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Democratizing the Republic by instituting the informal: the irregularity of the barrios of Caracas and Venezuelan democratization (1941-1964)

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In 1987, Venezuela's legislative body called for the *barrios*¹ to be integrated into the country's urban fabric within the framework of its new organic law on urban development. This new law assigned local urban planning authorities the task of identifying "areas of uncontrolled growth" with the aim of "incorporating them into the urban structure."² It marked the first step towards the regularization of town planning and real estate in these neighbourhoods, which were home to almost half the country's urban population.³ The *barrios* were by this point not just a major feature of the urban space but a major focus of attention for the public authorities and elected representatives. The 1987 law was therefore an extension of this official recognition of their existence to the domain of civil law, marking the beginning of a transformation in the legal and institutional environment in which the *barrios* had developed, which was described by the jurists Rogelio Pérez Perdomo and Pedro Nikken in 1979 as an "official informal order."⁴

This apparently paradoxical order was characterized by the illegality of the *barrios* housing, on the one hand, and the recognition it gained through the actions of local executive authorities, on the other. Until the end of the 20th century, the irregularity of the *barrios* was multifaceted. Most of the housing in these neighbourhoods was built following "urban land invasions" (i.e., irregular land occupations), which meant there was no legal guarantee of ownership for the occupier/builders.⁵ In addition, the housing did not comply with building regulations and was often illegal, which made it unregistrable and unlawful to rent. However, municipal authorities, public legal aid services, and public urban planning authorities would often operate outside the dictates of civil law and the legal market to provide support for the *barrios* housing in the form of installing services and facilitating the prevention and resolution of real estate conflicts.

For observers in the late 1970s such as Pérez Perdomo and Nikken, this *contra legem* support for the *barrios* from official bodies and their various representatives was

¹ While the word *barrios* means "neighbourhoods" in Spanish, it has evolved to mean "slums" in Venezuela. This term has been generically applied since the 20th century to all working-class neighbourhoods with buildings characterized by a range of irregularities (in terms of real estate, the law, construction).

² Republic of Venezuela, "Ley Orgánica de Ordenación Urbanística," *Gaceta Oficial*, no. 33.868, 16 December 1987. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Venezuelan sources have been translated into English via French.

³ Between 40% and 60% of the inhabitants of the Venezuelan capital of Caracas lived in the *barrios* at this time, that is between 1.1 and 1.5 million people. Teolinda Bolívar, "Los Agentes Sociales Articulados a la Producción de los Barrios de Ranchos," *Coloquio Vivienda*, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1, no. 1, Caracas CDCH-UCV, 1989, p. 146; Antonio De Lisio, "La evolución urbana de Caracas. Indicadores e interpretaciones sobre el desarrollo de la interrelación ciudad-naturaleza," *Revista geográfica venezolana* 42, no. 2 (2001): 215; Teolinda Bolívar and Yves Pedrazzini, "La Venezuela urbana: Una mirada desde los barrios," *Revista Bitácora Urbano Territorial* 12, no. 1 (January–June 2008): 64.

⁴ Pedro Nikken and Rogelio Pérez Perdomo, *Derecho y propiedad de la vivienda en los barrios de Caracas* (Caracas: UCV, 1979), 81.

⁵ Records show that only 28.2% of the *barrios* housing was freehold in 1973. See Kenneth L. Karst, Murray L. Schwartz, and Audrey J. Schwartz, *The Evolution of Law in the Barrios of Caracas* (Los Angeles: Latin American Center, University of California, 1973), 98. In actual fact, as these authors pointed out, it is possible that none of the land was freehold because the validity of the titles was not proven.

characteristic of the electoralism and institutional system of the 4th Republic of Venezuela (1958–1999).⁶ Prior to the democratization of 1958, the various administrations had pursued—albeit ineffectively—a policy of regularizing the *barrios*. These attempts at regularization had taken two forms. One, notably implemented by the social democrat governments of 1945 to 1948, was focused on installing utilities and facilities and officially registering the *barrios* located on development land. The other, implemented by the military junta of 1951 to 1958, was aimed at expulsion and demolition. These two diametrically opposed policies were then followed by another, completely different approach from 1958 onwards.

This chapter aims to show that the democratization of the Venezuelan political system in the early years of the 4th Republic led to the public authorities' de facto abandonment of a policy to regularize these informal neighbourhoods. This evolution is examined here from a dual perspective. Adopting a systemic approach, it is analysed as the development of a sui generis and eminently politicized way of constructing the working-class areas of Venezuela's cities (the *barrios*), which were legally irregular and enduring in their social and political environment. Taking a historical point of view, it is considered as a product of social and political tensions that meant that the emerging democratic regime's association with the *barrios* populations presented a major problem in Caracas in terms of political stabilization for the new elites in power.

From 1958 onwards, the Venezuelan capital saw a simultaneous shift towards a political regime of representative democracy and an “official informal” regime of producing working-class areas. This twofold shift was largely a consequence of the city's exponential economic and demographic growth. The Venezuelan economy had been revolutionized by the oil industry in the 1920s and had gone on to profit from oil rent and its monetization and investments. The resulting economic and demographic strain on the city came to a head under the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1952–1958), who had sought to take advantage of the oil boom to transform Caracas into a beacon of modernity.

Pérez Jiménez's fall on 23 January 1958, however, saw mass politics introduced into the Venezuelan political landscape. His policy of eradicating the *barrios* was immediately replaced by support for the “land invasions” from the transitional leaders. This official support was improvised, organized, and structured in conjunction with the deployment of the democratic parties' networks among the working-class areas. Communist and social democrat municipal councillors had already pursued this policy a decade earlier under the social democrat government of Acción Democrática (AD) from 1945 to 1948. Following a chronology that was itself political, the policy was thus reconstituted and consolidated in two stages. In a context of great political uncertainty considerably marked by the Cold War, it was reshaped first in 1958 to suit the Marxist activists and then from 1960 to 1964 to suit AD, which had returned to power.

By 1963, the “official informal order” that characterized the *barrios* had become established. It was justified and euphemized in official speeches and documents through the lexical field of “community development,” a fitting credo for this new Republic that was being constructed in partnership with the United States and the United Nations.

