion dollars) projected cost of the project—through collection jars at *feria* alone.

Many of Cecosesola’s other activities reflect this same desire to fulfill the needs of the community. Cecosesola’s youth members, for example, are currently in the process of forming their own cooperative, which will allow them to continue participating in Cecosesola’s activities now that governmental child labor laws indiscriminately bar youth from working.²¹¹ Even at their young age, these members already saw their cooperative as a response to greater needs. According to one member, “Most young people resolve their problems in the street, but we want to do it differently.”²¹² Another added, “It’s to help the young people with their personal growth, the delinquency.”²¹³ Others made statements such as, “We’re trying to get rid of individualism,”²¹⁴ or, “We want to make the country better.”²¹⁵

Cecosesola also strives to fulfill the community’s need for access to education. I spoke with one woman in the process of creating her own cooperative who had learned the necessary skills from taking a course that Cecosesola offered about healthy cooking. She said that she learned about the class through information advertised at *feria*, and that the course was free and open to the community.²¹⁶ Cecosesola’s involvement in political affairs reflects the same purpose. The cooperative’s current part in proposing a new law, the *Ley de Economía Social*, or

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ The six health clinics provide services in general medicine, pediatrics, and acupuncture, and also contain three dental centers, three internal medicine centers, and four clinical laboratories.

²¹¹ These youth previously worked part-time at Cecosesola while also attending school. New labor laws now prohibit them from working at Cecosesola until they are 18 years old. By forming their own cooperative, the youth will be able to continue participating in the Cecosesola experience.

²¹² Interview 43, Youth members of Cecosesola, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, September 5, 2007.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Interview 25.

the Law of the Social Economy, is part of its overall goal to promote cooperative growth that is for the betterment of the people. According to one member, Cecosesola is supporting the passage of this law to insure “that cooperatives have a more social vision to help other communities.”²¹⁷ The member offered the example of *ferias* with lower cost items constituting a “social aid.”²¹⁸ Evidently, Cecosesola passes the second test: its services appear to exist for the purpose of bettering the community.

During times of economic crisis, does the cooperative make sacrifices in order to continuing providing the valued services?

Cecosesola’s behavior during various moments of financial crisis suggests the cooperative’s willingness to sacrifice financial gain or ease of operations in order to continue providing the services that the community values and upon which it relies. During the economic crisis following the usurpation of Cecosesola’s buses, the cooperative found itself in a difficult position with regards to how to continue providing services. Many affiliated cooperatives, as well as the Jesuit priests, were convinced that the cooperative was going to fold and thus “went from cooperative to cooperative telling them that if they didn’t get out [of the central cooperative], they were going to lose the savings of the associates, which was a lie.”²¹⁹ Though bankruptcy was imminent, Cecosesola recognized the important role that its services played in the community. As once associate described, “The people in the *barrios*, we give a lot of weight to the funerary service because it is having the security that when someone dies, you will have somewhere to go for the deal of the funerary service. They give a lot of value to this part.”²²⁰ As evidenced from this associate’s use of both the 3rd person and 1st person tense (“the people” and “we”), the cooperative saw these services as an integral piece of the community, of which Cecosesola itself was a part. Thus, overcoming significant financial odds, the cooperative decided to continue its activities. As the associate explained, “We never sacrificed a single admission, a single bolívar, of the funerary service, in function to what we were experiencing.”²²¹

²¹⁷ Interview 30, Cecosesola associate, Sanares, Venezuela, August 28, 2007.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Interview 33.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

In more recent times, Cecosesola has taken a similar perspective with regards to funding the construction of the *Centro Integral Cooperativa de Salud*. The initial price estimate for the construction fell short of the actual cost of completing the center, which stimulated a period of intense self-analysis within the cooperative with regards to how to finish the project. Ultimately, it decided to take out a loan and encourage more donations from associates, affiliated cooperatives, and community members, rather than use more revenues from the other services it provides or change the prices of the services. As one member explained, “What we have proposed is that we are going to continue performing these activities in such a way that we don’t sacrifice the cost of the services that we are going to offer here in this health center.”²²² This may ultimately reduce Cecosesola’s annual profits, from which associates receive salary bonuses. In this manner, it appears that Cecosesola sacrifices its own revenues first during time of crisis that could jeopardize the services it provides for the community.

Do shoppers perceive of Cecosesola as part of their own community?

My interviews with several shoppers during a typical day of *feria* suggest that community members consider the cooperative an important part of their community. One shopper, who said that he has shopped at Cecosesola all along, said that he chooses to come despite his osteoporosis because “in other places it’s so expensive.” He added, “I love to shop here.”²²³ A different shopper, who has shopped at Cecosesola for a long time, coming every Friday, said that some items are cheaper at the *feria* and that it is easier to find products at ‘prices *más populares*.’^{224/225} According to a Cecosesola associate, the majority of his neighbors shop at Cecosesola.²²⁶ He explained that community members prefer to shop at Cecosesola because of “how we treat people.” He added, “You can find more economic prices, we try to share the products that are scarce. And the treatment also isn’t the same. In the supermarket it is distinct, distinct.”²²⁷ Cecosesola’s popularity with the community is also reflected through its high sales—the cooperative serves 55,000 families weekly, or roughly one-third of the Barquisimeto population.²²⁸

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Interview 12, Shopper at *Feria del Centro*, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 24, 2007.

²²⁴ Interview 13, Shopper at *Feria del Centro*, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 24, 2007.

²²⁵ No direct English translation exists for this phrase. The use of the word *populares* refers to *el pueblo*, the people. Thus, the shopper is saying that the prices are right for the people of the community—that they are better priced for what people can afford.

²²⁶ Interview 18.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Cecosesola, “Que es Cecosesola?” (August 2007).

The rate of crime at the *feria* is even more indicative of Cecosesola's important role in the community. As evidenced from weekly totals of sales and revenue, Cecosesola experiences a one percent rate of theft, as compared to a five percent rate in the average Venezuelan market. A member explained, "People who have been here for a long time help keep watch."²²⁹ He added that people do not want to steal from Cecosesola's *ferias* because they realize "that we all pay for what is stolen. We all have the responsibility to make it back up."²³⁰ In other words, they actively support the *ferias* with the understanding that stealing would drive up the prices.²³¹ Evidently, shoppers at Cecosesola's *ferias* perceive of the *ferias* as part of their own community; they understand that harming the *ferias* would be damaging to their own welfare.

Is Cecosesola part of the community?

My research suggests that Cecosesola is in fact a central, integrated part of the Barquisimeto community. The cooperative's assimilation on multiple levels permits the organization to fulfill its purpose of responding to the community's needs and also allows the cooperative to act as an element of community cohesion. This integration can be seen through many aspects of Cecosesola's interactions with its own actors as well as the community members who benefit from its services.

The relationship between Cecosesola and the community with regards to the planning and construction of the *Centro Integral Cooperativa de Salud* is perhaps most indicative. I asked one member how Cecosesola communicated the idea to the community and how it was able to gauge the community's response. She responded that big propaganda is not required to inform the community. She said, "We are the same community, we tell people at the *ferias*."²³² At each *feria*, Cecosesola members had set up a table with a model or picture of the planned health center in an effort to more fully involve shoppers in the planning process. Clearly, integration had been achieved on this project: as discussed earlier, community members contributed significantly to the construction of the hospital simply through donation containers placed in *feria*. The general perception of the hospital was that it belonged to the community—as everyone's labor had made it possible, it was owned by everyone.²³³

²²⁹ Interview 11.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Interview 9.

²³³ Interview 33.

Integration is also apparent through the role that shoppers play during *feria*. Rather than mere customers, community members frequently assume greater roles in taking ownership over *feria* and their role within it. One associate explained:

[Cecosesola] is a method of sharing, to share and *satisfacer* the needs of the community. Because there are many people—I don't say all but there are many—that get happy to come to Cecosesola to do their shopping. There are many that stay hours and hours, not shopping the whole time, but they stay here at Cecosesola. They shop and they stay, stay and help in whatever way. It's not 'I do my shopping and I have to go.'²³⁴

Evidently, rather than a business-client relationship, Cecosesola is integrated into the community as an organization made up of, and supported by, community members and their participation. As the associate added, "It is not a supermarket...The community goes to the *feria*, the majority, we go to Cecosesola and we get up early, and they go and stay a while."²³⁵ In this example, the associate switches back and forth between speaking about the community and speaking about himself as an associate; clearly, he sees himself as both, and these two roles as equal in terms of what they require for participation at *feria*. The same tendency can be seen in one of his later statements, when he speaks about the street children that Cecosesola has sheltered and absorbed into the organization. He said:

We move forward trying to help, to help the people with us. Because some have come that are not from our families. They are from the street. They're with us here so that they are not there, on the street screwing up, making problems and such. Thus, here with us, they have entered another world. So we're going to see what we can do. Right now we're doing this; right now we're forming a cooperative. We're doing various things with their own selves.²³⁶

In this statement, the associate demonstrates Cecosesola's role in absorbing disenfranchised individuals into the community. Through its activities, Cecosesola is in fact enriching the reach and power of the local community's bonds.

²³⁴ Interview 18.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

The role that the many actors in Cecosesola play in the organization is also indicative of Cecosesola's part in linking and strengthening bonds between different sectors of the population. To begin with, Cecosesola encourages individuals to form their own cooperatives, thereby forging new connections and giving individuals new access to resources. Secondly, Cecosesola links these cooperatives with each other and strengthens their connections with the community in providing services. Thirdly, Cecosesola also forges its own relationship with the affiliated cooperatives, and through this relationship, both groups benefit. As one associated explained:

Cecosesola as such is large, large. And as to the affiliated cooperatives, most are smaller than Cecosesola. But for what it serves, we help them...we work together with them. It's not that we're going to teach them everything, but rather, what can we do? Because in reality, we don't know everything. Cecosesola doesn't know everything. Rather, we also learn from other things.²³⁷

This statement affirms that Cecosesola does not possess a one-way relationship with the community; rather, it interacts dynamically with its many actors. Through these interactions, strong relationships of trust are generated. As one associated articulated, "It is not an affiliation of paper. It is an affiliation of sharing, of meeting."²³⁸ A member of an affiliated cooperative added, "There are not very large obstacles. We are like a big family [with Cecosesola]—we share the good things and the bad things."²³⁹

The same benefits can be seen through Cecosesola's relationships with the various producers. According to one associate:

The *ferias* have also allowed us to have a relationship with the producers, the small producers that are in different sites of the country. We came to have more than 800 producers organized in cooperatives [and] civil associations that produce and work in function with *feria*.²⁴⁰

Cecosesola's interactions with these producers are entirely based on trust: no contracts, papers, or promises for money are ever signed regarding payments before or after the growing season. Additionally, Cecosesola workers and producers do not distinguish between each other as separate types of members.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Interview 1, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 21, 2007.

²³⁹ Interview 25.

²⁴⁰ Interview 33, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 29, 2007.

As one associate stated, “I don’t know who is producer and who is Cecosesola.”²⁴¹ As an organization composed of 1,000 people, serving a huge portion of the Barquisimeto population, Cecosesola’s integration within the community and success in incorporating new groups and individuals into the community network is significant and suggests true practice of the cooperative’s stated purpose.

Does Cecosesola value the preservation of community services over increasing the salaries of individual members?

Lastly, Cecosesola clearly values preserving its services for the community above increasing overall profits that could augment individuals’ salaries. In past times of economic crisis, or in times of service expansion, Cecosesola has funded projects using its *fondos* or year-end profits. As access to *fondos* and year-end profits are determined through group consensus at *reuniones*, the repeated decision (for example, during the transport crisis and planning of the hospital project) to use these resources rather than affect the cost of services is striking. Though increasing the cost of services could directly translate to increased individual income, as the use of the year-end surplus is a group decision and typically used for individual bonuses, Cecosesola has always chosen to think about the good of the community and the group before increasing profit.

Cecosesola’s fulfillment of these six criteria points to a strong correlation between what members identify as the cooperative’s purpose and the actual behavior of the cooperative, both historically and currently. Cecosesola emerged for the direct purpose of providing a service to the community and this purpose has remained the driving force behind the cooperative’s expansion of services and its engagement with the community. As a deeply integrated and clearly important piece of its community, the cooperative is able to respond directly to social needs. It also acts as a resource for community networking and, as a result, its fortification. Cecosesola appears to exist primarily to *satisfacer* the needs of the community.

Autonomy

The second piece of understanding the role of agency in Cecosesola’s success is the presence of autonomy as a defining element of the cooperative’s activities. Due to the cooperative’s strict adherence to its greater purpose—community

²⁴¹ Interview 49.

maximization—it has seen preserving its autonomy as a necessary first step in fulfilling this role. In seeking to preserve true self-management, the cooperative attempts to maintain independence over its economic affairs, either by self-financing from the capitalization of its own profits or by assuming responsibility in obtaining loans. For cooperative members, such self-sufficiency is a source of pride and also of stability. Through preservation of this autonomy, Cecosesola separates itself from dependent alliances with the state and asserts itself as an independent organization.

Autonomy has been a pillar of Cecosesola's success from the onset. Because the organization emerged to satisfy a specific purpose, founding members assumed complete initiative in finding a way to create Cecosesola. It was their idea, driven by their own community's need, and thus through the process of implementing it, they simultaneously began the process of asserting autonomy. Though Centro Gumilla and the Alliance for Progress played an initial role Cecosesola's formation, it was one of support, rather than actual organizing.²⁴² Centro Gumilla offered courses that detailed how a cooperative should function, but it was up to communities to organize themselves and take advantage of this resource, which did not include monetary support. A founding member of Cooperativa Divina Pastora, one of the early cooperatives involved in Cecosesola, explained that his cooperative emerged from "support of the people, not like today from the state."²⁴³ Neighbors in his *barrio* came together to attend the courses that Centro Gumilla were offering to the community. After one week, seventy neighbors became associates and organized the first money collection for their new cooperative, a savings and loans operation. They named a directorate, and the next week, educated themselves about accounting.²⁴⁴ From the onset, community autonomy became part of the cooperative's foundation.

This beginning has contributed to the development of the mentality among members that "one has to live the process of liberation."²⁴⁵ As one described, for Cecosesola, this has been "a forty-year process."²⁴⁶ According to a member of Cooperativa La Montaña, one of the affiliated agricultural cooperatives, Cecosesola began directly from individual initiative and, as a result, the members themselves were fully responsible for every failure along the way. This is what has permitted the cooperatives to grow, learn, and progress.²⁴⁷ As one

²⁴² Interview 33.

²⁴³ Interview 52.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Interview 3, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 22, 2007.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Interview 10, Cooperativa la Montaña associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 23, 2007.

Cecosesola associate stated, “Any type of self-management process has to originate with the people.”²⁴⁸ Members take great pride in their autonomy, and from this autonomy, have developed a unique sense of ownership over the cooperative: “We are a cooperative very distinct from those of [Chávez]...we began ourselves.”²⁴⁹ Or, in the words of another, “Cecosesola has been our very own. We do it because we want to.”²⁵⁰

The development of a sense of ownership has permitted Cecosesola to see *lucha*, or struggle, as a critical part of the formative process. Without *lucha*, it believes that its autonomy would be compromised, as the continual practice of initiative is necessary to permit growth and organizational flexibility. As one associate explained, everything about the organization signifies continual struggle. The title of Cecosesola’s first book, *Construyendo una Convivencia Harmónica*,²⁵¹ or *Constructing a Harmonious Lived-Experience*, epitomizes the presence of struggle in every step of the process because each word speaks to the concept of resistance. He added, “Much of the time, the *lucha* is destructive—you win or I win...Here, everyone comes out better.”²⁵²

Cecosesola’s experience with *lucha* over the course of the last forty years speaks to its struggle for autonomy and illuminates the development of its perspective on external aid. Several specific historic moments provide insight into this process of formation and the meaning of autonomy for the cooperative. The first such test came in the form of Cecosesola’s relationship with other Central Cooperatives in Venezuela in supplying the *feria* service. Cecosesola had begun to integrate its *feria* system with other emerging cooperative centers across the country, but at a certain point, problems began to emerge due to the long chain of exchange. Centers would bring products from Cecosesola to their own *ferias*, which were run by various affiliated cooperatives. Associates of these cooperatives would pay the cooperatives, which would pay the centers. Then, a member explained, “At the very end it ended with us receiving payment, and this caused for us huge economic problems, such that arrived a moment in which we were at the point of closing.”²⁵³ Rather than continue its dependence on the other centers, or turn to the state for economic help, Cecosesola took responsibility for the situation: “So we decided to assume our part, and with our

²⁴⁸ Interview 11.

²⁴⁹ Interview 19, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela August 25, 2007.

²⁵⁰ Interview 30.

²⁵¹ In English, roughly: *Constructing a Harmonic Lived-Experience*.

²⁵² Interview 3.

²⁵³ Interview 33.

own strength, continue serving. Thus we overcame this entire crisis.”²⁵⁴ Similar autonomy was exercised in the expansion of the *ferias* and, as discussed previously, the development of the health networks. Cecosesola develops its own solutions for economic difficulties and creates its own resources in order to persevere.

Cecosesola’s insistence on autonomy is partly due to a past experience with loss of such autonomy and the negative repercussions that resulted. This experience was the transport service crisis, during which the cooperative obtained credit from the state to purchase buses.²⁵⁵ When the buses were usurped and destroyed, the cooperative lost 19 million bolívares, but had only one million bolívares saved.²⁵⁶ According to one member, “When we had the problem of transport, we were broken... the debts had increased terribly. We could not recover, in economic terms.”²⁵⁷ Use of the word “broken” is important here—for Cecosesola members, losing control over finances and being in nearly insurmountable debt ran counter to everything the cooperative had symbolized. Not only was the cooperative’s ability to fulfill its obligation to the community questioned, members’ sense of autonomy and power over their own well-being was shattered.