However, this “official informal order” was, in practice, anything but ordered. It was more a day-to-day politics composed of ad hoc official protections and urban improvements implemented in response to requests from partisan cronyism or inhabitant mobilization networks. Its erratic nature was accentuated throughout this period by the administrative jumble of three levels of public jurisdiction involved in the management of informal urbanization in the Metropolitan District of Caracas, namely the two municipal councils (the Departamento Libertador to the west and the Distrito Sucre to the east), the two federated states from the 1950s

⁶ Pedro Nikken and Rogelio Pérez Perdomo, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

onwards (the Capital District in the west and the state of Miranda in the east), and a third level of governance, the Metropolitan Area of Caracas, resulting from the growth of the urban area beyond the borders of the Capital District and the federal state.

The historical development of the officialization of the informal construction of Caracas's *barrios* is examined here using a corpus of sources that allow a comparative study of the official discourses and local practices. An analysis of the official documentation (legal texts, government reports, public speeches) is thus complemented by an examination of the local press, oral sources, the communist activist archives, and the early social science research studies on these informal districts.

1. 1941–1958: from the *campaña* to the *guerra*, from site preparation to the eradication of the *barrios* areas

In 1935, Venezuela entered a phase of accelerated modernization and political conflict around an uncertain democratization that lasted more than two decades. Throughout the presidencies of the military leaders López Contreras (1936–1941) and Medina Angarita (1941–1945) followed by El Trieno Adeco⁷ (1945–1948) and then the military regime (1948–1958), Caracas was the focus of attention in the country's political reconfigurations and modernizing efforts. The capital's informal urbanization gradually became a public issue during this period owing to its massification and the fact that it did not fit with the various regimes' modernization plans. Here, I largely reproduce the contributions of Martín Frechilla and Meza, who have studied the evolution of official positions on the *barrios* prior to 1958.⁸ Three major features characterize this period: 1) the emergence, classification, and quantification of the problem of informal urbanization, which was mainly characterized (and discredited) by building type (the traditional shanty, known as the *rancho*) and location (the *quebradas* (ravines) and especially the *cerros* (hills)); 2) the almost immediate discrepancy between the federal governments' discourses promising to eradicate the *barrios* and the Libertador municipal council's management of their expansion;⁹ 3) the radical shift, around 1950, from a draft federal policy drawn up in 1946 under the democratic government to regularize the *barrios* and install services to a policy of systematic eradication implemented by the military junta of 1951 to 1958.¹⁰

1.1. *Ranchos* in the capital: the creation of an urban illegality defined by building and location

Unlike other Latin American capitals such as Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, and Buenos Aires, Caracas still had a provincial feel at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1920, it had a population of only 118,000. Venezuela itself was still sparsely populated, with fewer than 2.5

⁷ The word "Adeco" is used to refer to AD. Similarly, "copeyano" is the adjective referring to the Christian democrat party COPEI.

⁸ Beatriz Meza, "Contra el rancho en Venezuela: de la campaña de 1946 a la batalla de 1951," in *Diseño y Sociedad* (2010), 48–57; Juan José Martín Frechilla, "Vivienda popular e iniciativa municipal en Caracas, 1908–1958 (O como algunos pioneros no estaban equivocados)," in *La cuestión de los barrios*, ed. Teolinda Bolívar and Josefina Baldó (Caracas: Monte Avila Latinoamericana, 1996), 189–201.

⁹ Martín Frechilla, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Meza, *op. cit.*

million inhabitants.¹¹ However, the sudden development of oil exploitation strengthened the capital's economic weight and, consequently, its growth. By 1936, the population of Caracas had more than doubled to 258,000, and by 1941, it was 354,000.¹² In the space of two decades, the city's population had grown twice as fast as that of the whole country.

Between 1926 and 1930, Caracas experienced its "first boom in private real estate development [*urbanización*]"¹³ when developers "with questionable property titles, ongoing disputes, and no permits" parcelled out irregular, unserviced land across "the flat areas and hills of the parish of Sucre," located in the west of the Capital District.¹⁴ Despite the fraudulent sales and the permanent tweaks in the regulations, there was as yet no record of real estate problems in the official sources.

The illegality of these housing developments was defined in 1929 and 1930 by the topographical site they occupied, that is the *quebradas* or the *cerros*, which had been declared unfit for development because of the impossibility of installing a water supply or sewage system. This prohibition was prescribed by two central administrations that came under the imposing Ministerio de Relaciones Interiores (interior ministry) and the Ministerio de Obras Públicas (ministry of public works) for the express attention of the governor, the municipal engineering department, and the municipal council, which were jointly responsible for enforcing it.¹⁵

By this point, the shortage of housing had become a social issue for the Libertador municipal council.¹⁶ However, it did not officially begin to diagnose what the problem was until a decade later. The irregularity of Caracas's working-class housing was defined as a real estate problem for the first time by the municipal authority following the social democrat opposition's victory in the 1938 municipal elections. In 1940, the commission responsible for land registry, common land, and municipal land classified the *barrios*-occupied land into three categories: municipal land with unregularized status, land with questionable property titles, and federal land.¹⁷

During this same period, the Ministerio de Fomento (ministry of development) introduced questions on residential sanitary facilities into the seventh national census. The 1941 census thus officialized the traditional *rancho* as a category of housing defined as having a straw roof, earthen floor, and almost systematically no water or sewage services.¹⁸ In a country where 65.1% of the population was rural, the census results showed that 60.8% of the housing was classified as *rancho*, painting a "disconcerting picture of housing in Venezuela."¹⁹ The *rancho* was thus associated with ruralism, archaism, and above all a lack of hygiene. The fact that this type of housing was so prevalent was considered harmful.²⁰ The national census linked the housing problem to the *ranchos* problem, especially in the big cities, where urban growth

¹¹ Venezuela, Ministerio de Fomento. *Cuarto Censo Nacional de Población*, 1920, quoted in Angélica Cedeño González, *Estructura espacial del AMDC año 1966*, Tesis de grado en geografía, Universidad Central de Venezuela, Caracas, 1984, 31.