Cecosesola’s response to this situation became a formative moment. Members assumed control of the situation and began working solve the debt: “We started with the *feria* until we covered all of the debts that we had with workers, with providers, with cooperatives, with the same Corpo Industria who gave us the credit for the buses. They were paid with what the *ferias* produced...”²⁵⁸ Eventually, the cooperative was able to come even and, today, this disaster has become a frequently reiterated reminder of the importance of maintaining autonomy. As one member explained, “This money from the government was a big disaster, with lots of corruption...it results in dependency.”²⁵⁹ The experience with government credit ultimately gave members the desire to develop their own economic capacity, leading to the creation of the *fondos*.²⁶⁰ They also provided a foundation for the concept of *lucha*:

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Interview 11.

²⁶⁰ Interview 3.

What has happened with us is that the experience with transport—everything it did to us, and we passed through to here with this experience—it gave us a lived experience, a learning. So, we learned a way to analyze our situations, and with that as a base, how to go forth...assuming responsibility. And the decisions about what happens with politics, what happens with those that want to take advantage.²⁶¹

As a result, today, Cecosesola pursues external aid only “in certain moments” for “precise things.”²⁶² In other words, support is never taken lightly. The decision to do so is a subject of great discussion, and Cecosesola always preserves initiative and responsibility in the process of securing support. It *pursues*, rather than *accepts*, aid. One member pointedly expressed: “We have to give the first word. The government can help us, but the community has to see its own problem and start the process. Then the government can help.”²⁶³ Since the transport crisis, Cecosesola has held itself strictly to this philosophy. Its first action in requesting aid was in the form of a petition to a later administration. A member related:

Thus, there came a moment when we proposed to that president that they recognize some of the damage that they had done to us. So they gave us a certain contribution, and with that, we increased the spaces of *feria*, fixed up here el Centro, fixed up over there at Ruiz Pineda. We enlarged, and that permitted somewhat what we are today in terms of infrastructure.²⁶⁴

Here, Cecosesola assumed responsibility for being reimbursed for the damages it had accrued, and through the subsequent success, its power and autonomy were recognized. In more recent years, Cecosesola has occasionally requested loans from public or private services. However, it does so only under very clear circumstances, for specific community goals that its own financing capability cannot cover, and with clear plans for returning the money established from the outset. It never accepts loans that will affect the quality or cost of its services. As one member explained, in regards to the *Centro Integral Cooperativa de Salud*:

We are requesting credit from a private bank in the order of 1.5 million bolívares and they have already approved us. We only lack several papers to begin the hand-off. We have established that the payment of this loan cannot be drawn from the services that we offer in the health center...And what we have proposed is that we are going to continue performing these activities in such a

²⁶¹ Interview 33.

²⁶² *Ibid.*

²⁶³ Interview 32, Cecosesola associate, *Reunión de Gestión*, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 29, 2007.

²⁶⁴ Interview 33.

way that we don't sacrifice the cost of the services that we are going to offer here in this health center.²⁶⁵

This statement reveals the new degree of sophistication that Cecosesola has developed with regards to maintaining autonomy. By regarding loans as services that it can *choose* to negotiate on its own terms, the cooperative assumes new power as an independent organization.

As such, Cecosesola also encourages the same responsibility in giving its own support. By developing the *fondos*, Cecosesola has created a self-financing mechanism that provides security in times of crisis, allows expansion of services, and supports member endeavors. In its administration of the *fondos*, Cecosesola continues to further its process of self-management by encouraging similar responsibility in the recipients of the financial support. The *fondos* provide loans to Cecosesola members and community members for uses as varied as medical operations and new cooperative endeavors. Cecosesola traverses a thin line in supporting, but also demanding responsibility, among members. For example, in case of a big operation with a huge cost, Cecosesola may ask the person to pay back a third of the amount, "but it is not obligatory."²⁶⁶ In the case of new cooperatives seeking loans, however, a much more rigorous degree of initiative is expected and Cecosesola encourages groups to raise their own start-up money. For example, a woman who recently began a new cooperative explained that she did receive some monetary support from Cecosesola, but that in general she and her comrades had to work very hard to generate the necessary resources. She explained, 'It is an effort at the beginning—you don't have money.'²⁶⁷ Through generally providing education, rather than money, Cecosesola insures that individuals possess the necessary initiative to undertake the project and that they are not merely doing it to gain access to Cecosesola's financial resources.

Cecosesola's hands-off approach is also evident in its influential role in the development of a community radio station in Cooperativa Mixta Santo Brasil. The cooperatives work together closely and share similar perspectives on the importance of fostering initiative among members. In this case, rather than funding the radio station, the cooperative left it up to members to design, finance, and implement the project. One founder of the project explained the process:

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Interview 11.

²⁶⁷ Interview 25.

It occurred to us to have a broad discussion...from here came emerging proposals for how the radio should be. When you hear commercial radios, they have an aspect that does not align with the communal. They play things that sometimes you don't like. It occurred to us to look for the money not to buy, but rather to construct, a transmitter. It was five months before we constructed the transmitter and secured air space...The first day, the signal only reached 5 meters because it was something we had constructed ourselves...So we went back to build it again with more materials, more knowledge.

To obtain the necessary resources for the project, everyone contributed.²⁶⁸ They also offered to publicize a government program, MINCEP, and thus received some funds from that as well. In general, however, the member found it important to point out that "The state has not given us money."²⁶⁹ The cooperative saw any funds it received as the result of its own initiative, rather than charity or a gift.

These factors clearly illustrate the important role of autonomy within Cecosesola. As an organization founded upon, and sustained through, initiative, the cooperative is able to generate ownership, power, and community while simultaneously providing a direct contrast to historic dependence on government and other forms of aid. Cecosesola is "the solution of the community,"²⁷⁰ a product of its own independent creation. As an organization, it holds an important place in the community, in fact symbolizing the community's ability to help itself. Autonomy functions powerfully on this macro level, but equally so on the level of the individuals who participate in Cecosesola. In the next section, I explore the role of agency among Cecosesola members as it correlates to the cooperative's success.

Agency as Individuals

Purpose. Though Cecosesola as a unit appears to be driven by a strong ethic of community purpose, defined by group decisions that further the goals of satisfying the community's needs, in this section I explore the role of purpose among actual individuals. My research suggests that though members do not always join Cecosesola for the explicit goal of serving the community, participation in the organization connects them to this common purpose and imbeds them into a new concept of belonging, both to Cecosesola and the

²⁶⁸ Interview 50, Cooperative Mixta Santo Brasil associate, Carora, Venezuela, September 8, 2007.

²⁶⁹ Interview 50.

²⁷⁰ Interview 41.

community at large. To analyze members' agency in regards to purpose, I examine why individuals become associates, why individuals have continued to be associates, and how individuals perceive of their place in Cecosesola. These three areas provide a strong lens for demonstrating how being a part of Cecosesola is more than just 'going to work.'

Nearly everyone whom I interviewed at Cecosesola had joined because of a need for work.²⁷¹ As becoming an associate requires recommendation from a current associate, most members had joined because one or more of their family members was already involved. For example, entering the kitchen one day at Feria Ruiz Pineda, I learned in a conversation with the two women cooking that one had come to Cecosesola through her two daughters, and the other had been recommended by her mother, a producer for *feria*, and had in turn recommended her sister.²⁷² On a different occasion, an associate explained:

In reality, all of my family is in sales, except my step mom. But all of my uncles, my grandparents, and my uncle's wife, all of my cousins, practically my entire family is in *feria*. Thus, since I was little I have always come to Cecosesola with my grandfather. I went to the *Reuniones de Chamitos* ... In this way, since I was little, I was becoming familiar with the experience. So, I entered Cecosesola.²⁷³

Members either joined because their former work was unsatisfactory (as one explained, "[my previous job] wasn't worth mentioning"²⁷⁴) or, most commonly, because of need. Some statements included:

I entered because I needed work.²⁷⁵

I entered because of a need. I became accustomed to it. I stayed. I like to be here.²⁷⁶

We all enter for a necessity.²⁷⁷

²⁷¹ Founding members, conversely, often helped to initiate the cooperative because of a need they perceived among their community or because of an inherent interest in cooperatives (Interviews 33, 37, 44).

²⁷² Interview 8, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 23, 2007.

²⁷³ Interview 18.

²⁷⁴ Interview 11.

²⁷⁵ Interview 20, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 25, 2007.

²⁷⁶ Interview 19.

²⁷⁷ Interview 34, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 30, 2007.

Clearly, individuals generally enter Cecosesola because they lack work and are in a difficult place in life. They represent the need within the community that Cecosesola attempts to satisfy. Within a short time, however, members expressed that their purpose in being a part of Cecosesola changed. One member explained that he joined out of economic need, but that the experience soon became something more.²⁷⁸ Through becoming more economically stable themselves, associates effectively become more empowered to help others that are in their previous position.

Therefore, their reasons for continuing to work at Cecosesola demonstrate the process through which associates exercise agency. Cecosesola becomes more than a job that is necessary for supporting one's family and instead becomes an enjoyable and stimulating community experience. Members stay not because they need to, but rather because they want to. During my visit to the Purchasing division of *feria*, I spoke with the two current members of the *equipo*. In explaining reasons for continuing to work at Cecosesola, one provided the rationale that "we continue learning...we complement each other."²⁷⁹ The associate explained that unlike purchasing jobs in other workplaces, here they do not sit inside the office all day, "exclusively receiving calls."²⁸⁰ Their responsibilities include visiting where the food is grown and meeting with producers. In other words, work at Cecosesola introduces members to a purpose broader than their own needs and involves them in the community. Another member explained, "In reality, because...he who doesn't like it, knows it. Someone who likes it, good. I like to be in Cecosesola right now and so I stay because I like it...In reality, I have never thought about this idea of quitting *feria*. For the moment, I have continued, I will continue in *feria*."²⁸¹ A different member, in discussing Cecosesola's history, said that the organization knows how to "treat people well" and concluded, "I fell in love with the *feria*."²⁸² Another simply stated, "Since I got here, I have done well."²⁸³ When I asked one associate if people retire at a certain age, he responded adamantly, "No, no, no...rather until they no longer want to continue with us."²⁸⁴ In asking one woman how she had changed during her time with Cecosesola, she was very expressive in responding: "My person, my character...the personal fulfillment is

²⁷⁸ Interview 27, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 28, 2007.

²⁷⁹ Interview 6, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 6, 2007.

²⁸⁰ Interview 7, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 7, 2007.

²⁸¹ Interview 18.

²⁸² Interview 15, Viajeros del Centro associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 24, 2007.

²⁸³ Interview 19.

²⁸⁴ Interview 18.

very important.”²⁸⁵ For associates, Cecosesola is a far broader experience than previous jobs, and their purpose for staying marks this significance. As such, members’ decisions to continue at Cecosesola for reasons greater than economic need suggest the degree to which work at Cecosesola imbeds associates into a notion of community larger than their nuclear families. One associate explained, “It’s a movement from the moment you enter. You are going to experience new things...there is the comradeship...you continue learning, sharing with the community.”²⁸⁶ Associates become involved in the constant generation of community, teamwork, and responsibility within Cecosesola and, as a result, begin to see their participation as more than a typical job. Members commit most of their waking hours to Cecosesola, voluntarily sacrificing weekends in order to help out at *feria*.²⁸⁷ They often cease to discriminate between personal and organizational goals. When I asked a woman what she hoped for her own future, she replied, “That it’s good...that we have good productivity.”²⁸⁸ Then, when I asked what she hoped for Cecosesola, she answered, “That we continue, that we have good productivity.”²⁸⁹ Rather than one small aspect of her life, her hopes for the cooperative had become part of her vision of her own personal fulfillment. One member stated this clearly, saying, “Most of us come here from a necessity, but then we become a part of the movement and it is no longer a job.”²⁹⁰ Evidently, though the generation of purpose plays out differently on the level of actual individuals than through the organization as a whole, the end result is similar: the continual preservation of a sense of purpose or reason for involvement that extends beyond any one individual’s own economic needs.

Autonomy: The other element of agency among individual Cecosesola associates is their constant exercise of initiative. Rather than passive employees, associates actively assume roles of power and responsibility in the organization. Member autonomy can be seen through the various organizational aspects of Cecosesola, member relationships, and member participation. The presence of such autonomy transforms associates into individuals that create, rather than simply receive, and is therefore a key element in Cecosesola’s success as a cooperative.

To begin with, each aspect of Cecosesola’s internal organization is entirely flexible, and thus relies upon constant member autonomy to function. Its two

²⁸⁵ Interview 20.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Interview 11.

²⁸⁸ Interview 19.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Interview 45, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, September 5, 2007.

main aspects include organization of work, or the *equipos*, and decision-making. Without set policies, rules, or decision-makers, these aspects are maintained purely by member interest. This organization is possible because members see the cooperative not as a pre-existing structure of which they play a part, but rather as a dynamic product that they themselves shape and influence. As one member expressed, “Cecosesola has been our very own. We do it because we want to.”²⁹¹

The *equipos* are the most critical piece of Cecosesola’s organization as they provide the framework for organizing human labor to provide the services. They are most notable for the fact that no external person is responsible for placing members into various *equipos* or coordinating their rotation. Members self-select where they would like to work, based on their personal interests and self-evaluation of the cooperative’s need, and also organize their own rotations. A member explained, “People see what *equipo* they want to do next and talk to the group and start learning.”²⁹² Though some jobs may appear less-desirable to the outside eye, every *equipo* always has enough members. Most notably, in all of my interviews, not a single member could identify his or her ‘favorite’ job. They all expressed that each job is important in its own way, and thus enjoyable.

The flexibility of this system requires that members take responsibility for their own labor and take the initiative to identify *equipos* that need assistance. Several members identified this as the most difficult aspect of beginning to work at Cecosesola. One explained that “it was hard getting used to not being told what to do” and learning to see what needs to be done and how to fill in to complete tasks.²⁹³ This statement provides a strong example of the role that Cecosesola plays in reversing dependency. Upon entering, individuals are used to receiving orders and thus find it challenging to take initiative. Within the *equipo* system, however, they soon learn how to exercise agency and take personal responsibility for the outcome of the services.

To facilitate this transition, new members typically begin in the *Verdura equipo* where they can easily witness the *feria* system and learn teamwork. One young associate explained, “So, when I started, I began in *Verdura*. Afterwards, I coordinated *Viveres*.”²⁹⁴ I coordinated *Viveres* to insure that we were watching the

²⁹¹ Interview 30.

²⁹² Interview 34.

²⁹³ Interview 35, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 30, 2007.

²⁹⁴ The household goods section of *feria*.

merchandise...”²⁹⁵ Most importantly, he added, “We don’t have anything limited here.”²⁹⁶ By this he meant that associates can chose where to work, and often travel to do rotations with producers or affiliated cooperatives if they are thus inclined. He worked for a short time in a surrounding region, but returned because he missed his family.²⁹⁷ Some affiliated cooperatives, such as Cooperativa Las Tinajas, a bread cooperative in the rural Sanares region, rely on a constant stream of Cecosesola associates from the main compounds who come up to work on one or two week rotations.

As a result, with no set policies, the direction of the cooperative is constantly being re-determined by the current interest of the associates. One associate in the *Quincalla* section of *feria* explained, “We make purchases, we implement price controls. Here, we pick what to buy: we’re always changing products.”²⁹⁸ This associate was 17 years old and had spent merely two years at Cecosesola. Evidently, member autonomy is the most critical aspect of maintaining the *equipo* system, which in turn supports the services. As two members explained on separate occasions, “We all do everything”²⁹⁹ and “You have the opportunity to try everything.”³⁰⁰

Cecosesola’s second main organizational element is the process of decision-making,³⁰¹ and this system, just as flexible as the *equipos*, is thus another clear indicator of member autonomy. As Cecosesola possesses no hierarchical structure, chain of decision-making, or elected officials, all decisions are made by consensus. One associate said, “There is no majority decision-making. We have to go until everyone is in agreement... Everyone can participate who wants to.”³⁰² This system relies on consistent member participation in the *reuniones* and at the Assemblies and, thus, according to one associate, “If you don’t participate in the *reuniones*, you’re lost.”³⁰³ Associates were able to converse fluently about the system and the importance of their involvement. Some statements included:

In other places, there is a boss. Here, it is participative.³⁰⁴

²⁹⁵ Interview 18.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ Interview 34.

²⁹⁹ Interview 11.

³⁰⁰ Interview 39.

³⁰¹ See Appendix A for a fuller description of the decision-making process.

³⁰² Interview 3.

³⁰³ Interview 9.

³⁰⁴ Interview 19.

Participation is the most important—it's where you learn...integration and communication.³⁰⁵

In the decision-making, responsibility is very important.³⁰⁶

Reuniones occur nearly every day of the week, often simultaneously in different locations and in various times throughout the day. Though certain members (primarily the older associates who helped found Cecosesola or who have been involved in Cecosesola over twenty years) attended more *reuniones*, most *reuniones* were composed of different members each day. The system is designed so that associates can attend *reuniones* once or twice a week, depending on their own schedules. No single person facilitated *reuniones*; rather, nearly every person in attendance spoke at some point, and the discussion topics varied depending on member choice. Topics ranged from governmental laws, profits, and member health to policies for missing days of work and problems of individualism both at Cecosesola and other cooperatives. Members described the *reuniones* as a key element of the cooperative's development, as well as their own. As one associate described:

...These analysis *reuniones* that we do permitted [Cecosesola] to pass on to the second level. In the time that you have been here, I can't say how many meetings you have seen. We are permanently doing this. Analyzing and specifying and demanding. I feel that this is a contribution, a value that we have been constructing... The minute we cease to meet, the minute that we stop analyzing our situation, we convert into chaos.³⁰⁷

Evidently, individual autonomy in decision-making is a critical component of Cecosesola's ability to provide services and thus, also, of its success.

The third major aspect of individual autonomy is the degree to which members assume responsibility over the organization. As already discussed, members take initiative simply by participating in the *equipos*, self-delegating, and attending *reuniones*. Through working at Cecosesola they also gain a sense of strong responsibility towards the organization as a whole and their fellow associates. I asked one member if he felt that he had changed since entering Cecosesola, and he responded:

³⁰⁵ Interview 25.

³⁰⁶ Interview 39.