¹² Venezuela, Ministerio de Fomento, *Quinto Censo Nacional de Población*, 1936, & *Sexto Censo Nacional de Población*, 1941, quoted in Angélica Cedeño González, *Estructura espacial del AMDC año 1966*, tesis de grado en geografía, Universidad Central de Venezuela, Caracas, 1984.

¹³ Martín Frechilla, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

¹⁵ The prohibition was drawn up by the Dirección de Sanidad Nacional (national health directorate), which came under the Ministerio de Relaciones Interiores (interior ministry), and the Comisión de Estudios de la Red de Cloacas y Colectores de Caracas (commission for the study of Caracas's sewage and drainage system), which came under the Ministerio de Obras Públicas. Martín Frechilla, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ *Ibidem.*

¹⁷ *Ibidem.*

¹⁸ Venezuela, Ministerio de Fomento, 1947, T.VII, CV, quoted in Meza, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ *Ibidem.*

²⁰ *Ibidem*, T1, XXII, quoted in Meza, *op.cit.*

was mainly due to the intensification of rural emigration. The number of *ranchos* in Caracas rose from 5,437 in 1941 to 12,738 in 1944.²¹

By 1945, the housing problem in Caracas was thus officially associated with the *barrios*. Despite the fact the area covered by these informal settlements had more than quadrupled in the Capital District in the space of a decade and a half (21 hectares in 1930, 94.5 hectares in 1941),²² the public authorities were only now defining their irregularity, which centred on three aspects: the site (steep, dangerous, and difficult to install services), the land's status, and above all the type of structure. The *cerros* and *quebradas* sites as well as the *ranchos* structures were rejected mainly on hygiene grounds.

The new version of the 1942 civil code reaffirmed the existing land law. Article 557 confirmed the “poder de atracción del suelo,” which stipulated that the landowner was also the owner of any building erected on their land unless the value of the building greatly exceeded the value of the land (article 558). The landowner could thus have the building demolished if the occupant was acting in bad faith (according to article 788 of the civil code), which was technically the case for the vast majority of the *barrios* occupants because they had no valid documents.²³ This land legislation, which was weighted heavily in favour of the landowners, was to remain unchanged until the 1980s.

Nevertheless, it was extremely complicated for landowners to evict occupants from the *ranchos*. They had to be able to clearly identify each invader and present evidence of their own continued ownership in the form of property titles. The Capital District's constitutional law of October 1936 also made any eviction subject to a declaration from the governor that the land invasion constituted a public order disturbance.²⁴ The land tenure system in force therefore made it impossible for occupants to legalize their *ranchos* and practically impossible for landowners to evict them. It gave the Capital District's governor and later the state of Miranda's governor the ultimate power of arbitration. Because local officials decided on possible evictions rather than the courts, arbitration was more political than judicial.

1.2. 1941–1948: The beginnings of a policy to upgrade the *barrios* from the democratic parties

The period from 1941 to 1946 saw the formalization and politicization of the two opposing public responses to this irregularity, namely eradication or improvement. The eradication policy put the construction of new collective residential housing at the centre of its town planning programme and argued that the *barrios* should remain illegal. The improvement policy, on the other hand, valorized individual housing and self-construction and defended the legal regularization of the *barrios*.

These debates crystallized around the largest development project of the time, the El Silencio *reurbanización*, which consisted of the demolition of a pericentral residential area in 1942 and the construction of seven blocks of residential apartment buildings, completed in 1945. The project was managed by the Banco Obrero, a public fund set up in 1928 to fund the creation of housing for individual workers that ultimately evolved into a full-fledged agency for the construction of working-class housing. Supported by President Medina Angarita, this

²¹ Meza, *op. cit.*

²² Oficina Metropolitana de Planeamiento Urbano (OMPU), *Crecimiento histórico de los ranchos de Caracas. Lapsos 1949-1971*, Caracas, OMPU (folleto), 1974.

²³ Nikken, Pérez Perdomo, *op. cit.*

²⁴ *Ley Orgánica del Distrito Federal*, artículo 13, ordinal 6, V, quoted in Nikken and Pérez Perdomo, *op. cit.*

modernist project was criticized by some individuals in the town planning office as well as by the democratic opposition. The planners stressed that the neo-urbanites would fail to adapt to living in modern collective housing.²⁵ The elected members of the Partido Democrático Nacional—which became AD in 1941—and the elected members of the Partido Comunista de Venezuela (PCV) rejected the project because it was too costly, not just for the public purse in the economic context of the Second World War but also for the city’s most modest income earners, who would be unable to afford the finance plan.²⁶

The elected representatives of AD, who formed a majority in the municipal council from 1939 to 1942, distanced themselves from the El Silencio project and instead focused on organizing an upgrade of the existing *barrios*. They created the Caja Municipal de Crédito Popular, a municipal fund to provide public loans to working-class individuals to finance their constructions. That same year, the council established its first Juntas Pro-Mejoras (executive councils responsible for urban development) at parish (or sector) and *barrios* levels as well as the Ligas de Colonos (settlers’ alliances). An Adeco leader, Gonzalo Barrios, also set up a humanitarian executive council called Junta Pro-Habitantes de Puentes y Quebradas (executive council for the inhabitants of the bridges and ravines).²⁷ During these three years of the AD/PCV majority in the Libertador municipal council, the elected members established the first municipal public support agencies charged with installing services and upgrading the *barrios*. Their action focused on the *barrios* situated on land that belonged to the nation and had been purchased by the Departamento Libertador. The AD and PCV representatives advocated an extension of the *barrios* within the council as a better solution to the working-class housing crisis than the construction of collective housing.²⁸

The democratization of 1945 saw their recommendations taken up by the federal government. The sudden fall of Medina Angarita on 18 October 1945 had put an end to a democratic openness that was controlled by military generals and gave way to the first Venezuelan social democrat government, the revolutionary administration led by Rómulo Betancourt. Universal, secret suffrage was introduced in March 1946, replacing the previous male-only, public suffrage system. The first national policy addressing the housing shortage was launched with the creation of a national housing commission on 14 January 1946 and a decree (no. 144) setting out the administration’s objective to build 40,000 working-class homes over the next ten years.²⁹ A number of AD officials with experience at municipal level in Caracas, such as Gonzalo Barrios, steered the administration in the direction of a programme centred on installing utilities and facilities and improving the Capital District’s *barrios*.