³⁰⁷ Interview 33.

If I have changed? I think so. In reality, yes, I have changed. Because [before] I didn't have obligations, or I had a commitment, but with my mother... When I entered Cecosesola there was a sense of commitment, responsibility... I was a kid, now I have more responsibility. I think different. Distinctly. As much here as elsewhere... One thinks about the ways to help people.³⁰⁸

Associates feel committed to Cecosesola and take action to support the organization. One member said that she feels responsible for the future of Cecosesola.³⁰⁹ As such, members frequently make efforts to improve the organization and hold each other accountable. For example, at nearly every *reunión*, associates discussed how to help new members gain a more community-focused attitude, and in some cases, members expressed concern about their comrades not taking responsibility for their absences.³¹⁰ As a result of such responsibility, members take initiative over their work in a new way. A member explained, "You're not a worker: you're a part of it. This is just life—you are not going to work and then going home... This is just living, day to day."³¹¹ Cecosesola ceases to be a mere job, rather becoming a product of each associate's own, autonomous labor.

Associates also feel a strong sense of responsibility towards each other, which can be clearly demonstrated through associates' attitudes towards their salaries and working overtime or during vacation.³¹² All associates frequently used the work "support." One stated, "Support is very important... we all support each other a lot."³¹³ For this reason, Cecosesola does not award salaries based upon merit, seniority, experience, or hours worked; rather, every associate receives the pay that he or she needs. At a basic level, this would mean that every associate would receive the same salary. But because pay also depends on necessity, someone with children, or children going to university, in practice generally receives a correspondingly higher salary.³¹⁴ Though this system could arguably hold many possibilities for dissent, I never witnessed a single discussion between associates about salaries, and it was never a topic at *reuniones*. Instead, associates were always eager to describe this aspect of Cecosesola to me, and saw it as a basic right that different workers should receive the pay that they need based upon

³⁰⁸ Interview 18.

³⁰⁹ Interview 39.

³¹⁰ Interview 36, Cecosesola associate, *Feria* Preparation Meeting, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 30, 2007.

³¹¹ Interview 46, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, September 5, 2007.

³¹² See Appendix A for more information.

³¹³ Interview 25.

³¹⁴ Interview 3.

their diverse life situations. Clearly, associates maintain a high level of responsibility towards each other—so much so that it overcomes any one individual’s desire for higher pay.

Similar initiative can be seen through associates’ attitudes towards the rigorous hours of work at Cecosesola and their willingness to work more hours than required. Most members said that the hardest thing about beginning to work at Cecosesola was the long hours and hard work. One associate, for example, said that he commutes three hours a day just to work at Cecosesola.³¹⁵ The *ferias* demand a specifically high level of dedication, given their long hours of operation and all of the labor that goes into receiving goods from the producers (often throughout the night) and stocking the shelves. One member described the hardest thing at the beginning:

Fridays. Because, goodness, you’re not accustomed to be here at four in the morning until eight at night. It’s hard, hard. This was what hit me most and still, [despite everything]...hits me. It’s difficult to begin at four and its, goodness, ten hours or more, 12, 16 hours. It’s a lot. However, it hits me, it hits me. Fridays I get home to go to sleep. I bathe, eat, and go to bed. And still it gets to me. What was hardest for me about *feria* was this.³¹⁶

Though members highlighted the difficulty of their workload, they never questioned its validity. As their own bosses, they recognized that the work was necessary, and took whatever initiative necessary to complete it. In some cases, this means that associates even return to help out during their vacation. Our guide of *feria* one day told us that he was officially on vacation, but that like many other people who do not leave the city on their breaks, he likes to continue to provide extra assistance at *feria*. Though he said that there is no obligation to stay, he did point out that “there is an agreement to collaborate.”³¹⁷ Though peer pressure could be an element in forcing high commitment, I observed varying levels of investment among members and no apparent judgment or exclusion based upon perceived differences in hours of work.

The third main aspect of individual member initiative is the role that associates assume in Cecosesola’s economic affairs. Matters of budget, saving, and spending are all managed through a process of group decision-making that involves all associates. Members also contribute to the *fondos* and can take the initiative to

³¹⁵ Interview 27.

³¹⁶ Interview 18.

³¹⁷ Interview 11.

save or ask for a loan. As one associate explained, "... We have the opportunity to save here. If you take a loan we give you a loan. We have the funds, we form ourselves. It's a distinct manner to help ourselves."³¹⁸ For associates, taking control over Cecosesola's finances is synonymous for exercising agency in their own lives. As the associate so poignantly described, associates take initiative to 'help themselves.' All associates have access to Cecosesola's budget, which is distributed openly at meetings with all spendings and earnings presented (down to the cost of office supplies). Associates also control the usage of Cecosesola's profits. Regarding the new health center, one associate explained, "We capitalized for the construction of this health center... [I]t belongs to no one in particular, but rather to the entire collective."³¹⁹ Through their independent agency, members are able to contribute to the autonomous empowerment of their community as well—in this case, the entire community taking the steps to help itself.

Member initiative can also be seen through associates' knowledge of Cecosesola's history and current issues. All associates with whom I spoke were able to coherently express aspects of the organization's history or its contemporary relations with the Venezuelan government. This knowledge is by no means critical for the work that most associates conduct on a day-to-day basis, and is therefore indicative of the interest and investment that associates gain through their work at Cecosesola. For example, on one occasion I spoke with an associate who had worked in the unskilled-labor sector her entire life and therefore spoke a rough, grammatically incorrect Spanish. However, she still geared the conversation towards explaining what distinguishes Cecosesola as a cooperative and went out of her way to express the values that it hopes to foster among its associates.³²⁰ Associates routinely shaped our conversations to center on key Cecosesola historical events, such as the transportation riots or the battles to find property, or to tell me their definition of a cooperative and the way that Cecosesola reorders human relationships. Associates were also able to clearly articulate the meaning and importance of the cooperative model:

[A cooperative] is where we help each other, one to the other.³²¹

The strength of the cooperative is the manner in which we participate.³²²

³¹⁸ Interview 18.

³¹⁹ Interview 33.

³²⁰ Interview 19.

³²¹ Interview 39.

³²² Interview 26, Cecosesola associate, Meeting of Affiliated Cooperatives, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 28, 2007.

In a cooperative, the means of production should belong to the associates in a collective manner. Each should not have his or her own car, etc. Cars should belong to the cooperative.³²³

The other indicator of member initiative to self-educate can be seen through associates' ability to converse fluently about new laws under Chávez that have affected the cooperative, as well as his newly proposed laws and Cecosesola's reaction to them. Nearly all members brought up these topics during interviews and no member whom I questioned about them was unable to comment in some way. Regarding laws that Chávez has already enacted, members made statements such as:

[The Special Law of Cooperatives] is very flexible.³²⁴

For Cecosesola, the problem has been that the government's new labor laws, such as the Law of Labor, do not apply well to the cooperatives. They were written with the boss/worker relationship in mind, but the Ministry of Labor still wants to impose them on the cooperatives. Loxima, The Organic Law of Protection in the Work Environment, etc. were all designed from the point of view of a dependent work arrangement.³²⁵

Yes [Chávez's laws]...have affected us...Now the laws have to be obeyed. They are more rigid (than under past administrations).³²⁶

[Cecosesola] pays [new mothers] for three months, something like that. But with the new governmental laws, I think that it's going to be extended to a year.³²⁷

Associates also spoke frequently about new laws that Chávez had recently proposed at the time, such as the Law of Technology and Education. One associate explained, "Right now in our country, they are developing and implementing a series of laws that are...charging a tax for every economic activity that you do."³²⁸ Another told me during a casual stroll through *feria* that these laws will require that a set percentage of revenue is deducted and given to a new governmental department for investment in projects to further education and the development of technology throughout the country. The associate

³²³ Interview 26.

³²⁴ Interview 5, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, September 28, 2007.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Interview 18.

³²⁷ Ibid.

³²⁸ Interview 33.

expressed concern because in Cecosesola, extra revenue is used for the *fondos*. He said that, ironically, “We form ourselves through our work. The *reuniones* and the analysis give us the possibility to change.” Thus, losing money for the *fondos* would mean sacrificing the education and innovation that occur naturally through Cecosesola’s work.³²⁹ Associates’ concern for, and interest in, these problems demonstrate member initiative to self-educate about the cooperative. Furthermore, their continual interest in approaching me to question my presence, my experience so far, and to share their current activities regarding these laws, point to a new degree of agency being fostered among Cecosesola members.³³⁰

The final aspect of initiative can be seen through members’ empowerment to form their own cooperatives. I spoke with founding members of three of Cecosesola’s affiliated cooperatives. The first, *Cooperativa Caminando Juntos*,³³¹ is the product of youth Cecosesola members. The adolescents designed the cooperative themselves, coming up with a name, mission, and submitting the application to formerly become a cooperative. They described the experience as “feeling responsible for something that belongs”³³² to them and one said, “This is something that we continue creating ourselves.”³³³ Forming the cooperative is their way to take control over their own lives and the lives of their peers. As one stated, “Most young people resolve their problems in the street” but we want to do it differently.”³³⁴ By approaching problems in a new way, these youth are exercising agency in the development of their community.

I observed similar processes of initiative during my conversation with a woman who recently formed a ‘healthy food’ stand cooperative in *Feria del Centro*. She began the cooperative to offer healthier versions of popular Venezuelan foods. To learn the skills, she found out about one of Cecosesola’s free cooking classes, enrolled herself, and then began saving money to start the cooperative. One Christmas, she borrowed an oven and worked hard making bread to save up the necessary resources to purchase her own capital. As quoted earlier, she said, “It is an effort at the beginning—you don’t have money.”³³⁵ Through her own initiative and hard work, she created a cooperative that has now been producing

³²⁹ Interview 11.

³³⁰ Interview 38, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, September 4, 2007.

³³¹ Literal translation: Cooperative ‘Walking Together’

³³² Interview 43.

³³³ *Ibid.*

³³⁴ *Ibid.*

³³⁵ Interview 25.

for five years. Rather than relying on external money, she found innovative ways to find the necessary start-up funds, thereby invoking her own agency.

The same was true for the women's bread cooperative Las Tinajas. The original eight women saved their own money and with a little extra borrowed from the government (500,000 bs, or about \$1,000 in the late 1990s) they bought some land. Most of the founders had originally worked in the fields, cultivating potatoes and coffee, which "was very hard work."³³⁶ Starting the cooperative was a way to improve their quality of life. As one founding member explained, "We earn almost the same here but the work is not as tough."³³⁷ At the beginning, they did everything by hand, but were eventually able to take a loan from Cecosesola to purchase capital. As such, the cooperative has always been a product of their own vision and labor and designed explicitly to improve their lives, even when they have sought outside resources. As the associate stated, "Everything is for your own experience—that is the tradition here."³³⁸

Agency Correlates to Cecosesola's Success

The preceding sections demonstrate the strong presence of both purpose and autonomy on the level of Cecosesola as an organization and on the level of individual participants. My data suggests that these two elements are key in explaining Cecosesola's success in offering its services, fostering worker involvement, and maintaining economic stability. The presence of purpose on an organizational level has insured that Cecosesola subsists and expands solely for the good of the community, thereby minimizing corruption. The cooperative's ability to foster this purpose among individual participants has created a workforce of committed and responsible associates. Purpose has also been the motivating factor behind the cooperative's insistence on economic and political autonomy. Such autonomy has imbedded the cooperative into the community as a symbol of the community learning to help itself. Individual autonomy, as expressed through member initiative, has created community among Cecosesola members and also strengthened the ties of individuals to their external communities through their initiation of new cooperatives and active role in providing Cecosesola's services. Most importantly, as the next section will explore further, agency has stimulated the creation of a unique Cecosesola narrative, the second critical aspect of Cecosesola's success as a cooperative.

³³⁶ Interview 29, Cooperativa las Tinajas associate, Sanares, Venezuela, August 28, 2007.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Ibid.

Narrative

Among Cecosesola associates I observed the presence of a distinct narrative of group identity. The narrative emphasizes principles of solidarity, equality, and community, in essence serving as a language of inclusion for members. It is also the medium for a common expression of Cecosesola's alternative vision of life and the world. Most importantly, the narrative is a form of resistance against highly politicized state narratives. The Cecosesola narrative, which emphasizes political neutrality, contrasts directly with historically manipulated state discourses and offers a powerful, self-defined route for associates. Ultimately, such self-determination through this narrative of resistance empowers the cooperative members to engage with the state narrative and write themselves back into a story from which they have been excluded.

Three aspects define the Cecosesola narrative: its language of inclusion, its cosmic vision of the world and Cecosesola's role in offering alternatives, and its language of political neutrality. Taken together, these aspects blend to form a common discourse and perspective shared by most, if not all, of Cecosesola's associates. As the following analysis of actual member statements will show, this narrative is impressive both for its scope and pervasiveness.

Narrative Element One: Inclusion

The Cecosesola narrative is foremost defined by its emphasis on inclusion. Associates' language is pervaded by references to the inclusive nature of their organization and their behavior corresponds in many ways to the idealism of the actual discourse. Members routinely use the words "solidarity" and "trust" in speaking about their work in the cooperative and always refer to each other as *compañero*, or companion. The following statements characterize the concept of solidarity as expressed through the narrative:

It is important to us that the organization think collectively.³³⁹
 So what has happened with us as Cecosesola? By means of our analysis, we have realized that we have this [Venezuelan tendency for laziness] but we are also supportive. We lean very strongly towards companionship. So on the base of this solidarity, this comradeship, we go forth creating our activities. And

³³⁹ Interview 3.

equally, regarding necessity, transparency. We foment that and are that, the majority.³⁴⁰

Associates speak of themselves as merely one piece in a much greater network of relationships, yet see their own contributions as critical. They describe the collective as necessary not only for the services it provides, but also for the role that it plays in providing support. As one associate described, “My problems are not just my own... We depend upon interpersonal relationships.”³⁴¹ Associates also speak of “trust” as the key factor permitting the success of Cecosesola and the cohesion of the group:

[Trust] is something that you construct over time, not something that you construct in the moment.³⁴²

There is a process of developing trust, of getting to know each other... We need less control if there is trust.³⁴³

It’s distinct because here there is trust. If I leave something here, I can get it later—because we have struggled for this. Conversely, on the street it is wilder; you have to be sharper... Here, it is different. I’m going to stay here. If I lose something, I’ll get it back. It’s different, completely different.³⁴⁴

Members consistently use these words in daily conversation and they form the main topics of the *Reuniones de Gestión*. However, they are not purely discursive elements, but also actively practiced pieces of the narrative. In other words, members attempt to live out the discursive reality that they speak about.

The narrative of inclusion is foremost practiced through group unity and the strength of personal relationships. Cecosesola members grew to associate their own identity as individuals with the identity of the group as a whole. In responding to questions that I asked about their personal lives, they often responded with answers about Cecosesola, suggesting that the Cecosesola narrative minimizes the importance of the individual in favor of the betterment of the group. At one *reunión*, for example, an associate related hearing a fellow associate call the *ferias* “a waste.” Someone else at the *reunión* responded that the

³⁴⁰ Interview 33.

³⁴¹ Interview 3.

³⁴² Interview 18.

³⁴³ Interview 3.

³⁴⁴ Interview 18.

associate should have responded, “Then you are too because you’re a part of *feria*.”³⁴⁵ This simple joke reflects the transformation through which associates begin to conceive of themselves as part of the greater Cecosesola identity. Such common identity is further cemented by the tendency of the associates to speak of their common ownership of Cecosesola, its services, and its capital. As one associate explained, “We capitalized for the construction of this health center that belongs to no one in particular. As we all have it, it belongs to no one in particular, but rather to the entire collective.”³⁴⁶

Through the inclusive narrative and the nature of work at Cecosesola, most of associates’ social and community networks are based in the organization as well. I asked one associate if he had any friends who do not work at Cecosesola, and he responded:

Yes I do, but it’s not the same relationship. It’s not the same trust. We don’t talk the same. Let me tell you something. You go to a party...or to the mall, and you go with a *compañero* from here, and in reality you talk about Cecosesola’s *feria*. Because you’re walking and say, ‘oh this happened to me what can we do...?’ And you spend [the whole time] only talking about Cecosesola. Conversely, with your [other] friend...you talk, but about what happened on the street, [and if you talk about *feria*] they’re not going to understand you...You talk with them but differently, about other things. It’s not the same relationship.³⁴⁷

This quote highlights that a certain element of group identity is coalesced through the act of differentiating Cecosesola members from outsiders. However, this aspect of the narrative is particularly significant primarily for its degree of power. Unlike state narratives, which use ‘otherness’ to create inclusion, the Cecosesola seems less a product of such differentiation. Associates naturally feel greater affinity with other members, but as the quote reveals, they still preserve outside friendships. Inclusiveness, therefore, seems a far more important generative force within the Cecosesola narrative than exclusiveness. This is mirrored through the inclusiveness of inner-group dynamics. I observed no clear friendship groups or cliques among associates. Members ate lunch at slightly different times each day, depending on their current work, and thus also sat with different associates from day to day. Given the rotational nature of *equipos*, members did not distinguish between each other based upon skill, education, or work

³⁴⁵ Interview 36.

³⁴⁶ Interview 33.

³⁴⁷ Interview 18.

position. The same was true between general Cecosesola associates and the producers, as evidenced by the statement: “I don’t know who is producer and who is Cecosesola.”³⁴⁸ The notion of group identity and solidarity extended to all Cecosesola members, no matter their role.

Practice of the narrative of inclusion is also observable through the distribution of power at Cecosesola, as measured by equal access to information, knowledge, and participation. Associates not only speak of absence of hierarchy and the presence of solidarity—these elements are actually practiced. To begin with, associates speak about, and practice, a policy of open access to information. Even as an outsider, I was given access to any information that I asked for, such as budget figures, salary information, and yearly spending. This information was in fact distributed to every person who attended the *Asamblea*. Given that associates belong to flexible *equipos*, such open access was also practiced in situations in which members helped out in *equipos* other than their current *equipo*. An associate in the *Compras*³⁴⁹ *equipo* described that the job “is not exclusive to the *compañeros* that are here. Any *compañero* can bring information.”³⁵⁰

I also identified active protection of the non-hierarchical power structure through the Cecosesola value of equal access to knowledge and decision-making.³⁵¹ To insure that all associates have an equal right to education, Cecosesola built the *Escuela Cooperativa “Rosario Arjona,”* or the Cooperative School, a building where the majority of *reuniones* take place, as well as related educational events. I observed the process of group decision-making and education on a daily basis. Special *reuniones*, *los Reuniones de los Chamos*, occur weekly to involve and educate new members. The role that these *reuniones* play in distributing power and creating inclusion was clear—when asking an associate to leave, for example, something that does sometimes occur at Cecosesola, the whole group participates in the discussion and makes the decision. During a *reunión* that involved a discussion of this process, one associate said, “When we ask people to leave, we must look beyond just what’s happening—the concrete—and see the moment that we are living in—why is a *compañero* behaving this way?”³⁵² This statement sheds light on the inclusive nature of Cecosesola’s decision-making, as well as the absence of harsh power imbalances.

³⁴⁸ Interview 49.

³⁴⁹ Cecosesola’s ‘Purchasing’ *equipo*.

³⁵⁰ Interview 7.

³⁵¹ Interview 49.

³⁵² Interview 23, Cecosesola associate, Net Revenue Meeting, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 27, 2007.

Member participation further contributed to the practice of a non-hierarchical structure. Though some Cecosesola members may by choice participate less than others, all in all I witnessed high member participation in *reunions*. Numerous members made statements about the difficulty of learning how to self-manage when they first began their work at Cecosesola or about the importance of participation.³⁵³ For example, several *reuniones* that I attended explicitly focused on the issue of involving associates who have lower rates of participation. At one such *reunión*, members discussed an affiliated cooperative, Cooperativa el Triunfo, which they said was having troubles with individualists and also lack of trust and communication. One associate stated, “This could happen here and be our problem too, so we need to help, be involved.” Another added, “So, how do you build trust and encourage people to participate?”³⁵⁴ On a different occasion, members discussed the importance of inclusion and equal power between Cecosesola and other cooperatives, emphasizing that Cecosesola still has much to learn from the experiences of other cooperatives.³⁵⁵ A member explained, “Cecosesola is not the owner of the cooperative movement. The cooperatives are self-managed.”³⁵⁶ As these examples suggest, the narrative of inclusion as regards equal power and solidarity pervaded nearly all communication at Cecosesola—and through the mere act of discussing inclusion, members in fact increased their own practice of inclusion.

Narrative Element Two: Alternative World Vision

The Cecosesola narrative also furthers an alternative vision of the world, allowing members to re-envision their history and future as Venezuelans and global citizens. In contrast to past state narratives, which imposed external explanations for poverty and unequal power arrangements, the Cecosesola narrative allows members to create their own group explanation for poor resource management and their historic exclusion. This narrative exists both discursively, on the level of speech between associates and as main themes during *reuniones* and educational events, and also in the form of Cecosesola’s established narration about itself as a group. Cecosesola has self-published one book, *Construyendo una Convivencia Harmónica*, and is in the process of finishing a second

³⁵³ “It was hard getting used to not being told what to do” (Interview 35). “There is no boss to say where to go next. You go where there is need, where you can help” (Interview 39). “If the majority [of associates] understand and participate, it is very hard for it to fail” (Interview 41).

³⁵⁴ Interview 32.

³⁵⁵ “It’s not that we’re going to teach everything, but rather, what can we do? Because in reality, we don’t know everything. Cecosesola doesn’t know everything. Rather that we also learn from other things” (Interview 18).

³⁵⁶ Interview 41.

(as of September 2007). These books, outlined in *reuniones* and written by many different associates, present the formalized Cecosesola narrative. The book is not considered complete until every associate has reviewed and approved it. The first book discusses Cecosesola's account of global patriarchy and individualism, the tendencies of the Venezuelan people, and the group's historical process of attempting to create a new way for human beings to live and interact. The organization also possesses a Cooperative Video Team, or ECT Television, which members developed to allow Cecosesola to document its own activities. The goal of the team's production is to aid the organization in evaluating itself "in retrospect" and to also document "the culture of the *pueblo*."³⁵⁷ With these two mediums, Cecosesola's narrative can be solidified and also propagated. The first aspect of this narrative, which the book and associates relate similarly, explains why Venezuela has problems of sustainable change and development. According to the written and oral Cecosesola narrative, Venezuelan culture "is a culture of *facilismo*."³⁵⁸ A Venezuelan saying... is 'if work produced richness, the donkey would have a chick and a cow.' More than Colombians and other cultures, Venezuelans would rather sit and not work."³⁵⁹ Within this narrative, associates describe Venezuelans as culturally disinclined to hard work. Members explain these tendencies based upon the lifestyles of their early ancestors. The following narration by one associate captures the Cecosesola narrative's explanation for the current state of the Venezuelan people:

In our daily reflections, we have been describing who we are culturally, as a *pueblo*... Our ancestors were Caribbean, very folkloric. So... when there is this easy money—[we spend it on] the beach, these sorts of things, because we don't have this sense of foresight, we don't accumulate—we enjoy it... Our Caribbean ancestry, it's a thing of joy, of permanent celebration... So, when there is this easy money, we squander it... We don't have the sense to save for tomorrow. Rather we live day by day. And for this reason, when there is a lot of cash, instead of dedicating myself to work, I enjoy myself... This is a characteristic that we have as a *pueblo*.³⁶⁰

But equally, like happy and easy-going people, we also have this aspect of being gatherers. It is a way of being. Our ancestors, the indigenous people, did not have the problem of work... They simply lived life... We call it the *Viveza*

³⁵⁷ Interview 3.

³⁵⁸ In English, 'wanting to get things done with the least effort or work possible.'

³⁵⁹ Interview 11.

³⁶⁰ Interview 33.

Criolla,³⁶¹ and we also look for easy money, to obtain benefits without working very much.³⁶²

This narrative captures the degree to which Cecosesola associates have crafted a common mythical history of Venezuela's past. Members were quick to narrate the results of this ancestral heritage on the modern Venezuela. According to one member, in Venezuela someone is called a *pendejo*, or jerk, if he or she does not take any money when it is available to give to his or her family. The associate told the story of a distraught woman who approached him during *feria* because she had dropped 150,000.00 bs (about US \$70.00), her money to buy food for the entire week. A little while later, a different shopper approached the associate and said that he had found the money. However, he insisted upon remaining anonymous because he did not want to be called a *pendejo* for not having stolen the cash.³⁶³ Other associates made similar statements about Venezuelan tendencies:

The Venezuelan will take money to spend in a second. The cultural tendency is to spend the money right away.³⁶⁴

...Here [in Venezuela], capitalism functions a bit differently. It's more wild, fierce...immediate, more of today.³⁶⁵

And that was the culture of us Venezuelans, to become more cunning.³⁶⁶

Given that associates see these tendencies as the main barriers to overcoming poverty, exclusion, and hierarchies of power in Venezuela, they narrate frequently that the role of the cooperative is to attempt to learn about and suppress these barriers to cooperation. According to one associate:

Paying attention to who we are culturally is an element permanently present in our analysis... Thus when there is a *compañero* in which this part comes out, we try to make it evident, so that it can be weaker every time. We don't cure it. Neither are we curing those who participate here. Rather, upon revealing it, we try to lessen the impact that it has among us. For this reason, we have [been able to] maintain ourselves. And for this reason, we have developed.³⁶⁷

³⁶¹ In English, the "Creole Vivacity" or "Creole tendencies."

³⁶² Interview 33.

³⁶³ Interview 11.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Interview 18.

³⁶⁷ Interview 33.

Through this narrative, Cecosesola associates create their own explanation for the economic deficiencies of their families and neighbors and also design their own solutions. Instead of accepting the explanations of state narratives for Venezuelan poverty, or state promises for looming change, the Cecosesola narrative empower associates to change their own lives and communities.

As part of their process to overcome ‘the Venezuelan tendencies,’ the second aspect of the Cecosesola narrative asserts that the cooperative is ‘transforming the world’ through its development of a unique cooperative model of human relations. As one associate explained, “In Latin American there is a problem of mistrust. If all of us construct together, we resolve the problems of many people.”³⁶⁸ Cecosesola associates believe that the activities of their organization represent an evolution of humanity towards a less hierarchical, less consumption-oriented society. The group narrative describes Cecosesola as a symbol of change and innovation: through its flexible organization and power distribution, they see themselves as contributing to the transformation of the world. The following narrative epitomizes the Cecosesola perspective of its own resistance through flexibility:

Another thing that we have [in Venezuela is] this hierarchy. And that is something we have assumed from the civilization, the occidental culture, that of hierarchy, the horizontal. Thus, we have been trying to break this scheme. We are not pyramidal, horizontal, or vertical, or the contrary of all this, because then we would still be static. What we have proposed is that we are an organization in movement. . . . And that gives us knowledge, it gives us a wider perspective, it gives us participation. Because if we are static, well here you are and here you stay. . . . An organization like ours has to be flexible, open, non hierarchical—information is a fundamental element. So we try to produce it, spread it, look for it, [and] demand it. The presence of all of these elements allows us to function. Have you been here on Thursdays when they are stocking *feria*? Until everything appears. . . everything looks like chaos. And then you get up Fridays and everything is ordered, and you see everyone in their places, developing, serving, attending.³⁶⁹

This narrative expresses the Cecosesola vision of its own innovation and the importance of its non-rigid organizational structure. Through embracing chaos, associates find their own order. With this narrative, associates are in fact defining independent group values for what development, organization, and progress signify, rather than being limited to the meanings of state narratives. As one

³⁶⁸ Interview 3.

³⁶⁹ Interview 33.

associate described, “We are an organization in movement. Who knows where we will end up?”³⁷⁰

The language of world transformation confirms the agency of the group—thereby writing it back into the narrative of nation. In this manner, the narrative is a form of resistance for historically marginalized associates:

One of our preoccupations is this: how to amplify in the rest of the *compañeros* a vision of what we are doing...and the importance of what we are doing. I feel that we are giving a service to the transformation of the world, which is the rapid wealth, the extraction of the greatest benefit possible from everything around us. Here we propose a relationship of respect, of love for others and for oneself. And I feel that the change of relations has been one of the keys that has permitted us to maintain ourselves and develop as a community organization.³⁷¹

Not only do Cecosesola associates gain ownership over their own livelihoods, they come to assume a vision that extends to the transformation of others within their society and the world. One associate described the importance of this perspective in relation to the Law of Technology and Education that the cooperative is currently attempting to bypass. According to the associate, several members are writing a report “to clarify what we are doing in the contribution of this science and technology. [Cecosesola] is not just making money. No—it is creating knowledge, a distinct vision of the country and of the world.”³⁷² The following statements highlight the role of transformation in the Cecosesola narrative:

We are not just a labor center... We try to learn, to create a better society.³⁷³

[I]t is more than my transformation. In the moment that I as a person start to act and think differently, then I am transforming myself and...the world.³⁷⁴

Through the narrative of world transformation, associates gain power and hope regarding their own lives and their place in the world. It allows them to reposition themselves within their communities and the Venezuelan state and

³⁷⁰ Interview 53, cooperative associates (new cooperative), Carora, Venezuela, September 8, 2007.

³⁷¹ Interview 33.

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Interview 43.

³⁷⁴ Interview 33.

also ties them together as a community with a common lived history. As one associate narrated:

What has happened with us is that the experience with transport—everything it did to us, and we passed through to here with this experience—it gave us a lived experience... So, we learned a way to analyze our situations, and with that as a base, how to go forth...assuming responsibility. And the decisions about what happens with politics, what happens with those that want to take advantage.³⁷⁵

Associates narrate about the group experience as though it were their own, thus identifying their own contributions as important: “We’ve come from a social system constructing a road to the social, the collective.”³⁷⁶ As the narrative suggests, they also gain a sense of pride about the accomplishments of the organization, in essence assuming a language of the organization’s, and their own, uniqueness. As one associate explained, “From a global perspective, I don’t think there is anyone else who has achieved what we have.”³⁷⁷ The Cecosesola narrative thus also possesses a language of pride and accomplishment for what it has contributed to the world. The narrative embraces the uniqueness of the organization’s transformation—“It is not easy to systematize what we have done...the system has to be here, in the moment of the people”³⁷⁸—as well as its uniqueness from non-cooperative organizations—“We must remember that they do not all speak the same language. [The cooperative] is a distinct way of seeing the world.”³⁷⁹ The narrative also, in some cases, distinguishes Cecosesola from other cooperatives, namely state-sponsored cooperatives: “Other cooperatives are not like this, even though they are legalized...we have to be critical.”³⁸⁰

Ultimately, this narrative gives associates the power to redefine themselves as Venezuelans and to engage with a historically distant and controlling state. As one associate narrated, through being in a cooperative, “You learn so much...you develop your own personality, your own identity as Venezuelan.”³⁸¹ Through the purpose and initiative that associates assume through their work at Cecosesola, and their inclusion in the powerful Cecosesola narrative of world transformation, associates begin in turn to create new definitions for themselves within

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Interview 48, cooperative associates, Regional Meeting of Cooperatives, Carora, Venezuela, September 7, 2007.

³⁷⁷ Interview 40.

³⁷⁸ Interview 41.

³⁷⁹ Interview 48.

³⁸⁰ Interview 26.

³⁸¹ Interview 39.

Venezuelan society. Rather than subject to dominant discourses that have historically narrated about the barbarity of the *pueblo*, the Cecosesola narrative gives associates a route for creating new definitions and value systems for themselves as cooperative members and integral pieces of Cecosesola. This, in turn, gives members the power to engage with the Venezuelan state and the national narrative.

Narrative Element Three: Political Neutrality

By virtue of the two elements discussed previously, Cecosesola also possesses a distinctly apolitical group narrative. By refusing to depend upon, or affiliate itself with, the state or any political facet, the cooperative asserts itself autonomously and resists previous state narratives. Associates defend Cecosesola's political neutrality, and my personal observations support these claims. The cooperative was devoid of political paraphernalia, and *reuniones* never presented a particular political slant. According to associates:

We don't take into account anything religious or political.³⁸²

We have maintained the principle of political neutrality. Inside of the cooperative we do not discuss these things. Outside of the cooperative anyone can say what they want.³⁸³

My conversations with members reflected this tolerance. Members seemed open to expressing either personal favor or dislike of Chávez,³⁸⁴ but, for the most part, expressed political indifference, as I will discuss in more depth later. Although associates defended Cecosesola's political neutrality, they did not dissociate themselves entirely from political ideologies. While refusing to align the cooperative explicitly with any one party or leader, they did not disregard the values or ideas behind certain ideologies, for example, the Bolivarian Revolution and socialism. Members remarked:

We don't adopt the form of the red shirt, the slogans...but that is what we are inside.³⁸⁵

We don't call what we are socialism. We are cooperative. But when you try to see what socialism signifies, the equality...we've had all of that for a long

³⁸² Interview 3.

³⁸³ Interview 52.

³⁸⁴ For example, "I am *anti-Chavista*" (Interview 20).

³⁸⁵ Interview 11.

time... The problem with socialism is all of the parties. The parties are very capitalistic.³⁸⁶

By resisting categorization or affiliation, however, the cooperative maintains autonomy from political influences and, therefore, its ability to continue asserting its own narrative.

With political neutrality as a basis for the group narrative, the organization is able to function independently from politics and state intervention. During times of political upheaval, Cecosesola has continued to offer its services without interruption:

We're not pro or anti Chávez. We have simply established that they leave us space, that they let us work, that they allow us to be... All of these things that we have experienced, lootings, before Chávez, after the strike when the anti-Chávez groups stopped economic activity in the country, we continued functioning. We opened as usual on Friday, Saturday, [and] Sunday. Similarly, when Chávez had not yet assumed power, when there was violence, looting, we still opened the same, every day. When there was the *Caracazo* we opened every day. The country was even taken militarily, and we went out to conduct our economic activity.³⁸⁷

Additionally, even though new administrations no doubt usher in new complications for the cooperative, members assert that their actual lives have continued virtually unaffected. I asked an associate if the Bolivarian Revolution had impacted his personal life and he responded, "I wouldn't say so. It has continued normally. It has not affected me right now. But I would say that it would affect someone who was in politics... But us as an organization, I don't think so."³⁸⁸ In this way, Cecosesola's narrative of political neutrality serves as a language of preservation and stability in the context of a volatile state. The narrative is a vehicle for the cooperative's services, protecting it from the outside political turmoil and insulating the community in a space where it can be foremost concerned with its own needs. As one associate stated, "We see life in a different way because we are here at Cecosesola. But we do not have time to keep up on the news."³⁸⁹ Rather than being defined primarily by their identity as Venezuelan, an identity highly tied to state narratives and a politicized state

³⁸⁶ Interview 22, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, August 27, 2007.

³⁸⁷ Interview 33.

³⁸⁸ Interview 18.

³⁸⁹ Interview 20.

agenda, members draw meaning from their identity as part of their community and the cooperative.³⁹⁰

As a result, members overwhelmingly demonstrated an ability to ‘see both sides’ of political issues. Despite the intense polarization of popular opinion over Chávez (so much so that before reaching Cecosesola, I had never before spoken with a Venezuelan who did not identify as “*Chavista*’ or ‘*Con la oposición*’) most Cecosesola members spoke of both the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ aspects of Chávez’s administration and Revolution. Members stated:

What don’t I like [about Chávez]? In reality, I don’t like the president’s manner of being, but at least he wants to do things well. I don’t know. In reality, I don’t have any affinity with the president or with the opposition. It’s good that they have affected Venezuela as they have. But there are things that they do well, other things that are not...³⁹¹

The government has both good and bad aspects...some things that they impose, I don’t like.³⁹²

As these statements reveal, Cecosesola members possess the ability to make reflective judgments about politics and, generally, refrain from taking sides. The narrative rather expresses a preference for transforming the world and themselves, however that may be possible. Members recognize their own participation in the structure of the state as inevitable, but see their own agency as a tool for creating alternatives to that structure:

Thus we are not anticapitalist, we are not anti-Chávez, we’re not against the other because it is not our position to give preference to someone, but rather for the construction of something distinct, new... [W]e say that the issue with capitalism is not a problem of storage, of creating, of taking from others, but rather that it a manner of how people relate...The idea is how to continue transforming ourselves... We don’t position ourselves as ‘anti’ because we also ‘are.’ In the background, we are them. So you are going to permanently have a confrontation with the other, and we’re not interested in confrontation, but rather in finding ourselves.³⁹³

³⁹⁰ For example, upon being asked what it means to be born in Venezuela, an associate responded, “To have been born in Venezuela? I’ve never thought about it. In reality I don’t know. The family. More than anything the family, to be familiar with Venezuela” (Interview 18). Rather than tying his identity to the notion of state and country, he referred first to his family.