In June 1946, Alejandro Oropeza Castillo, former managing director of the Banco Obrero and an Adeco official, submitted a general report on behalf of the national housing commission on the objectives of decree no. 144. This report was in fact a roadmap for a national policy on installing services in the *barrios*. It set out a “plan for the improvement of low-income housing” for households that were unable to meet the repayments necessary to purchase a Banco Obrero apartment. This was the first time a national public body had officially acknowledged that there was a lack of public resources to rehouse residents from the *ranchos* and had therefore recommended that the existing *barrios* should be upgraded. The plan proposed that an executive council, the Junta Pro-Vivienda Popular, would be responsible for installing services, constructing foundations, and selling building materials to the future

²⁵ Meza, *op. cit.*

²⁶ Martín Frechilla, *op. cit.*

²⁷ *Ibidem*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Meza, *op. cit.*

occupants in each municipality that had signed a contract with the Banco Obrero.³⁰ The project's two objectives were to develop serviced land for the rehousing of inhabitants from the *cerros* and to provide materials to facilitate the construction of permanent houses. Known as the "anti-*ranchos* campaign," this project claimed to put an end to *ranchos* not by demolishing them but by improving them through self-construction.

In August 1947, Betancourt made reference in one of his speeches to an "emergency plan" to provide "building materials to poor communities ... so that they themselves can rebuild their homes."³¹ While this plan was never implemented, even though it was probably only envisaged for Caracas,³² it was the first time a federal government had officially supported a policy to improve the self-built *barrios*.

Betancourt's government and the national housing commission thus legitimized the action of the social democrat and communist elected members in the Libertador municipal council. The two elected members who were most active on this issue within the new council, which was established in January 1948, were Eduardo Gallegos Mancera of the PCV and Raúl Díaz Legórburu of the Unión Republicana Democrática (URD). Gallegos Mancera proposed to the council that municipal technical assistance should be made available free of charge to the *barrios* occupier/builders regardless of land regularization status. Díaz Legórburu called for the Departamento Libertador to designate land reserves and defended the decriminalization of the construction of *ranchos*. Both these individuals stressed on numerous occasions in their speeches to the council that the public authorities must recognize that the development of the *barrios* was now an irreversible phenomenon.³³

The 1940s saw a considerable increase in emigration to Venezuela's cities. The 1950 census results show that the country's urban population was in the majority for the first time, accounting for 53.8% of Venezuela's total population of 5 million. In particular, the *barrios* areas in Caracas had expanded due to the Adecó government's support for the *ranchos* improvements. In 1945, there were 78 *barrios* in all in Caracas, with 60 located in the Departamento Libertador and 18 in the state of Miranda in the east. In 1948, these figures had increased to 122 *barrios* overall, with 97 in Libertador and 25 in Miranda. In the Departamento Libertador alone, there were a recorded 20,953 *ranchos* in 1949, accounting for more than 20% of the capital's housing.³⁴

The rapid democratization during the El Trieno Adecó period thus coincided with a clear acceleration in the expansion of the *barrios*, a consensus between the social democrat (AD and URD) and communist party leaders with regard to regularizing the *barrios*, and the creation of the first informal institutional tools—the *juntas* (executive councils)—to organize the installation of utilities and facilities.

1.3. 1949–1957: *guerra contra los ranchos* (war on the *ranchos*), the military dictatorship's eradication policy

³⁰ Alejandro Oropeza Castillo, *Informe General [BO]* (mimeo). In INFODOC, Caracas, Facultad de Arquitectura y Urbanismo, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1946 & Alejandro Oropeza Castillo, *Proyecto N° 6. VIVIENDA MINIMA [BO]* (mimeo). In INFODOC, Caracas, Facultad de Arquitectura y Urbanismo, Universidad Central de Venezuela, quoted in Meza, *op. cit.*

³¹ Rómulo Betancourt, *Venezuela, política y petróleo* (Mexico: Seix Barral, 1979), (1st ed. 1956), 523.

³² Meza, *op. cit.*

³³ Martín Frechilla, *op. cit.*

³⁴ Oficina Metropolitana de Planeamiento Urbano (OMPU), *Crecimiento histórico de los ranchos de Caracas. Lapso 1949-1971*, Caracas, OMPU (folleto), quoted in Meza, *op. cit.*

The military coup of 2 December 1948 put an end to this first social democrat government experiment in Venezuela and, consequently, to any plans to regularize the *barrios*. The military government, led by Marcos Pérez Jiménez from 1952 to 1958, dissolved the elected officials and suspended elections. Its drive to modernize was aided by a favourable economic climate marked by an increase in international crude oil prices. Venezuela's gross national product, boosted by oil rent, increased by 95% between 1950 and 1957.³⁵ The country had the strongest economic growth of any on the continent during this period.

Pérez Jiménez believed this new prosperity could turn the regime's "new national ideal" into a concrete utopia. He dreamed of making Caracas the capital of the Caribbean.³⁶ Approximately 60% of national investment in public works was allocated to Caracas during his dictatorship.

Obsessed with modernism, the government decided that the *ranchos* had to go. Its suspension of elections in Caracas and its new fiscal resources gave it the means to achieve its aim to eradicate them. All working-class housing in the capital was henceforth to be functionalist, modern, and collective. The Banco Obrero soon followed the regime's lead and, in 1949, declared "war on the *ranchos*." Its publications propagated condemnations of the *ranchos* on hygiene and moral grounds and claimed that life in the *barrios* made workers forget their "creative and active drive."³⁷ Despite a report from a presidential commission of urban planners addressed to the governor of the Capital District in 1951 proposing to install utilities and facilities in the majority of the capital's *barrios* and allow the inhabitants to construct their own homes,³⁸ the military leaders and various administrative directors were persuaded that the *ranchos* should be eradicated.

In 1952, Pérez Jiménez presented his "presidential plan for the elimination of the *barrios*." This plan was accelerated in 1954 following the publication of a report that put the number of *ranchos* in Caracas at 53,360 and the number of inhabitants at 310,976, that is 38% of the capital's population.³⁹ In 1958, 750 hectares of *ranchos* were destroyed by force.⁴⁰ The regime built collective housing during this period, most notably the emblematic Dos de Diciembre complex from 1955 to 1957, a large complex of 13 superblocks and 52 apartment blocks intended to house 180,000 people.⁴¹ Between 1951 and 1957, more than 23,000 housing units were built in Caracas, accounting for 70% of the national total.⁴²

However, by 1957, it was clear that this strategy had not lived up to the government's rhetoric because the transformations of the capital had accelerated demographic growth. Between 1950 and 1958, the city grew from 704,000 inhabitants to more than 1,200,000,⁴³

³⁵ For a good insight into Pérez Jiménez's economic policy, see Charles W Anderson, *Politics and Economic Change in Latin America* (Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand Co., 1967).

³⁶ Juan José Martín Frechilla, "La construcción de una capital: del primer proyecto moderno a la metrópoli desquiciada," in *Caracas, memorias para el futuro*, ed. Giuseppe Imbesi and Elisenda Vila (Rome: Gangemi Editore, 1995).

³⁷ Banco Obrero, *Reurbanización de Ciudad Tablitas Un nuevo mundo para la clase trabajadora Banco Obrero Vanguardia de la vivienda venezolana* (Caracas: Banco Obrero (folleto), 1952), quoted in Meza, *op. cit.*

³⁸ The report, which was headed by Leopoldo Martínez Olavarria, was commended in 1996 by Juan José Martín Frechilla. He highlighted the fact that the urban planners of the 1990s had finally come around to such recommendations. Martín Frechilla, *op. cit.* and Meza, *op. cit.*

³⁹ Banco Obrero, *Informe preliminar sobre el cerro piloto presentado por el Banco Obrero y la Gobernación del Distrito Federal* (Caracas, 1954), quoted in Martín Frechilla, *Vivida popular, op. cit.*

⁴⁰ Iraida Montaña, *Les invasions de terres urbaines au Venezuela: un problème...ou une solution?* (PhD thesis, Université de Paris Val-de-Marne, 1980), 155.

⁴¹ Juan José Martín Frechilla, *Planes, planos y proyectos para Venezuela: 1908-1958 (apuntes para una historia de la construcción del país)* (Caracas: Fondo Editorial Acta Científica Venezolana, 1994).

⁴² Martín Frechilla, *Vivida popular, op. cit.*

⁴³ Antonio De Lisio, "La evolución urbana de Caracas, indicadores e interpretaciones sobre el desarrollo de la interrelación ciudad-naturaleza," *Revista Venezolana de Geografía* 42, no. 2 (2001): 203–26.

expanding to the east through the state of Miranda as far as the colonial town of Petare. The concentration of investment in Caracas and its spectacular growth had considerably increased its attractiveness. The capital's modernity and standard of living now contrasted more than ever with that of the rest of the country. However, both the new, overpriced working-class housing and the job market in Caracas precluded migrants from the countryside from integrating into the regular housing market.

A large proportion (521 hectares) of the *barrios* initially managed to resist the bulldozers.⁴⁴ In addition, even though many of the Dos de Diciembre apartments still lay empty, most of the displaced *barrios* inhabitants rebuilt their *ranchos* further south or west, in the Capital District, or in the east, towards Petare. Hence, 53 new *barrios* appeared in the Metropolitan District of Caracas during the military regime.⁴⁵ In early 1958 then, some 220,000 people were living either in the old, densified *barrios* or in the new *barrios* located outside the city centre. Their housing conditions had deteriorated overall.

This meant that the sudden onset of a recession in the second half of 1957 had dramatic consequences for the Caracas working classes. Public investment fell sharply, which led to a scaling-down of activities, especially in the construction sector.⁴⁶ In January 1958, unemployment reached an all-time high in the city, and in the *barrios*, where a large proportion of the construction workers lived, it hit 30%.⁴⁷ The social crisis delivered a double blow to the working classes in the form of mass unemployment and a housing crisis, which was exacerbated by the evictions and the inaccessibility of the new collective housing.

2. From mass revolt to mass voting: the political centrality of the *barrios* during the 1958 transition

On 23 January 1958, an uprising of the country's principal institutions succeeded in putting an end to the dictatorship. Throughout January 1958, there had been successive pronunciamientos against a backdrop of riots in Caracas. While street protests had played their part in the political crises of the last two decades, this was the first time in the country's history that a regime had been brought down by crowds mobilized on the streets of Caracas.

This "spontaneous combustion,"⁴⁸ as Arturo Uslar Pietri and many other contemporaries called it, on 23 January 1958 must be understood as an eruption of social tensions that had been exacerbated by sudden mass unemployment in a city under construction. However, the social crisis did not disappear along with the dictator, and the insurrectionary climate in Caracas, which was sometimes fuelled by a military anxious about the transition, and sometimes by the crowds, prevailed throughout the whole of 1958. Once again at the centre of the political arena, Acción Democrática had to contend with the economic and military sectors, on the one hand, and the PCV, on the other, in a Cold War context that was far more tense than it had been in 1945–1948.

⁴⁴ Esther Marciano, *Evaluación de las inversiones del sector público en las áreas de ranchos de Caracas* (Caracas: UCV-FAU, 1972) quoted in I. Montaña, *Les invasions de terres urbaines*, *op. cit.*, 155.

⁴⁵ I. Montaña, *Les invasions de terres urbaines*, *op. cit.*, 158 and Fundacomun, *Inventario de los barrios pobres del área metropolitana de Caracas y el dpto. Vargas* (Caracas: Fondo Editorial Común, 1978), 19–20.

⁴⁶ Ocarina Castillo d'Imperio, *Los años del buldozer: ideología y política, 1948-1958* (Caracas: Fondo Editorial Tropykos, 2003), 58–9.

⁴⁷ See Talton Ray, *The Politics of the Barrios in Venezuela* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 16–7.

⁴⁸ Arturo Uslar Pietri, "El alba de la democracia," *Revista Billiken* (25 January 1958).