³⁹¹ Interview 18.

³⁹² Interview 19.

³⁹³ Interview 33.

In essence, the Cecosesola narrative positions the cooperative external to the state narrative and the state-constructed universe of nationalism. Through its distinct narrative, members assert their own vision of transformation as an alternative to the external Venezuelan structure and state narrative. Though the cooperative recognizes changes at the state level, it attempts to maintain its neutral perspective while making the necessary modifications to be able to continue furthering its goals. During the *Reuniones de Gestión*, which often became mediums for discussions about how the cooperative should approach Chávez's new laws and programs, members frequently made statements such as: "We should not say that the change is good or bad, but use our flexibility to adapt"³⁹⁴ and "It is not that things are changing to be worse afterwards, but that things are changing and we need to adapt."³⁹⁵ In this way, through political neutrality, the Cecosesola narrative encourages a new form of resistance against state narratives.

Cecosesola Narrative: Generator of Civil Society

The de-politicized Cecosesola narrative of world transformation allows members to reposition themselves as autonomous beings to state definitions and, as a result, they gain the necessary power to be able to engage with the state as an external force. In essence, the narrative contributes to the construction of a new civil society as the cooperative becomes able to critique, collaborate with, and make demands of, a Venezuelan state that was previously inaccessible. Through these new interactions, Cecosesola defines its own meaning of politics, thereby rejecting the language of the state. As one associate asserted, "We are going to construct another world. That is *our* politics."³⁹⁶

The first aspect of Cecosesola's generation of civil society is its critique or questioning of state behavior and laws. By monitoring state actions and educating itself about new laws, the cooperative is engaging with the state and thereby asserting itself as a separate presence. Associates meet weekly for the explicit purpose of discussing how such laws "will affect us, Cecosesola. If they affect us. What we can, what we can't do, all of that."³⁹⁷ During these *reuniones*, they evaluate the effectiveness of the state ("Little by little we can make a change; but not tomorrow like the government wants"³⁹⁸) and often criticize state proposals,

³⁹⁴ Interview 23.

³⁹⁵ Interview 26.

³⁹⁶ Interview 40.

³⁹⁷ Interview 18.

³⁹⁸ Interview 40.

such as Chávez's plan for Communal Councils, which would govern cooperatives and community activities:

The Communal Councils cannot be a manner to transfer resources, but a medium to change our conception of community.³⁹⁹

This is an idea someone came up with in a classroom... We're trying to make contact with people in that classroom to share our experience.⁴⁰⁰

Second, as the last statement shows, Cecosesola members then take the next steps, which are to collaborate with the state to share their knowledge and, if necessary, make demands to reach the desired outcomes. Members extend their obligation to participate within the cooperative to an obligation to participate on the level of nation. As one member stated, "If we don't participate within the law, capitalistic elements remain."⁴⁰¹

I witnessed processes of both collaboration and demand between Cecosesola and the state. In August 2007, Cecosesola began organizing a response to state proposals which would create new cooperative laws (among others) and amend the constitution. Observing that these changes could have huge ramifications on Cecosesola's ability to provide certain services, self-govern, and own communal property, Cecosesola began engaging with other, similarly-concerned cooperatives in a series of meetings all over the country. According to attendees, "The goal of these meetings is so that we can say 'a good part of the cooperative movement thinks this way about the new laws.' ... Reflecting about our cooperative life, we can elaborate criteria to have an opinion."⁴⁰² During the meetings in Corora, Venezuela, cooperative members critiqued government proposals...

The law takes a little from France, a little from Argentina... we want it to take into account the cooperative activity [that is] taking place across the country.⁴⁰³

...asserted their right to influence and determine the content of the laws...

No law should be outside the realm of public participation.⁴⁰⁴

³⁹⁹ Interview 51, cooperative associates, Regional Meeting of Cooperatives, Carora, Venezuela, 8 September 2007.

⁴⁰⁰ Interview 11.

⁴⁰¹ Interview 4, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, 23 August 2007.

⁴⁰² Interview 48.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

I think that it is very important that the cooperative movement is recognized so that the norms there correspond with the norms of the cooperatives law.⁴⁰⁵
 ...crafted an alternative proposal...

Thus, Cecosesola supports the creation of an Organic Law that would protect coops from these other laws, instead holding them to a separate set of criteria specific to the coop experience.⁴⁰⁶

...and reinforced their political autonomy and ability to have their movement's opinions headed:

Our cooperative movement has not been manipulated by anyone.⁴⁰⁷

One thing that we have is experiences. We have sweated, each one of us in our own region...we have also had political experience.⁴⁰⁸

If we have opinions...they will continue penetrating and appear in law⁴⁰⁹

Laws, deputies change. They are temporary. [We are not].⁴¹⁰

Through this process of organizing meetings, building a coalition of forces, and crafting a proposal, Cecosesola asserted its ability to collaborate with the state,⁴¹¹ thereby generating a stronger civil society.

Third, on other occasions, Cecosesola acts directly to make demands of the state. As discussed previously, Cecosesola is in the process (as of February 2008) of attempting to receive an exemption from the Law of Technology and Education tax. To receive the exemption, they are writing a report to argue the validity of their current activities as processes of education and formation.⁴¹² In the report, they argue that "just how a cooperative organizes itself, arranges its seats, could

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Interview 5.

⁴⁰⁷ Interview 48.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ "Now, right at this time, with the constitutional reform and with the intention to create a new cooperative law, here there has not been so much participation, though we are looking for it and it has not been denied. It's possible that we are going to be able to make several contributions" (Interview 37).

⁴¹² Interview 33.

come from a book.”⁴¹³ Thus, Cecosesola itself could arguably be creating innovation through the essential elements of its daily functioning. Though this demand has not been resolved as of this writing, Cecosesola has previously received the desired outcome from its interactions with the state. When Chávez first came to power, Cecosesola worked closely with policy makers to insure that its experience with cooperative development was reflected in the Special Law of Cooperatives that Chávez was modifying. Members described:

We as a cooperative movement had a very active participation in that. On the basis of our experience, we could make various contributions in certain articles. And they were taken into account. We did well...I would say that we have worked well with the government because we are not opposed, no? Rather that we are constructing a space where we all have life and we have established this also in terms of the transformation of society.⁴¹⁴

A national consensus regarding the proposals [was brought to the Assembly]. All of the articles that had been proposed [by the cooperatives] were included in the Constitution.⁴¹⁵

The opinion of the movement was taken into account... The majority of the articles in the cooperative law were what we had proposed.⁴¹⁶

The articles in the Constitution about cooperatives were written up by our very own cooperative movement in 1998. And in the current cooperative law, in good measure they were also compiled by the cooperative movement.⁴¹⁷

As this example highlights, collaboration with the state allows Cecosesola to influence national decisions and shape Venezuelan laws. To a certain degree, the state headed Cecosesola's recommendations for the Special Law of Cooperatives and included them in the final legal text. Essentially, Cecosesola succeeded in infusing its own narrative into the state narrative.

In conclusion, this section has demonstrated that through relationships of trust and solidarity, Cecosesola has become the source of a new community-based narrative of resistance. By being both independently formed and de-politicized, this narrative provides a direct alternative to passive acceptance of dominant state narratives, acting as a medium through which associates can separate themselves

⁴¹³ Interview 23.

⁴¹⁴ Interview 18.

⁴¹⁵ Interview 48.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

⁴¹⁷ Interview 37.

from a nation-centric world cosmology. Rather than waiting for the state to fulfill promises or construct an inclusive society, the narrative imbues members with the power to take agency over their own lives and the circumstances surrounding their historic exclusion, thereby opposing an oppressive Venezuelan structure. Such agency allows Cecosesola members to re-engage with the state on their own terms, for the fulfillment of their own social visions. Engagement empowers the organization, and its community, as separate and independent forces from the state, thereby generating a stronger civil society. As a result, the narrative not only forms the basis of Cecosesola's success—fomenting group identity—it also empowers historically disenfranchised members to write themselves into the idea of nation. As my contrast between Cecosesola and Chávez's cooperatives will show, without an independent narrative founded on a group's own agency, it is very difficult for a cooperative to ever spur true citizen mobilization.

VI. The Failure of Chavez's Cooperatives

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Cecosesola's fiscal year-end meeting (2007), which all 300 members are expected to attend. At this meeting, members reach a consensus on how to distribute the net profits of the previous year and make other significant decisions for the coming term. Open, consensus-based meetings such as these reinforce Cecosesola's participatory, non-hierarchical organizational structure.

As my discussion of national narratives suggest, trying to understand the failure of social programs during past Venezuelan administrations would not yield very interesting explanations. Each successive government brought a new discursive story to the notion of statehood, but very little changed regarding Venezuelan patterns of exclusion and the historical consolidation of power among the elite. Under these circumstances, state social programs, in retrospect, stand out as symbolic, rather than revolutionary, gestures to provoke social restructuring, and their failures are not resoundingly surprising.

Chávez's ascendancy and implementation of the Bolivarian Revolution, conversely, has been almost unilaterally popularized as an astounding 'break from the past' and as a symbol of Latin America's 'leftward' turn (though whether this is a positive or negative change is hotly disputed). What few scholars debate is that Chávez, more than any other Venezuelan (or even regional) president, speaks directly to excluded populations in an effort to reshape Venezuela's history of power domination. In this context, the failure of his cooperatives to even begin this process—according to him, they still reproduced a capitalistic mentality⁴¹⁸—is far more puzzling.

Though it is still early to deeply assess Chávez's long-term effects on the country, Cecosesola's uniquely successful cooperative experience is a powerful lens to begin understanding the perceived failure⁴¹⁹ of the cooperative program. The importance of agency and narrative in Cecosesola's development suggests that these are important measures to begin with in analyzing the program. Though other factors, yet unknown, may also contribute to the failure, what I will show to be a strong absence of both agency and narrative among Chávez's cooperatives cannot be ignored. Cecosesola's experience with failed cooperatives in the past, which also lacked these elements, suggests the further applicability of the

⁴¹⁸ As one Cecosesola member explained, "Now, Chávez is saying that all cooperatives are capitalistic, how he will make communal councils in the new constitution, which the new government will regulate..." (Interview 11). All Cecosesola associates in the study agreed, expressing the similar perspective that: "The [new] cooperatives are not organizations that lead to socialism. We agree with him. The cooperatives that he has promoted are very capitalistic" (Interview 22).

⁴¹⁹ I say 'perceived' because no studies, to my knowledge, have yet analyzed the nature of the program's failure. Beyond basic statistics that show a large rate of inactivity among the new cooperatives, no greater analytic framework yet exists. My own analysis of the program's failure must thus rest upon Chávez's own indictment, the impression of Cecosesola cooperative members (who are deeply imbedded in the national cooperative movement), and my own observations (or *lack of* contact with newer cooperatives, which were difficult to find). The limits of this study prevented me from conducting a comparative research study among some of the newer cooperatives. However, given Chávez's own impression of the failure, it seems natural to assume that Cecosesola's experience, and the comments of Cecosesola members, can provide one means of beginning to understand both the *meaning* and *causes* of Chávez's indictment of the program.

measures of agency and narrative in understanding the success, or failure, of cooperatives.

State Money, State Idea: The Absence of Agency

Despite Chávez's high popular support, my research suggests that his cooperative program relied upon, and provoked, little agency among the founders of the new cooperatives. The program's design lacked a method for evaluating individuals' purpose for forming cooperatives and also nullified the need for individuals to exert initiative in the formation or execution of their cooperatives. As such, the cooperatives could neither become integral pieces of their surrounding communities nor imbue community members and associates with new social autonomy.

Lack of Initiative. To begin with, the state awarded money to newly formed cooperatives based on very limited criteria—namely, the presence of a minimum of five associates and communal ownership of the organization. Though the program mandated that associates make decisions democratically, there was no mechanism for monitoring cooperatives once they were founded. In essence, though the state endeavored to create cooperatives, it had no way to insure that new members were in fact forming such organizations. Instead, the easy access to start-up money generated the mentality that “if there's money, let's legalize ourselves” because the government is providing the money.⁴²⁰ Though previous Venezuelan administrations supported cooperatives, they did so very distinctly. According to one Cecosesola associate:

It wasn't so very difficult [to get government money in the past]. The only thing is that it wasn't that much money, and more importantly it was a product of cooperatives that surged from their own effort rather than from the financial help of the state.⁴²¹

Thus, the ease of funding in Chávez's program limited the need for associates to exercise effort in the formation of their cooperatives:

Well, there is a *compañero* from Cooperativa la Alianza who says that money does not do work. So, neither does a project. People are the ones who work. Thus, when there is a lot of money, and if the money is easy, this does not ensure that there is going to be a successful cooperative. And the example has

⁴²⁰ Interview 5.

⁴²¹ Interview 37.

been that many cooperatives with very good projects from a technical standpoint, and with a lot of money, have not begun to work or have lost the money.⁴²²

As the last quote highlights, it is the presence of *lucha* that permits associates to gain ownership over their organization and the experience self-formation. Without the need to work hard to garner their own funding, the cooperatives were founded on the spirit of dependency that they were designed to combat. As such, the importance of the relationship with the government undermined, from the very beginning, the autonomy of the cooperatives.

Many of the new cooperatives may applaud [the new proposed reforms], because we know who it comes from (Chávez). The problem is that [these] cooperatives are not autonomous.⁴²³

The people beginning the cooperatives also have little experience and, essentially, do not know what they are doing. Because they begin with government money, the individuals are not as invested in their project or as responsible.⁴²⁴

Once the initial capital money was exhausted, many of the cooperatives disintegrated. An associate explained, “Chávez is not going to go back to the cooperatives that he has made. They’re over there lost, asking that he give them more money. And I don’t think that this is going to happen.”⁴²⁵ In essence, a new relationship of dependency on the government had been forged.

Not only did the program minimize agency, it also made it impossible to distinguish between differing motives for creating the cooperatives. Cecosesola members pointed out that this system made desire for money associates’ real purpose in forming cooperatives:

New cooperatives disappear fast because there is no integration and they just want the money.⁴²⁶

The government’s error is making people organize for money—then that’s the reason they organize.⁴²⁷

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Interview 48.

⁴²⁴ Interview 10.

⁴²⁵ Interview 18.

⁴²⁶ Interview 25.

⁴²⁷ Interview 51.

Cecososola associates also criticized the program for its failure to consider typical Venezuelan cultural tendencies regarding access to money:

This program that the government made to throw money to the streets doesn't work. A very small percentage of these cooperatives work. Most of them fail. The Venezuelan will take money to spend in a second. The cultural tendency is to spend the money right away.⁴²⁸

It's a problem with how they conceived of the program... Here, capitalism functions a bit differently. It's more wild, fierce... immediate, more of today... Thus, giving start up money to these new cooperatives is largely unsuccessful because the tendency is to snatch up the money and spend it, without a thought to the true purpose of the venture.⁴²⁹

In other cases, the absence of need for associates to demonstrate true initiative permitted the growth of corruption and the establishment of cooperatives as a way to bypass new worker protection laws:

Five people can legalize themselves as a cooperative. After three months, a worker becomes an associate. Thus, those in power can get new workers every three months so that these individuals do not become associates (and therefore receive all the health protections they would then deserve).⁴³⁰

Without the need for individuals to express true initiative towards creating a cooperative, the program could never actually succeed in creating true cooperatives. Rather than developing ideas based upon their own needs, struggling to actualize them, and turning to outside aid only in moments of true need or to enhance a service already developed through *lucha*—a process that I have identified as key in Cecososola's success—Chávez's program reversed this process, providing easy aid and support to individuals with underdeveloped needs and projects. The program offered cooperatives as solutions to poorly defined problems—and to the very problems that could be best solved by community-initiated solutions.

Chávez's program is not the first attempt by a Venezuelan government to create community programs to solve issues of poverty and social exclusion. The failure of the other *cooperativas centrales* and their *feria* systems can also be linked to the lack of initiative and autonomy required by the state programs. Though

⁴²⁸ Interview 11.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

⁴³⁰ Interview 5.

Cecosesola was one of the first central cooperatives, in the 1980s the success of the *feria* system began to draw government attention. Thus, it began contributing money to *centrales* all over the country to encourage them to create *ferias*. Cecosesola aided in the creation of a national cooperative center, CECONAVE (*Central Cooperativa Nacional de Venezuela*), which coordinated these efforts and what eventually came to number 300 *ferias*.⁴³¹ Cecosesola acted as a central distributor for produce that was sent to other *centrales* for their own *ferias*. However, at a certain point, the *centrales* and the *ferias* began to experience internal problems:

There came a time in which we became very libertine. That we had very fixed norms. We didn't change... So as a result of this libertine characteristic, the rules were not followed, and there came a time in which we sent the merchandise there, but the money never arrived here...⁴³²

Cecosesola members associate the presence of government funding with the failure of the other *ferias*. Rather than expressions of community initiatives, the state both created and implemented *ferias* in other communities. In essence, like Chávez's cooperative program, it was initiated by money, not individuals. As a result, "The other *ferias* became purely... a commercial relationship, and this is what led them to deteriorate and, of course, to come to an end."⁴³³ Thus, the direct absence of initiative contributed to the failure of the other 300 *ferias* and, in most cases, the other *centrales* as well. Central Portuguesa, for example, accepted government loans but then began to miss payments because "the community did not contribute."⁴³⁴ The *central* eventually collapsed, though some of its cooperatives still exist. The comparison of this project to the current program therefore lends a historical understanding to the cause of the current failure:

What has happened right now with this government program, with the cooperatives, is that people are organizing to receive certain royalties. It is not an activity that they have achieved [through *lucha*], that gives them formation... [or] is demanding; rather, they have organized in *lucha* for certain royalties and that's it. For this reason, there are not those values there, being

⁴³¹ "[The government] contributed money to other central [cooperatives] so that they would make *ferias*. And [with] these contributions... we succeeded in making a national center, which grouped all of the centers in different states, and it was called Ceconave... There were... 300 *ferias* in the whole country..." (Interview 33).

⁴³² Interview 33.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁴ Interview 41.

sowed...developed... Today they are receiving these royalties, without any effort, [just like] the *centrales* received the royalties without much effort.⁴³⁵

This additional example suggests that autonomy and initiative not only contribute to the success of cooperative development, as in Cecosesola's case, but can also explain its failure when they are absent. In this way, autonomy seems to be a clear factor in understanding the failure of Chávez's cooperative program, despite its stated goal to stimulate the power and involvement of the community. Without requiring that individuals struggle or create their own solutions, the program removed the need for individuals to exercise their own power or develop the resources of their own community. As Cecosesola's experience demonstrates, the community's effort to fulfill a goal autonomously is key to crafting strong community bonds and stimulating individual and group agency.

Lack of Community Purpose. The absence of a need for individual or group initiative, which made money and personal gain the core motivating factors for the creation of the cooperatives, meant that the cooperatives could never emerge as direct responses to needs experienced by their respective communities. In contrast to Cecosesola and its affiliated cooperatives, which emerged because of unsatisfied needs in their communities, the presence of easy funding and the promotion of Chávez's program in many cases blocked the cooperatives from surging as direct community expressions. As such, most were founded without a sense of purpose any greater than the well being of the associates themselves. Cecosesola members identified this as a key point of failure among the government cooperatives:

The new government cooperatives are not developing for the well-being of communities, but rather because people have easy access to money to create person gain, and for this reason they fail to become anything more but capitalistic ventures.⁴³⁶

Well, these cooperatives, the government financed them, right. And there are many people who in reality do not understand what a cooperative is... Many people take advantage. They are not there to process something, but rather to see what they can get for themselves. The government finances them, [so] they don't have to worry. There's no concern.⁴³⁷

[The government is] giving loans to people who wouldn't really choose a loan. A cooperative that is organized exclusively to take out a loan does not have very

⁴³⁵ Interview 33.

⁴³⁶ Interview 10.

⁴³⁷ Interview 18.

much cooperative tradition. And to that they have given money. There has not been formation.⁴³⁸

These quotes all highlight the fact that the individuals who benefited from Chávez's program did not have the 'solution' of their own community's needs as a foremost concern in beginning their cooperatives. As Cecosesola's experience has demonstrated, without such purpose, a cooperative will have little sustainability and also fail to act as a source of community networking. Cecosesola members already observed these problems among the new cooperatives. According to one associate, "The cooperatives that are forming with a basis in this government...sometimes they don't go anywhere...the cooperatives are going to end without this government."⁴³⁹ If the government cooperatives possessed a deep community purpose, governmental support would not be a necessary element for their continuation. As Cecosesola's experience with the health center demonstrates, a community engaged around a cooperative for the fulfillment of its own needs is a powerful force, even when economically depleted. Donations alone contributed enough funds for the initial cost of constructing Cecosesola's hospital.

Thus, my data suggest that the success of Chávez's program was crippled from the onset because it did not require the element of community purpose in the creation of cooperatives. Cecosesola's experience shows that cooperatives should emerge *because* of a need in a community, not because of governmental promotion and incentives.

Chávez's Charisma and State Revolution: The Absence of Independent Narrative

Without agency as a grounding point in the new cooperatives, they could not generate the necessary independent narrative for associates to re-envision their place in the nation. Though Chávez may have intended the cooperatives to generate inclusion, his own state narrative precluded and hindered this possibility by making him—the powerful, charismatic leader—and the revolution itself—a deeply politicized vision of change—the underlying narrative of the program. As such, new cooperatives could never generate independent visions of the meaning or significance of their cooperatives in the context of the state. From the onset, they were saturated with a state-centric revolutionary framework and therefore crippled in becoming anything but

⁴³⁸ Interview 37.

⁴³⁹ Interview 20.

politically symbolic artifacts of Chávez's national narrative. As a result, though Chávez's national narrative overtly preaches social inclusion and community empowerment, his charismatic presence as leader and his unitary focus on constructing a socialist state discreetly undermine the role that excluded Venezuelans and communities can actually play in the revolution. In this section, I will explore the role of narrative in the failure of Chávez's cooperative program.

The primary block to independent narrative formation among the new cooperatives is the role of what I call Chávez's charisma. Chávez is the face of the revolution and its programs, and thus, as the primary leader, he is also the sole voice of the national narrative. Additionally, his national narrative, in this case the narrative of the Bolivarian Revolution and *Socialismo del Siglo XXI*, is primarily a state-created narrative. This is manifest clearly in the cooperative program itself. Chavez did not adequately consider the experience of Venezuelans in crafting the program's orientation, structure, and goals. According to one Cecosesola associate, Chávez's laws have not taken "into account at all the experience of Cecosesola or other cooperatives." Thus, the arrival of his administration, which was far more concerned with cooperative activity than previous administrations, "was very tough, especially for Cecosesola."⁴⁴⁰ Though there has been dialogue and communication between the state and Cecosesola, members reported that, overall, "[government sectors] are not seeing [Cecosesola] as an important experience in the construction of socialism."⁴⁴¹ The government used the experience of cooperatives in other countries as a rubric, "not internal experiences."⁴⁴²

In this way, the state-crafted narrative of Bolivarian socialism has defined the program far more so than the cooperative experiences of actual Venezuelan cooperatives. According to Cecosesola members, the state cooperatives have become sites of compulsory Bolivarian nationalism, regardless of whether or not this narrative is actually meaningful for the participants.⁴⁴³ As once member explained, Venezuelans "adapt to what the government says, but stay the same inside. They go out with red banners in the street for Chávez, but the mentality is not changing... This change is not easy; it takes time."⁴⁴⁴ Chávez's cooperative program was imbued with the state discourse and therefore made Bolivarian

⁴⁴⁰ Interview 10.

⁴⁴¹ Interview 11.

⁴⁴² Interview 28, Cecosesola associate, Sanare, Venezuela, August 28, 2007.

⁴⁴³ "People say socialist slogans and vote for Chávez but do not change inside" (Interview 40).

⁴⁴⁴ Interview 11.

nationalism the underlying narrative of purpose and identity for the new cooperatives. As one Cecosesola member explained, “New cooperatives have to go to state demonstrations and put on a red shirt, or they will not receive more money.”⁴⁴⁵ Though this may represent the extreme situation for new cooperatives, it illuminates the degree to which the Bolivarian Revolution and the idea of Chávez as a leader defined the cooperative program. This narrative furthers values more important to the state than the actual community. As a state narrative, it is designed to convey the promise of rapid social transformation and a break from the past. Like past Venezuelan state narratives, it makes many promises for changes that will happen ‘tomorrow.’ It is not the narrative of communities for change in their own communities and may in fact be threatened by the formation of strong community identities. These aspects of the narrative prevented it from becoming a meaningful source of identity or connection for Venezuelan communities. Cecosesola members described, “The word revolution signifies a transformation, but fast...and when it is slow, we call it evolution.”⁴⁴⁶ In contrast to community narratives, constructed slowly through the community’s own *lucha* and autonomy, the narrative of revolution imposed an external idea of change: “When you want to do it fast, sometimes it is passing over the people.”⁴⁴⁷ The narrative behind the cooperative program thus existed externally to members’ own local realities.

Furthermore, the state narrative is singularly tied to Chávez and associated strongly with the voice of one leader. Cooperatives, conversely, function inherently as group narratives and are influential at strengthening communities because they empower many voices. As shown through Cecosesola’s experience, collective, community-generated narratives are critical for cooperative success:

Well, we have always asked ourselves about how to achieve education. And we have always tried to examine this. Thus, it has been process of discovering, little by little, the methodology of education. Over a long time, many *compañeros* have contributed different elements. There has not been one founder or initiator, but rather many *compañeros* contributing ideas.⁴⁴⁸

This quote highlights the role of group identity and group-constructed Cecosesola narrative. The narrative is successful because it is flexible, generated constantly through the group’s activities and struggles. Chávez’s narrative of

⁴⁴⁵ Interview 52.

⁴⁴⁶ Interview 51.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁸ Interview 37.

nation, conversely, is a state creation and allows no space for the community to generate its own purpose. The cooperative program was deeply saturated with this narrative and, thus, an externally imposed idea of resistance. According one Cecosesola associate:

It seems to me that another experience like Cecosesola's is not going to be achieved because someone external to the community promotes it...much less the government. Rather, the self-development, the self-managed development, can be the path to other community experiences.⁴⁴⁹

Though the cooperative program was advertised for this purpose—the generation of community power—as a product of the state narrative it could never be separated from the greater state pursuit of its own vision of change and the maintenance of power. In this way, the presence of the state narrative in fact co-opted community participation in the cooperative program. The program was designed to foment community self-management while the state itself has continued to seek to consolidate power and control. According to Cecosesola associates:

When Chávez talks about socialism, sometimes he's talking about community participation, but other times he's talking about state-ism.⁴⁵⁰

They talk about participation, but they tie down the process... [Chávez's] priority is to maintain power.⁴⁵¹

Thus, though designed to foment inclusion, the program was foremost a piece of greater state goals to consolidate control. Cooperatives represented solely one aspect of the state's program to create a socialist economy and stimulate growth.⁴⁵² As one member explained, "Where the state has a large presence, above all in the economy, we have only one employer. The state is the only employer, the only one that produces, the only one that distributes."⁴⁵³ Cooperatives in fact conflict internally with this system because, as Cecosesola's experience shows, self-management and autonomy are key aspects of their success. The role of Chávez's interest in control,⁴⁵⁴ therefore, was a huge barrier to new cooperatives forming their own identities and narratives:

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁰ Interview 22.

⁴⁵¹ Interview 11.

⁴⁵² Chávez and the government put emphasis on growth" (Interview 3).

⁴⁵³ Interview 22.

⁴⁵⁴ "The current government is against capitalism, but it is capitalist. It wants everything that moves through the country to be from the government" (Interview 41).

Today, the government helps more with financing, promotion, and above everything, with the intent to control them politically... Before, there wasn't promotion.⁴⁵⁵

In that time, fortunately, the government did not exercise much control over the cooperatives, and for this reason, we could develop the cooperatives without worrying ourselves too much about the government. [Now we do] because the government seeks to control a lot more.⁴⁵⁶

I think that for the government, the most fundamental thing is to have control. It's fundamental. So we are talking about a state-centric political process, centered in the hegemony of the government. I don't know if it is good or nor but it is the reality. And when it is state-centric, where is the community?⁴⁵⁷

This last quote highlights that the state cooperative program ultimately left no space for the community itself in the development of cooperatives. The program was inherently politicized and therefore could not offer members the power to create alternatives to past, politically defined explanations for their own externality. As members stated:

It's the same cooperativism, but they put in politics, it is politicized.⁴⁵⁸

These new cooperatives are politicized. Cooperatives that don't fall on the same line are seen as something else... They are very inexpert and do not function well.⁴⁵⁹

The state also imposed many conditions on both new and old cooperatives, deeply challenging Cecosesola's ability to function independently.⁴⁶⁰ As an associate explained, "If you receive something from an institution and they impose conditions, how can you organize?"⁴⁶¹ As another exclaimed, "The government is requiring collective organizing, which is what we already do!"⁴⁶² In this way, the program was primarily about government control and the furthering of the state's vision of the Bolivarian Revolution. The cooperatives were conceived as a mere first step: "the cooperatives are not the goal—they are

⁴⁵⁵ Interview 22.

⁴⁵⁶ Interview 37.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁸ Interview 52.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁰ Interview 26.

⁴⁶¹ Interview 11.

⁴⁶² Interview 26.

part of the process to achieving socialism... Only the Communal Councils are socialist.”⁴⁶³

All of these factors ultimately prevented the new cooperatives from generating narratives of resistance, the most important aspect of Cecosesola’s ability to forge true community power, autonomy, and inclusion. As products of a government narrative, the cooperatives could never gain the necessary autonomy or narrative identities to define their own visions of change and bring this back to the nation. Rather than strengthening civil society or combating exclusion, they acted as shallow symbols of Chávez’s state narrative. Unlike Cecosesola, which has maintained distance from political influences and therefore persisted through many huge social upheavals in Venezuela, “the cooperatives that are forming with a basis in this government... sometimes they don’t go anywhere... the cooperatives are going to end without this government.”⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶³ Interview 42, Cecosesola associate, *Reunión de Gestión*, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, September 5, 2007.

⁴⁶⁴ Interview 20.

VII. Cooperatives and the Bolivarian Revolution

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Customers shop at *Feria del Este*, one of Cecosesola's three main markets throughout the city of Barquisimeto.

What relationship would you like to see between the government and the community?

“The first thing is respect for the autonomy of communities, and this respect is manifested in many ways. Respect for them to organize how they want to. And that they can organize. But, I don’t know of any government, in Venezuela or anywhere else, including the United States, where the government [doesn’t] seek to impose its own form of organization. It’s the problem of power. An organization that the government doesn’t control—the government doesn’t know what to do with that.”⁴⁶⁵

-Cecosesola associate

I came to Venezuela expecting to witness a flourishing, state-promoted cooperative program engaged in the revolutionary task of fostering new linkages with a historically excluded, poor Venezuelan population. This program, I was convinced, was beginning the noble task of implementing the Bolivarian Revolution’s *Socialismo del Siglo XXI*. What I found instead was a small number of corrupt or mismanaged state cooperatives and, most surprisingly, a resilient cooperative movement functioning separate from, and at times in collaboration with or in opposition to, the state. Sustained by Cecosesola, one of the sole remaining *cooperativas centrales* from a previous era of Venezuelan cooperative activity, this cooperative network is successfully providing for the needs of its community through self-management and self-financing, all without the presence of a hierarchical line of command or an established organizational structure. Most significantly, Cecosesola’s strict adherence to *satisfacer las necesidades que tenga la comunidad* (*satisfacer* the needs that the community possesses) permits the development of group and individual agency—represented through the Cecosesola narrative—that acts as a form of resistance against the structure of the Venezuelan state. I witnessed cooperative members exercising agency not only through rejecting the politicized state narrative (and structure) in favor of Cecosesola’s structure, but also through their constant reformulation and creation of Cecosesola’s ‘flexible’ structure.

I have shown in the previous chapter how Cecosesola’s unique cooperative success sheds light on the failure of Chávez’s cooperative program. However, as the state program was designed explicitly to further the goals of the *Agenda Alternativa Bolivariana*, its failures can speak to greater contradictions and failures within the comprehensive *Agenda* itself. Namely, while the current Chávez administration uses the language of revolution in a narrative of re-making the nation, Chávez’s charisma and state-centric vision perpetuate the Venezuelan

⁴⁶⁵ Interview 37.

processes of exclusion. Though the discourse centers on a populist rhetoric of inclusion, it still relies upon and creates exclusion—not only of the wealthy elites, but also of citizen mobilizations that do not carry the state socialist banner. As such, the failure of Chávez's cooperative program reveals the contradiction at the very heart of the Bolivarian Revolution between Chávez's language of citizen mobilization and his presence as a singular, charismatic leader.

Chávez is distinct from past Venezuelan presidents in many regards, and most notably for the form of his rhetoric. Though previous administrations incorporated distinctly populist discourse designed to garner support from poor Venezuelans, Chávez's is so forcefully pro-*pueblo* as to alienate the rich elite. Interestingly, Chávez even goes so far in his own narrative of change as to envision his Revolution as the key to finally transforming 'the people' from objects to subjects. In other words, Chávez believes that his *Agenda Bolivariana* will imbue marginalized Venezuelans with agency. In his own words:

What we do is believe in the strength of the people...that solidarity that brings the people to unity ... And I believe that there is a change in the people-as-object, in the people as subject of its own history, transforming itself as it discovers its potential strength. And when that 'poverty-people,' which is the consciousness of strength, becomes a protagonist, not even the army would dare oppose it.⁴⁶⁶

My case-study of his cooperative program, however, reveals the contradiction at the heart of this desire, regardless of its intention: Chávez's elevation to the position of charismatic leader—no matter how much this may represent the desire of the *pueblo* for a leader who will finally end exclusion—in fact undermines citizen initiative. Chávez's super-human personality has become conflated and directly associated with state behavior and activities. His singular presence, rather than the Venezuelan people themselves, has become the symbolic representation of the country. According to Hawkins, "[T]he rule-based structure is much less important than the voice of Chávez."⁴⁶⁷ Even in Bolivarian projects designed to elevate the voice of the citizenry, Chávez is forefront. The original website for the *Círculos Bolivarianos*, for example, stated, "The highest leader of the *Círculos Bolivarianos* shall be the President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela."⁴⁶⁸ The significance of this phenomenon becomes all the more salient when contrasted with Cecosesola, where it is the very *absence* of a

⁴⁶⁶ Muñoz, 32.

⁴⁶⁷ Hawkins, 1151.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1153.

dominant individual or personality that permits the growth of group responsibility and agency. Thus, Cecosesola's experience suggests that Chávez's charisma, which permits his voice to become the 'only voice' of Venezuela, actually propagates yet another state narrative that does not provide true space for citizen contributions.