This pivotal year is a major subject of Venezuelan memories. Historiography has mainly studied it in terms of negotiations between elites, with a notable focus on the democrat leaders' success in finding a new political balance in the form of a "pacted" democratization.⁴⁹ In Caracas, however, the reconfigurations were more profound. The new political openness and the first social measures proposed by the interim government's junta gave rise to a renewed wave of migration to the capital. In response to the social crisis, the junta proposed the Plan de Emergencia para los Barrios. This was the first effective official, national public policy to install utilities and facilities in the *barrios*. As such, the *barrios* were de facto given official recognition through the support of the federal government without any new legislation being passed before the general elections. The Plan de Emergencia was a transitional measure that had lasting consequences. It officialized the informal *barrios* through improvisation and sealed the transition to democracy in Caracas.

The question of the *barrios* was placed centre stage in the Republic⁵⁰ during the course of what was a "historic year" for Venezuela, which included the fall of the dictator and the reinstatement of national elections and, in Caracas, the rise of the insurgent masses and the introduction of the vote for the citizen masses. The results of the general elections of 7 December 1958 established the *barrios* as a burning electoral issue, because, in stark contrast to the working-class vote in the rest of the country, the working-class voters in Caracas had voted for the president of the interim government, Wolfgang Larrazábal.

2.1. Caracas in an insurgent context

Opposition to Pérez Jiménez among the working-class neighbourhoods had spread throughout the city during the month of January that year. The *barrios* in the Capital District were closed off to the authorities. The streets were barricaded, and the police were greeted by protesters banging pots and pans and throwing stones and Molotov cocktails if they tried to approach. Rioters from two working-class neighbourhoods close to the city centre, Dos de Diciembre and San Agustín, were making their way towards the city's business district.

In the parish of San Agustín, whose *barrios* bordered the city centre to the south, the mobilization frontlines had been crossed a number of times during confrontations with the Seguridad Nacional,⁵¹ whose headquarters, just a few hundred metres away, were set on fire on 23 January.⁵² The Dos de Diciembre neighbourhood, located just west of the city centre, was another epicentre of the riots. The fact that hundreds of the new flats in the superblocs in this neighbourhood were still empty caused outrage. Although people opposed the regime here, they still wanted to benefit from its real estate developments.⁵³

On the morning of 23 January, when the news broke that Pérez Jiménez had fled the country, a massive crowd gathered in the city centre. The occupations of the capital's main squares have been captured in many photographs taken throughout a historic day of festivities

⁴⁹ This democratization was formalized in the famous Punto Fijo Pact, which was signed in Caracas by Rómulo Betancourt (AD), Jóvito Villalba (URD), and Rafael Caldera (COPEI).

⁵⁰ The 4th Republic of Venezuela, known in Venezuela as the Cuarta República or simply the Cuarta.

⁵¹ This account of the events in San Agustín is based on a double-page spread in the 31 January 1959 edition of the communist daily *Tribuna Popular*. It commemorates the previous year's "battles" of San Agustín under the title "Valiente 'Hornos de Cal'" (valiant 'Hornos de Cal'). While the report was, of course, already a memory appropriation of the great event, it is rich in valuable factual details on the actors in this sudden working-class radicalization: "Valiente 'Hornos de Cal'!" *Tribuna Popular*, 31 January 1959.

⁵² Ramón J Velásquez, "Aspectos de la evolución política de Venezuela en el último medio siglo," in *Venezuela moderna: Medio siglo de historia, 1926-1976*, ed. Ramón J Velásquez (Caracas: Fundación Eugenio Mendoza, 1979), 200; Carlos Gimenez, interviewed by Serge Ollivier in July 2013, Caracas; photographic archives of the Fundación Fotografía Urbana: <http://prodavinci.com/galeria/?gid=51&pid=1483>

⁵³ Alejandro Velasco, *Barrio Rising: Urban Popular Politics and the Making of Modern Venezuela* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 377.

during which Pérez Jiménez's effigy was burned.⁵⁴ The day was lived as a liberation day. It did not just mark the end of a process, however, but powerfully legitimized collective mobilizations. By the evening of 23 January, the street had gained a newfound political weight.

Demonstrations continued in the months that followed and soon seemed to bestow a particular political colour on the Caracas masses. On 13 May, the US vice president, Richard Nixon, met with an angry response from thousands of demonstrators during an official visit to Caracas.⁵⁵ On 23 July and 7 September, tens of thousands of demonstrators took to the streets to oppose attempted putsches against the interim government. Contemporary commentators saw this as a continuation of the popular pressure for democratization.⁵⁶

Hostile to the US government and pro-democracy, the street mobilizations also took on a social content. An unemployed workers' movement had been forming in the capital since 23 January, with thousands demonstrating every day in front of the presidential palace.⁵⁷ The secretary of the interim government's junta, Edgar Sanabria, was to comment two decades later that the junta had been faced from the outset with "a sort of chemical binomial: either lead or silver,"⁵⁸ in other words, the choice was between a repressive policy (the "lead" symbolizing bullets) and a social policy (the "silver" symbolizing subsidized jobs). The junta chose the social option in the form of the Plan de Emergencia para los Barrios.

2.2. The Plan de Emergencia para los Barrios: a social measure and support for self-construction

On 13 March 1958, the Plan de Emergencia para los Barrios was announced by the interior minister, Numa Quevedo, indicating that the problem was now considered a public order matter. He announced "a basic emergency plan to solve as far as possible the problem of unemployment on a national scale. ... This plan, which will be coordinated by the competent bodies, will concern the twenty states and federal territories ... and will be implemented until 30 June, the end of the economic year, for a total sum of one hundred and twenty-seven million bolívares."⁵⁹ He added that the funds released should be used to respond to the major national challenges of improving roads, public hygiene, and education.

The 1953 Constitution was still in force as was its legislative calendar, with a budget vote due in June. The Plan, which had been drawn up in the February,⁶⁰ was therefore intended as an interim solution while awaiting the new budget. On the radio, in the press, and in official documents, it was referred to as the Plan de Emergencia para los Barrios.

⁵⁴ "18 horas de júbilo frenético en Caracas por la caída del dictador," *El Nacional*, 24 January 1958.