As such, Chávez's narrative continues to be characterized by relationships of exclusion, "otherness," and state control. Though Chávez defines his administration as a 'break from the past,' his narrative relies on the same exclusion as past state narratives. Many scholars have described the Bolivarian discourse as innately populist, and thus founded upon pitting "'the people' against a presumed 'elite,' although the exact content of this 'other' can vary."⁴⁶⁹ Though the transfer of attention towards a historically marginalized population could be seen as positive, my research supports Hawkins' analysis that a government founded upon such populist elements is not only a barrier to stimulating the agency of the *pueblo* (my contribution), but also potentially damaging to the construction of democratic governance. Hawkins, as I am, is hesitant to overtly criticize Chávez, for his administration has resulted in many improvements for poor Venezuelans (due primarily to the range of new social programs). However, Hawkins writes:

I will naturally emphasize some of the more negative attributes of *Chavismo*. I consider this an important exercise in its own right, insofar as *these populist attributes are inherently anti-democratic*... I emphasize that it is difficult and perhaps impossible to build democracy on a foundation of populism like that we see in Venezuela... Venezuelans... need to recognize these inherent contradictions in order to defuse the extreme polarization that has taken place over the past five years.⁴⁷⁰

My research bolsters this suggestion that Chávez's populism—which I define more specifically as his charisma and the new Bolivarian narrative—acts as a fundamental block to democracy. Even though Chávez's stated goal is to increase the agency of the *pueblo*, his very interest in this development has resulted in the suppression of citizen initiative and government infiltration into community mobilization projects. Though my study cannot adequately address whether or not the current Venezuelan government functions democratically, it does suggest that by attempting to control community activities, the state is by no means acting as a stimulant to agency or, as a natural consequence, the independent civil

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 1140.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., 1145.

society so critical to the strength of a democracy. As my analysis has shown, the Bolivarian narrative was likely a significant cause of the failure of Chávez's cooperatives simply because it was used as the foundational piece of the program. Though this narrative is powerful for its ability to mobilize the masses, it conflicts directly with the processes of independent community initiative through its inherent politicization.

The effects of this narrative on civil society have not been confined to the cooperative program, and are therefore reflect significantly upon the *Agenda* as a whole. The *Círculos Bolivarianos*, for example, were invaded by the state narrative from the onset. According to Hawkins, "Chávez and his associates originally conceived of the *Círculos* as a kind of branch of the Bolivarian movement in civil society, part of a 'National Bolivarian Front.'"⁴⁷¹ Rather than designed purely for citizen mobilization, Chávez envisioned them as a tool of state nation-building that would further state power. As Hawkins adds, "Each *Círculo* is also encouraged to engage in the study of the Bolivarian ideology, a kind of leftist-nationalist ideology based on the writings of three Venezuelan patriots from the 19th century: Simon Rodríguez, Ezequiel Zamora and, of course, Simon Bolívar." At the same time, "the idea is to encourage self-help and community development 'from below.'"⁴⁷² My research shows that these two goals are innately incompatible—though Chávez may have the cultivation of community agency in mind, his manipulation of these programs to consolidate state support undermines the programs' capacities to truly stimulate a strong civil society. By demanding national allegiance first, Chávez subverts the power of communities to foster independent identities and group agency.

These conclusions present several important contributions to contemporary scholarly debates about agency, narrative, charisma, and community development. Foremost, Cecosesola's experience provides a strong argument for the capacity of human agents to reject social structures and, most importantly, construct alternative structures. It also suggests the need to consider agency not only on the level of individuals, but also on the level of groups. In addition, my research points to the need for additional theorizing about the nature of group identity. Though the tendency has been to consider group narratives as necessarily both inclusionary and exclusionary by nature—that is, that they create community partly by defining who is 'not' included—Cecosesola stands as an example of a strong community group that is less differentiated through its

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 1151, in reference to: Muñoz, 286-7, 297-8.

⁴⁷² Ibid., 1153.

narratives of ‘otherness.’ Membership in Cecosesola undoubtedly sets associates somewhat apart,⁴⁷³ but it does so to a far different degree than state narratives. My research suggests that the cooperative model of purpose and initiative is what allows Cecosesola to flourish and, quite possibly, to possess a narrative that strengthens without excluding.

This inference becomes somewhat problematic when considering the state’s role in community governance. My projection of Chávez’s cooperative program onto the Revolution as a whole suggests that the presence of a charismatic, ‘popular’ leader, though appealing to historically excluded masses, may actually prove counterproductive to reversing such exclusion. Additionally, fomenting true community power may, as an unavoidable consequence, minimize interest in and allegiance to idea of ‘nation.’ Given most states’ interest in maintaining power at all costs, this is a somewhat unfortunate conclusion. Thus, though potentially unfeasible presently, Cecosesola’s experiences point to the fact that communities may benefit the most from a state that permits them to ‘help themselves.’ This is not to say that states should play no role in the social betterment of their citizens, but rather that communities should be given the autonomy to fulfill their own needs. This conclusion may also be important for development organizations who often attempt similar top-down structured community development programs. My research suggests that the presence of resources and an institutionalized program is by no means a direct prescription for the success of a social movement. Communities with the sufficient incentives to organize for their self-betterment may not need outside financial resources. These resources may, in fact, *impede* community incentives. As such, rather than imposing solutions *onto* communities, these communities should be subtly encouraged to find solutions from *within*. Cecosesola stands as a strong example of the power of historically excluded groups and individuals to create communities, *satisfacer* their own needs and, together, construct the world that they envision.

⁴⁷³ Interview 18.

* * *

What is the difference with the political parties? Political parties tell you: I am your leader. Stay quiet and I'm going to make you socialism tomorrow. But meanwhile, there is no socialism...I just promise it for tomorrow. This is what the political leaders do. [We] say that we are going to create solidarity now. And for this reason we do not pick leaders that show us paths—rather, we do it ourselves. And that is what we are worried about right now, about if this government is going to understand that. Because governments move in function with power. That is what motivates them fundamentally. And we don't give power to anyone...we are not looking for anyone's favor, but rather we are constructing the society that we want as best we can. We are not looking for a leader who can do it for us. Rather, we create this path ourselves.⁴⁷⁴

-Cecosesola

⁴⁷⁴ Interview 45.

Appendix I: Glossary of Terms

Agenda Alternativa Bolivariana: The Alternative Bolivarian Agenda. Refers to the reforms undertaken as part of the ‘Bolivarian Revolution.’

ahorro y crédito: Savings and credit. Refers to the earliest form of cooperatives in Venezuela.

anti-Chavista: A person who opposes Chávez and likely affiliates *con la oposición*.

arepa: Traditional Venezuelan corn flour patty stuffed with cheese, meat, vegetables, or beans.

Asamblea: Assembly. Refers to Cecosesola’s quarterly Assembly meetings.

barrio: Neighborhood. Often used in reference to especially poor or dangerous neighborhoods or slums.

Barrio Adentro: Chávez’s social program to provide free healthcare to low-income *barrio* residents.

cafetería: Cafeteria.

Caracazo: Popular name for the 1989 riots that occurred all over Venezuela and prompted violent state retaliation. The days of mass protest resulted in 277 ‘official’ deaths, though thousands are estimated to have died. Historians and state discourse have historically explained the *Caracazo* as a popular response to rising transport fares. Recently, however, they have been seen as a more complex reaction to President Perez’s imposition of a rigid IMF structural adjustment plan, which directly violated promises he made during his presidential campaign.

caudillismo: Political system in which *caudillo* strong-men hold power.

caudillo: Leader or military strong-man. Refers specifically to the rural men who mobilized the masses in wars and various military campaigns during the era of Independence struggles in Spanish colonial America.

central/centrales: See *cooperativa central*.

Centro Integral Cooperativa de Salud: Cecosesola’s Integrated Health Center, or hospital, planned to open for service in 2008.

Chavismo: The political philosophy of Chávez.

Chavista: A person who supports Chávez.

Círculos Bolivarianos: The Bolivarian Circles. Community groups organized by Chávez to provide community governance and foment Bolivarian ideals.

compañero: Companion. The word that Cecosesola members use to address each other.

Compras: Cecosesola's Purchasing *equipo*.

comunidad: Community.

con la Oposición: With the Opposition. A person who opposes Chávez.

Construyendo una Convivencia Harmónica: Creating a Harmonic Lived-Experience. Cecosesola's self-published book.

cooperativa central: Central cooperative. In Venezuela, *centrales* are umbrella organizations for various affiliated cooperatives. During their height in the 1970s and 1980s, they formed a regional and national cooperative network. Cecosesola is one of the last central cooperatives still in existence.

cooperativismo: Roughly, the cooperative 'mentality' or 'spirit.' No direct English translation exists.

cooperativista: Cooperative member.

depósito: Cecosesola's storage warehouse, the produce/supplies pick-up site for affiliated cooperatives who run small *ferias* in their own communities.

Doña Bárbara: Novel by Rómulo Gallegos, translated roughly "Ms. Bárbara."

economía popular: The popular economy. Chávez's new term for a market organization alternative to capitalism.

Escuela Cooperativa "Rosario Arjona": Cecosesola's cooperative school.

Equipo: Team. Cecosesola's term for the organizational unit of workers. *Equipos* are flexible and worker-managed, meaning that associates move between jobs based upon their personal interests and their own perceptions of where there is need for additional labor.

facilismo: According to the Cecosesola narrative, the Venezuelan culture is one of *facilismo*, or wanting to get things done with the least effort or work possible.

Feria de Consumo Popular/feria: Fair or market of popular consumption. Refers to Cecosesola's *feria* system, which emerged to provide discounted food to the Barquisimeto community and also to give rural agricultural producers stability and community in selling their goods. The primary *ferias* are: Feria del Centro, Feria del Este, and Feria Ruiz Pineda.

financiamiento: Financing.

fondo: Cecosesola's funds, which provide financing and security to members. See Appendix A for a fuller description.

Fruta: Fruit section of *feria*.

Ley de Economía Social: Law of the Social Economy. Cecosesola's proposed law of cooperative organization.

Llanos: Plains.

lucha: *Lucha* is conceived of as the *process* of struggle, the journey of traveling through hardship.

Mercal: Chávez's state-run discount supermarket chain, intended to provide affordable and reliable food to poor Venezuelans.

mestizo: A person of mixed racial heritage. In Venezuela, specifically, "persons of some combination of European, indigenous and African heritage."⁴⁷⁵

Mini-Feria: This section of *feria* offers a lower price per pound than the main *Verdura* section and is designed to provide produce to families with very low incomes. Anyone can shop in this area, but the expectation is that families who can afford to do so will shop in the main *Verdura* section, thereby helping to maintain the existence of *Mini-Feria*.

Misión Vuelvan Caras: Literally, Mission 'About Face.'

Misiones: Missions. A broad term that refers to the variety of social "missions" programs instituted as part of the *Agenda Alternativa Bolivariana*. These include *Misiones* offering free education, health care, housing, and job training. The *Misión Robinson* and *Misión Sucre* programs have succeeded in nearly eliminating illiteracy in Venezuela.

pendejo: Jerk or 'stupid person' (slang).

pobreza: Poverty.

'por ahora': Refers to Chávez's statement in 1992 that his coup attempt against President Pérez had failed only 'for now.'

pueblo: Village or town. In common speech, also used in reference to the everyday "people" that make up the nation. The usage of this word is somewhat charged. According to Coronil and Skurski, "The term *pueblo* has a dual set of meanings. On the one hand, it encompasses the entire citizenry of Venezuela and is invoked in relation to the nation's defense and the memory of its independence. On the other hand, the term refers to people who have lower-class (popular) origins and is widely used as a substitute for social class categories when referring to the poor, who are the majority of

⁴⁷⁵ Yarrington, 68.

the population. Its connotations, charged with ambiguity, vary with context, speaker, and audience.”⁴⁷⁶

Puntofijismo: This term references a 1958 pact between Venezuela’s political parties that essentially limited future elections to a competition between two parties. Initially seen as a positive reform, the term emerged in a derogatory sense to encompass the negative consolidation of power in what was seen as a corrupt, two-party system.

Quincalla: The “trinkets” section of *feria*.

Reunión: Meeting. Refers to Cecosesola’s self-management structure in which associates meet up to multiple times a day to make group decisions, discuss problems, and share knowledge. The term encompasses Reuniones de Gestión (general “management” meetings), *Feria* preparation meetings, Reuniones de Cooperativas Afiliadas (affiliated cooperative meetings), educational meetings, and Reuniones de los Chamos (meetings for new Cecosesola members).

Satisfacer: To satisfy, fulfill, meet. Cecosesola members routinely use this word when referencing the cooperative’s goals within the greater community and for this reason I have chosen to preserve it in the original Spanish.

Socialismo del Siglo XXI: Socialism of the 21st Century, Chávez’s end-goal for the Bolivarian Revolution.

Verdura: The vegetables and produce section of *feria*.

Viveres: The household goods section of *feria*.

Viveza Criolla: The “Creole Vivacity” or the “Creole tendencies.” Refers to the explanation offered by the Cecosesola narrative for the laziness of the Venezuelan people.

⁴⁷⁶ Coronil and Skursky, “Dismembering.”

Appendix II: Organizational Map of Cecosesola

▫ Important Actors

Associated Workers

Associated workers are the most visible of Cecosesola's many important actors. These roughly 350 individuals conduct the day-to-day activities that keep the cooperative's programs functioning smoothly. Generally residing in Barquisimeto, they engage in work on Cecosesola's various compounds—the *feria* grounds, health clinics, and funerary service center—and participate in the nearly daily *Reuniones de Gestión*. These workers are also responsible for running the main financing and support services of Cecosesola, such as the *Servicio de Protección Solidaria de los Ahorros*,⁴⁷⁷ *Apoyo Mutuo*,⁴⁷⁸ and the *Fondos Integrados*.⁴⁷⁹ Few of the associated workers possess specialized jobs, in contrast to the producers, and instead rotate flexibly through the series of different tasks necessary for maintaining the services.

Agricultural Producers

Agricultural producers, who reside within five major regions outside of Barquisimeto, provide the fresh fruit and vegetables that stock the Cecosesola *ferias*. Most farmers belong to cooperatives within their specific region (12 cooperatives in total), and though each individual owns his or her own land—choosing what to grow and how to grow it largely autonomously—he or she collaborates with other cooperative members to transport the goods to Cecosesola. Though the farmers receive individual reimbursement based on the type of products and quantity of products they grow, each contributes a set amount to a *fondo* within the agricultural cooperative that provides financing, disaster relief, and permits the purchasing of communal buildings and equipment. These cooperatives generally meet bi-monthly to discuss what individual farmers should plant, share growing advice, establish fair prices on produce, and decide how to use the communal *fondo* resources. Each cooperative within a given region also contributes to a regional *fondo*—including all

⁴⁷⁷ In English, "Service for Supportive Protection of Savings and Loans."

⁴⁷⁸ In English, "Mutual Aid."

⁴⁷⁹ In English, "Integrated Funds."

cooperatives within that area—as well as a comprehensive *fondo*—covering all affiliated agricultural producers.

Though separated spatially from the center of Cecosesola activities, producers and the associated members still maintain a strong bond and do not distinguish themselves as distinct Cecosesola actors. According to one member, the relationship “is not an affiliation of paper. It is an affiliation of sharing, of meeting.”⁴⁸⁰ Another said, “I don’t know who is producer and who is Cecosesola.”⁴⁸¹ I witnessed this connection through the involvement of producers in *feria*. Though not a required element of their labor, many producers drive the 2-5 hours each weekend to stay in Cecosesola dormitories and assist at *feria*. This enhances their level of connection with the outcome of their labor in the community as well as their identity as Cecosesola workers.

In essence, though participating in more specialized activities, producers and direct associates receive equal treatment and value each other highly. This is reflected in the degree of support that Cecosesola provides to its producers. These individuals receive health care, have full access to all of Cecosesola’s *fondos* and, most importantly, always receive support from Cecosesola in case of crop failure, drought, etc. through the Crop *Fondo*. To provide additional security, producers establish the price of their crops with Cecosesola before planting. These prices are based on the exact cost for each individual farmer to produce the given product and therefore protect the growers from unpredictable changes in market value. This system also allows the farmers to receive financing in advance of the actual growing season.

Affiliated Cooperatives

The diversity of affiliated cooperatives extends beyond the collection of agricultural producers. Twenty-two cooperatives provide services such as savings and credit or the wholesale of domestic appliances. Other cooperatives (totaling about 38), located both within the city and in more rural areas, produce a variety of products that are incorporated into the *feria* system. These cooperatives fall into three major categories: producers of food products, food service cooperatives, and *feria* cooperatives. Within the first category are different cooperatives producing coffee, spices, noodles, and cereals that are sold within the *feria* (in total, these cooperatives produce 50 different artisan items). The

⁴⁸⁰ Interview 1.

⁴⁸¹ Interview 49.

second group encompasses cooperatives that set up booths within the *ferias* to sell fresh-made cakes and meals, meat, cheese, herbal medicines, and beverages. The third group encompasses 25 cooperatives that wish to set up smaller *ferias* in neighborhoods or cities not served by the main Cecoseola *ferias*. These groups purchase products at the Cecoseola storage warehouse and drive them elsewhere to run their own discount *ferias*.⁴⁸²

Cecoseola values the participation of its many affiliated cooperatives and therefore expects them to function cooperatively and participate within its self-governance framework. Weekly meetings engage affiliated cooperatives in the Cecoseola decision-making process and impart education about cooperatives. Cecoseola also provides financing and support to help in the formation of new cooperatives and to help already-affiliated cooperatives expand.

As with the producers, affiliated cooperative members consider themselves part of Cecoseola. I spoke with a woman from a cooperative that operates a healthy food booth in the *Feria* Central. She explained how she and the other founding members took advantage of free Cecoseola nutrition classes to learn the basics of healthy cooking and described Cecoseola as “the teacher of all of us.”⁴⁸³ She said, “. . . we are like a very large family: we share the good and the bad.” Though not officially registered as a cooperative, her cooperative is currently undergoing the application process. I was able to learn about or conduct interviews with the following cooperatives: Cooperativa Divina Pastora, Central Portuguesa, Cooperativa Las Lajitas, Cooperativa Mixta Santo Brasil (affiliated in the past through *ferias*) and the cooperative Carnecería stand in *Feria* del Centro.

Affiliated Civil Associations

Some groups affiliated with Cecoseola have decided to register as civil associations rather than cooperatives. Las Tinajas, for example, a bread ‘cooperative’ (founded by a group of eight women) that now supplies all of the bread to the *ferias*, has chosen to maintain its status as a civil association instead of becoming a legal cooperative. According to one of the founding members, two of the associates are not interested in participating in the meetings and the communal decision-making process, and therefore do not desire to change the legal status. Beyond requiring more taxes, becoming a cooperative would also involve “more responsibility with respect to human (labor) and the

⁴⁸² Cecoseola, “Que es Cecoseola?” (August 2007).

⁴⁸³ Interview 25.

government.”⁴⁸⁴ In the meantime, however, the group continues to function cooperatively, with members holding weekly meetings to make decisions democratically and sharing equally in profits.

Suppliers

To provide a wide range of products, Cecosesola purchases many items from suppliers, such as flour, canned goods, snacks, and cleaning supplies. Given that the actual delivery people vary from week to week and many of the suppliers are large national companies, “it is only a relationship of selling and buying.”⁴⁸⁵

▫Products and Services

Ferias

Ferias were the second service Cecosesola began to provide (after the funerary service). Originally conducted out of converted buses that could be driven to various parts of the city and parked to sell produce, they have grown in size and number and now serve 55,000 Barquisimeto families a week, about one-third of Barquisimeto’s 1.5 million residents. Though many affiliated cooperatives now operate their own smaller *ferias*, Cecosesola is responsible for three large *ferias*, operated out of warehouses on cooperative-owned land, which sell a total of 400,000 units of product weekly, or about 450 tons. The following information applies only to the *ferias* that Cecosesola operates directly.

Feria takes place three days a week on Friday (5:45am-5:30pm), Saturday (5:45am-1:00pm), and Sunday (7:15am-12:00pm) in three locations throughout the city: in the West (*Feria Ruiz Pineda*), the East (*Feria del Este*) and in the Southern center (*Feria del Centro*). *Feria del Centro* operates 36 registers alone, with a total of 200 running in all *ferias*.⁴⁸⁶

Set-up for *feria* occurs all day Thursday (workers re-stock shelves) and continues throughout the entire night (producers from all over the region arrive into the early hours of the morning). Upon arrival, they drive their trucks onto a scale, weigh and record the quantity of their produce, and team up with the night workers to unload and arrange the produce in *feria*. Because they will be working

⁴⁸⁴ Interview 29.

⁴⁸⁵ Interview 4.

⁴⁸⁶ Interview 11.

all weekend to operate the *feria*, Cecosesola members shop together Thursday evening (several members take turns running the registers).

The Shopping Process

People begin arriving early, even before *feria* begins, in car and by foot. The parking lots are set up with a security system to prevent car theft. Shoppers enter the warehouse, purchasing produce in a separate area from household and packaged goods. Central, community areas encourage shoppers to hang out, listen to music, and eat food with their family members.

Market Security

Crime is a significant problem in Venezuela, so Cecosesola has set up security systems to discourage theft. Upon entering the parking lot, vehicle drivers receive a slip of paper that they must then present upon departure. After shopping, customers must present a receipt of purchase to leave the produce area. Additionally, several security guards roam the market. Though these are nothing more than the typical procedures for most large Venezuelan stores, Cecosesola experiences a mere one percent rate of theft, as compared to a five percent rate at the average Venezuelan supermarket. According to one member, "People who have been a here for a long time help keep watch."⁴⁸⁷ He explained that customers do not want to steal from the market because they realize "that we all pay for what is stolen. We all have the responsibility to make it back up."⁴⁸⁸ Another member seconded this opinion, saying, "We have to share the burden from the error of mis-writing, people stealing, among all of us."⁴⁸⁹

Products and Distribution

On average, Cecosesola offers goods priced 30 percent less than other stores and markets. This is possible because the cooperative values offering products at a fair price, even if it means losing money in order to offer that item. *Fondos* from previous years help to cover the losses that Cecosesola incurs from offering items lower than the government-set price or the price for which they obtained the items. Shortages are common, however, and occasionally Cecosesola can no

⁴⁸⁷ Interview 11.

⁴⁸⁸ Interview 11.

⁴⁸⁹ Interview 38b, Cecosesola associate, Barquisimeto, Venezuela, September 4, 2007.

longer offer a product, or must offer it in reduced quantity. During my visit, black beans had just reappeared after a long absence, and the *feria* was currently experiencing a shortage in powdered milk and eggs. As a result, Cecosesola was rationing both items (limiting a certain quantity to each family). According to one associate, “It’s easier to get stuff at *Mercal*, but after that, here, because we make whatever sacrifice is necessary to provide the product.”⁴⁹⁰ Cecosesola decides which products to offer based upon what people buy. The *Comprás* (purchasing) *equipo*, a two-year rotation job for two people, is responsible for determining this information. At *Quincalla*, however, the people on the rotation decide autonomously what to buy, set the prices and, according to one current worker, are always changing which products they offer.⁴⁹¹

•Feria Organization

Verdura (Vegetables and General Fruits): In this section, everything is sold for one set price per pound. Thus, the area distributes both vegetables and those fruits that are basic enough to be included in the set rate. Some items include: tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, plantains, passion fruit, papaya, potatoes, broccoli, cauliflower, squash, melons, yucca, sweet potato, *apio criollo* (a Venezuelan root vegetable), etc.

Fruta (Fruits): This section sells fruits that range in prices per pound or item and that are also more fragile. Some items include: apples, apricots, grapes, strawberries, berries, pears, kiwis, etc.

Casa (Non-Perishable Foods and House Supplies): This is the second main area of *feria* (about the same size as *Verdura*), supplying all of the non fruit and vegetable items. Producers supply most products, but special sections sell the goods made by affiliated producers/cooperatives and the produce of Las Lajitas, an organic farm. Some items include: Canned foods, crackers, flour, eggs, sugar, coffee, grains, beans, sauces, snacks, organic herbs, spices, extracts, candy, toilet paper, detergent, cleaning supplies, etc.

Quincalla (Trinkets): This section of *feria*, set up like a booth with a glass counter, sells a random mix of cheap household trinkets and items. Most days, the proceeds of this section filter directly into one of Cecosesola’s *fondos*. During my visit, the money was going towards a *fondo* that provides support for the youth

⁴⁹⁰ Interview 11.

⁴⁹¹ Interview 34.

workers of Cecosesola to take trips to the mountains for recreation. Some items include: towels, shampoo, toiletries, kitchenware, dog food, candy, etc.

Mini-Feria (Miniature-*Feria*): This section, separated by *Verdura* by a gate, offers a lower price per pound than the main *Verdura* section and is designed to provide produce to families with very low incomes. Anyone can shop in this area, but the expectation is that families who can afford to do so will shop in the main *Verdura* section, thereby helping to maintain the existence of *Mini-Feria*. Some of the produce in this section is from exactly the same delivery batches as for *Verdura*, whereas some items are of lower quality (smaller in size, damaged, or from an earlier week). *Mini-Feria* also offers a much smaller selection of produce (broccoli, for example, is not offered here). During my visit, produce from this section cost \$00.65 per pound, whereas produce in *Verdura* cost about \$1.72 per pound.

Affiliated Coops: Carniceria, Charcuteria, Comida Natural: Items include: cheese, meats, fish, turnovers, *arepas*, sandwiches, cakes, ice cream, juice, natural medicines, etc.

Cafetería: All ferias contain a cafeteria that provides the main midday meal to Cecosesola workers, both during *feria* and on every other day of the week. Members write down their name before receiving food, and roughly \$2.50 is removed from their pay for each meal. On a given day at *Feria del Centro*, 70-120 people will eat lunch. Working in the kitchen is a rotating job, generally filled by three people at a time. According to one woman, whom I spoke to while on meal duty, “There are always two women and one man in the kitchen so that the men learn to cook!”⁴⁹² Members agreed that meals have improved significantly over time as Cecosesola has become more organized and also begun to self-educate about nutritional eating. A typical meal includes a bowl of soup, a plate with rice or noodles, a vegetable and a meat, a cup of freshly-made juice, a piece of fruit, and bread.

“Cecosesola Ferias: A Description

Feria del Centro: This is the primary Cecosesola compound and the site of the largest *feria*. Besides the *feria* warehouse, the compound houses the storage *depósito* (site of extra items for *feria* and pick-up site for affiliated coops), the *Escuela Cooperativa “Rosario Arjona”* (main administrative center, library, meeting

⁴⁹² Interview 8.

location, dormitory), the bank (within the *feria* warehouse and open during *feria* for customers), two affiliated cooperatives (Línea Blanca, a discounted-appliance service for members, and a smaller family cooperative that produces spices) and the recycling program for bags and boxes from *feria*.

Feria Ruiz Pineda: This *feria*, originally the bus parking lot and service center during the time period when Cecosesola provided Barquisimeto's bus service, is now the site of a *feria* and also houses the administrative center for most purchasing and financial tasks.

Feria del Este: This is a newer *feria*, operating purely as a warehouse on distribution days.

◦Supported Ferias: Cecosesola's role

Twenty-five affiliated cooperatives service the Cecosesola *déposito* to pick up produce and supplies that they use to run miniature ferias in their own communities.

Community Healthcare

Health services are Cecosesola's newest community venture. Since opening the first clinic in 1995, the program has expanded dramatically. Cecosesola currently runs six "networked" clinics, which offer health services for associates and the community in general. In 2006, they served 155,000 patients. Associates receive certain services for free and others at a slight discount from the community price. According to one associate, who works in the Acupuncture center, there is capacity for everyone, so they have never had to turn patients away or make them wait a long time to see a doctor.⁴⁹³ Nonetheless, certain services cannot be offered in the community clinics, and for this reason the cooperative began plans for the *Central Integral Cooperativa de Salud* in 1999, which will open in 2008 and provide a greater range of care.

⁴⁹³ Interview 9.

Clinics

The clinics provide services in general medicine, pediatrics, and acupuncture, with three dental centers, three internal medicine centers, and four clinical laboratories. In 2006, the entire health network served 155,000 patients. The centers are maintained through health contracts with 6,500 families, who pay a weekly installment of 700bs (\$0.33) to receive health care, and also through the fees associated with visits from associates and non-associates. The clinic I observed provided internal medicine care for a cost of 18,000bs (\$8.37) for associates and 23,000bs (\$10.70) to the general community. Pediatric care was free for associates and 17,000bs (\$7.92) for the community. Two young associates working in the reception area asserted that the prices at Cecosesola clinics are significantly lower than anywhere else, except perhaps for the government-sponsored *Barrio Adentro* health centers.

Centro Integral Cooperativa de Salud

Construction of the hospital, a five-year planning process, was nearing completion during my visit. The approximate cost of the structure so far had been about 5 billion bolívares (2.3 billion dollars), a sum raised entirely by Cecosesola associates and the community. Each member contributed 10,500bs a week (\$4.88), with affiliated cooperatives and community members providing substantial support as well. Cecosesola still lacked sufficient costs to finish the project, and was thus in the process of mustering more donations and signing a loan. However, one associate expressed that the collective decision had been made that the payments for the loan will not be raised through the services that the center provides; rather, they will be drawn from continued individual donations and various sources in *feria* that currently raise money for *fondos*.⁴⁹⁴ At the Assembly, this discussion emerged in the context of affiliated cooperatives, some of which had donated much more than others. Cooperativa Colibri, with a mere 8 associates, donated 2,060,000.00bs (\$958.00) whereas Cooperativa John F Kennedy donated an average of 400.00bs/person. Further efforts were going to be made to equalize these donations. Despite the differences in contributions, multiple members emphasized that the center is communally funded, and thus also communally owned.

⁴⁹⁴ Interview 33.

Funerary Service

Cecosesola originated out of various communities' need for affordable funeral services. Government laws at the time prevented cooperatives from providing these services, so the original twenty members created a central cooperative with a board of directors, which could legally bypass the requirements. Today, the funerary service, the largest in the region, reaches 17,400 families in Barquisimeto, all of whom pay 1,400bs (\$0.65) a year. Cecosesola associates pay 700bs (\$0.33) a year. The service covers up to eight family members and provides a coffin and accompaniment (by car or bus) to the cemetery.

Financing

The ability to self-finance is a key value at the heart of Cecosesola. Various means support Cecosesola's economic autonomy and ability to support and further community investment.

Fondos

Cecosesola associates contribute to health, cultural, agricultural, and educational *fondos*. These *fondos* support associates in case of accidents and also support members with higher than typical economic burdens (they themselves, or their children, may be pursuing an education, for example).

Financimiento: Financing for affiliated cooperatives and individuals

Cecosesola possesses a financing department, Apoyo Mutuo, which provides financing to members. These communal funds allow members to purchase new capital (such as a commercial oven or new farm buildings) and to receive start-up funds for a new cooperative project.

Use of Net Gains/Profit

Most years, Cecosesola possess net profits at the end of the year. At an annual meeting in September, generally attended by all 350 associates, members decide democratically how to distribute the profits. Typically, a portion of the profits

are directed towards *fondos* and the remainder is distributed to associates in the form of bonuses.

Sustainability Efforts

Cecosesola's narrative reflects a strong dismay with environmental destruction and, thus, the cooperative pursues various activities to lessen its impact. Members run a recycling program at Feria del Centro, packaging all bags and boxes used during *feria* to distribute to producers for re-use. Cecosesola also owns a farm in a rural area where all organic refuse from *feria* is transported to be composted in a three-month cycle. The resulting compost is then sold to the community at *feria*.

Self-Documentation

Cecosesola is not interested in actively promoting that others adopt its mode of organization, but it believes strongly in documenting its own activities. These materials are used for the organization's own self-reflection and also offered as resources to the (many) groups that approach Cecosesola for guidance in starting similar projects.

ECT Television: Equipo Cooperativo de Video

ECT Television is a video-production team that films key Cecosesola and community events and creates educational videos.

Cecosesola Self-Published Books

Cecosesola has written two books about its experiences. Associates write these books communally—no individual associates' names appear in the publication. The books detail Cecosesola's history, world vision, and experiences with collective organizing

•Cecosesola Job Information

Organization of Labor

Cecosesola functions without assigning workers to set positions based on skill or need. Rather, individuals rotate on a voluntary basis through an ever-evolving set of *equipos* in all of Cecosesola's many services. Though some jobs, such as *Comprás*, require a two-year stay due to specialized skill-needs, most *equipos* evolve based upon their members' interest and perception of where they are most needed.

Equipos include: administrative duties (working in the main office, coordinating meetings, etc), *feria* work (inventories of incoming and outgoing goods, running the depository, stocking shelves and weighing/placing produce, working the cash registers, carrying money from the cashiers to the control room, putting money away and guarding the safes, cleaning up after market days), health center operations (administrative, nursing jobs, medical care), compound maintenance (cleaning Cecosesola property, acting as nighttime security guards), cafeteria duty (buying food and cooking meals daily for members), and guiding and supervising Cecosesola visitors.

Workers can also chose to complete rotations at affiliated cooperatives, for example traveling to rural Sanares to work at Las Tinajas, the major bread producer, or at the organic farm, Las Lajitas. Furthermore, jobs are always flexible. Though an individual may currently be supervising the *Verdura* area of *feria*, he or she will step into any other area based on where the highest priority lies. No supervisor regulates members' current *equipo* or organizes transfers between *equipos*. Generally, members simply self-organize by constantly communicating with each other to learn which *equipos* need special assistance. Other times, two members will decide to switch *equipos*. This is made possible by the strong bonds of camaraderie among all workers; in asking where I could find certain individuals, upon all occasions I was greeted by a specific response about a person's current *equipo*: "Oh, he or she is in *Verdura*." Despite an established system for job assignments, workers always keep track of each other's present *equipo* and can recite it from memory.

Pay/Salary

Cecosesola believes in paying associates based upon need. If all associates had the same family situations, they would all receive equal pay. However, given that

family sizes differ and some associates are paying for the education of their children (or themselves), salaries vary among associates. For example, a single associate would receive 1,000,000bs/month (\$466.29), whereas an associate with one child would receive 1,300,000bs/month (\$606.17). Associates who are in school can receive an annual bonus of 280,000bs (\$130.56) to help cover tuition and textbook costs. In this way, pay is not tied to 'hours worked' or number of years working at Cecosesola. At the end of the year, associates evaluate net profits and decide what part of this to receive as year-end bonuses (versus pouring into funds or other projects). Cecosesola associates receive much higher salaries than other Venezuelans with similar work and their salaries are much higher than the national minimum wage of 615,000bs (\$286.77).

Medical Coverage and Sick Leave

All Cecosesola associates receive a health plan that grants them free preventative health care at Cecosesola's health clinics. The plan covers about 80 percent of medical consultations and offers significantly discounted prices for the other services at the health clinics (as compared to the set community member rates). A health fund provides support in case associates need large, expensive operations and, generally, associates are asked to pay back a third of the cost, but it is not obligatory if they do not have the resources.

Cecosesola covers up to five consecutive days of sick leave for associates. After five days, associates must get a note from their doctor so that government social security will cover the additional time away from work. Unlike in typical labor contracts, Cecosesola does not grant associates a maximum number of sick days because, as one explained, "You cannot predict how many times you're going to be sick."⁴⁹⁵

Vacation-Time

Associates receive 15 days of vacation leave their first year working for Cecosesola and this number increases by two days with each subsequent year. Dedication to the cooperative is so high, however, that associates frequently stay in Barquisimeto and continue to help out while on vacation.

Families and Spouses

⁴⁹⁵ Interview 36.

Cecosesola encourages families to work together at Cecosesola. It is not considered abnormal for associates to get married and, according to one associate, none of Cecosesola's relationship conflicts in the past have taken place between family members or spouses.⁴⁹⁶

Students and Young People

Many students and young people work at Cecosesola part-time while attending school. After they graduate, they often begin working full time and can bring additional expertise to the cooperative.

⁴⁹⁶ Interview 3.