⁵⁵ Ramón Velásquez, "Aspectos de la evolución," *op. cit.*, 208–10. Archive footage from Universal International News showing clips of Nixon's brief official visit to Caracas is available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvigX1doz2U>

⁵⁶ Ramón Velásquez, "Aspectos de la evolución," *op. cit.*, 218. The daily *El Universal* reported ten dead and eighty-four injured. See *El Universal*, 08 September, in *Historia gráfica de Venezuela. El gobierno de Larrazábal: 1958*, Vol. 7, ed. Jose Rivas Rivas (Caracas: Ediciones Torán C.A., 1982), 173.

⁵⁷ Blas Lamberti, interviewed by Agustín Blanco Muñoz, in Agustín Blanco Muñoz, *Venezuela 1958: otra derrota popular* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1991), 98.

⁵⁸ Sanabria, Edgar. Interviewed by Agustín Blanco Muñoz in Agustín Blanco Muñoz, *El 23 de Enero: habla la conspiración* (Caracas: Editorial Ateneo de Caracas, 1980), 223. Following Wolfgang Larrazábal's resignation from the junta to concentrate on his presidential campaign, Edgar Sanabria assumed the interim presidency of the Republic from 18 November 1958 to 18 February 1959.

⁵⁹ "Ministro del interior informo sobre plan mínimo de urgencia para solucionar el desempleo," *El Universal*, 14 March 1958. Can also be found in J. Rivas Rivas, *Historia gráfica de Venezuela, op. cit.* Vol. 7, 85.

⁶⁰ Ministerio de Obras Públicas, *Memoria y cuenta que el Ministerio de Obras Públicas presenta al Congreso nacional*, 1960, xiv.

Its contents were documented when it was extended in July as a public policy that was included in the budget and attached to the Ministerio de Obras Públicas. It was then officially renamed the Plan de Obras Extraordinarias (special works plan) but was still commonly referred to as the Plan de Emergencia para los Barrios in the press and in ministerial reports.⁶¹ The Plan was placed under the direction of a young municipal engineer and Adeco activist Celso Fortoul, who presented a report to the Ministerio in July comprising an assessment and proposed programme of works.⁶²

Fortoul immediately highlighted the lack of planning in the Plan. He said it was a “reactive and interim” response aimed at “temporarily solving the problem of unemployment in the Capital District and the state of Miranda.” He set out a detailed description of the planned works and added the upgrade of individual housing to the list of priorities that had been outlined in March by the interior minister, namely roads, public hygiene, and education. No major infrastructure project or town planning was envisaged. Only “minor”⁶³ works were to be carried out, such as the construction of pavements, road surfaces, sewers, primary schools, and police stations, and—unregulated—aid was to be provided for the building of individual houses. The Fortoul report thus elucidated and validated the aim of the works that had been set out in the Plan in March to install utilities and facilities in the *barrios*.

The Plan was effectively an unavowed unemployment compensation programme. Its sole objective was to create jobs in the construction sector in Caracas. Thirty thousand new jobs were announced in July 1958⁶⁴ followed by a further 28,000 in January 1959.⁶⁵ The workers were hired by the Banco Obrero recruitment offices for six-month periods. However, only half of the workers were actually employed on construction sites.⁶⁶ Limited by the lack of planning, the administration was instead forced to let its employees work on upgrading their own *ranchos* using materials that had been reserved for the Plan.

When the accounts were submitted at the end of 1960, they showed that nearly half a billion bolivars had been injected into the *barrios* in 1958 and 1959.⁶⁷ The Departamento Libertador *barrios* had benefitted from the greatest improvement, with new utilities and facilities installed and houses upgraded. However “interim” the Plan may have been then, it represented a radical change in urban policy. For the first time, the *ranchos* had received substantial support from the state. Fortoul was soon dubbed the “people’s engineer” in Caracas. For the inhabitants, the urban development set out in the Plan represented not just a material contribution to their *barrios* but a public recognition of their permanence.

However, there had been no change either legally, through the land law, or administratively, through a municipal decree, concerning the urban land occupations. The reason for this was that there was no elected parliament in place and the municipal councillors, who had been elected in 1948 and had returned to office, lacked legitimacy.

Nevertheless, the introduction of a non-legislative measure contributed to a significant administrative evolution. On 24 February 1958, the Banco Obrero launched a campaign to reimburse the occupier/builders of the *ranchos* that had been destroyed during the dictatorship.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, xv–xvi.

⁶² *Informe sobre el Programa a realizar por el Plan de Obras Extraordinarias*, unpaginated, quoted in OMPU, *Censo Socio-Económico de los barrios del Área metropolitana de Caracas*, Caracas, 1967, (1st ed. 1959).

⁶³ Ministerio de Obras Públicas, *Memoria y cuenta*, *op. cit.*, 1960, xiv.

⁶⁴ *Informe sobre el Programa a realizar por el Plan de Obras Extraordinarias*, *op. cit.*, unpaginated.

⁶⁵ “Comenzó ayer el reenganche de los trabajadores cesantes del ‘Plan de Emergencia’,” *El Independiente*, 13 January 1959.

⁶⁶ Ministerio de Obras Públicas, *Memoria y cuenta*, *op. cit.*, 1960, xiv.

⁶⁷ More than 210 million bolivars per year. Ministerio de Obras Públicas, *Memoria y cuenta*, *op. cit.*, 1960, xv.

It declared that it wanted to recognize the improvement—*mejora* or *bienhechuría*—that they represented for the benefit of the occupier/builders, provided that these individuals were acting in good faith according to article 788 of the civil code. This was not a legal breach. The Banco Obrero announced in the press that reimbursements would only be made on presentation of a rental contract for the plot as well as the most recent receipt for rent payment and invoices evidencing construction costs.⁶⁸

While the majority of the inhabitants of the demolished neighbourhoods were unable to present these documents, the Banco Obrero's positioning was nevertheless significant on several levels. Politically, it represented a complete reversal of Pérez Jiménez's eradication policy. Legally, it contributed to a recognition of the value of the *rancho* structure provided there was a written agreement from the landowner. Administratively, the Banco Obrero abided by the municipal council's decisions for all *barrios* located on municipal land and encouraged the occupier/builder to obtain the landowner's agreement in the case of private land occupations. From this point on, land "invaders" seeking to establish permanent *barrios* therefore always had to obtain the consent of either the municipal council or the private landowner. During the early years of the new regime, this served to orient land "invasions" away from private land and towards municipal land.⁶⁹

The end of the dictatorship and its war on the *ranchos* combined with the introduction of the Plan de Emergencia rapidly catalysed the colossal migratory pressure on Caracas. The expansion of the *barrios* was exponential in February 1958. A year later, in January 1959, the Banco Obrero estimated that more than a hundred new *ranchos* were being built in Caracas every day,⁷⁰ particularly in areas relatively far from the city centre, such as in the parishes of La Vega and El Valle in the southwest of the city, where the population had almost doubled in one year.⁷¹ Since no census was carried out that year, it is very difficult to assess precisely how many people immigrated to the capital and settled in its *barrios*. In any case, between 1957 and 1960, the population of the Metropolitan District of Caracas grew by more than 20% to almost 300,000.⁷²

By the time the Plan had come to an end in January 1960, 60 new *barrios* in all had been established in the Metropolitan District of Caracas, mostly in the east (in Petare) and northwest of the city. More new *barrios* had been created in the space of two years than in the previous ten.

According to contemporary commentators, the phenomenon was highly visible. The valley looked completely different. Many of the verdant *cerros* suddenly looked moth-eaten, punctured by stacks of wood and metal sheets. In 1959, the political shift was seen equally as a major shift in the capital's urban history.

2.3. *Barrios* juntas set up to make the land "invasions" permanent

The dozens of new *barrios* appearing in 1958 were created through urban land "invasions," that is through the irregular occupation of municipal or private land. Although the authorities may have been caught unawares by the sudden expansion of the phenomenon, it was

⁶⁸ *La Religion*, 23 February 1958.

⁶⁹ Talton Ray, *The Politics of the Barrios in Venezuela* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 33–6.

⁷⁰ "El Rancho y El superbloque," Anexo XII, in Banco Obrero, *Proyecto de Evaluación de los Superbloques*, Caracas, 1959, 12.

⁷¹ OMPU, *Censo Socio-Económico de los barrios op.cit.*, unpaginated.

⁷² From 1,180,934 to 1,478,628 inhabitants. Source: Dirección General de Estadística, quoted in OMPU, *Censo Socio-Económico de los barrios op.cit.* (unpaginated).

neither spontaneous nor disorganized. Very quickly, each *barrio*, both old and new, set up a neighbourhood junta. These became the inhabitants' interlocutors with the municipal authorities and public town planning agencies. The idea behind them was inspired by an old Ibero-American tradition and also by the Ligas de Colonos and the first Juntas Pro-Mejoras created by the elected Adeco and communist party councillors in the Libertador municipal council two decades earlier.

The return to power of these parties stimulated the creation of juntas, especially since they were encouraged by the Plan de Obras Extraordinarias administrators. Fortoul's report called for the creation of a communal centre in every *barrio* to manage collective facilities and services. This was essentially dependent on the creation of a Junta Pro-Mejora. The report specified that in "*barrios* that have a Junta Pro-Mejora, this stage is very much facilitated" and conflated the future communal centre management committees and the Juntas Pro-Mejoras.

Although these plans remained hypothetical in the current emergency situation, the communal centres proposed in Fortoul's report served as a planning foil to gain recognition for the Juntas Pro-Mejoras. The success of improvement projects carried out in the *barrios* within the framework of the Plan already relied on the existence of a neighbourhood junta. The installation of a sewage and running water system was only granted to "*barrios* that meet certain minimum organizational conditions." The report did not add any new conditions in respect of the Plan's subsidies. Rather, it clarified the de facto modus operandi set out in March and attempted to apply a veneer of planning rationality to it.

These juntas had no legal status nor even any official generic title. They were usually named after the demands that the inhabitants wished to put forward, hence Junta Pro-Mejoras (junta for upgrade). Sometimes they were called Juntas de Vecinos de Barrios (*barrios* neighbourhood juntas) or, when the *barrio*'s permanence was not assured, Junta Pro-Defensa del Barrio (junta for the defence of the *barrio*). Whatever their appellation, their main role was to obtain support from the municipal council and the town planning agencies for their requests. They would apply to the communal junta of their parish or directly to the Libertador municipal council in the Capital District or the Sucre municipal council in the case of the *barrios* located in Petare in the state of Miranda.

The municipal councillors (*concejales*) very quickly resumed their role as the preferred interlocutors of the neighbourhood juntas. The archives of the communist party municipal councillor Eduardo Gallegos Mancera contain a list of the juntas' requests and his responses to them.⁷³ On his return to the Libertador municipal council in May, which he had been elected to in 1948, his activity was directed towards the Juntas Pro-Mejoras. He supported their requests addressed to the economy and land registry municipal directorates,⁷⁴ approached the Instituto de Credito Popular (institute for working-class credit) and the housing commissions to propose a construction programme,⁷⁵ and followed and coordinated the dealings of one junta in particular with the Fundación de la Vivienda Popular (working-class housing foundation), private companies, and the Plan de Emergencia.⁷⁶ All his interventions were conducted on the municipal council's letterheaded paper.

In all of the chaos of 1958, the elected municipal officials directed the *barrios* inhabitants towards the appropriate public bodies and helped to officialize their actions, even

⁷³ Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 5.

⁷⁴ These requests came from the El Millo and Los Mecedores *barrios*, Letter from Gallegos Mancera to *Presidencia del Cuerpo*, Caracas, 2 June 1958. Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 5.

⁷⁵ On behalf of the inhabitants of the Las Brisas de Pro-Patria *barrio*, Report presented by Gallegos Mancera to *Concejo Municipal*, Caracas, 1 July 1958, Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 5.

⁷⁶ For the Turiamo *barrio*, Letter from Armando Vegas to Gallegos Mancera, Caracas, 14 November 1958, Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 5.

when the *ranchos* in question occupied “invaded” land. The sources provide information both on the prevalence of the municipal council in the revived democracy in Caracas and on the dynamism of the increasing number of *barrios* juntas.

2.4. From the *barrios* juntas to the *barrios* vote: the emergence of *barrios* politics

Each junta was politicized from its inception. At least one of the leaders in every junta was affiliated to a political party. Any petitions or letters of request from a *barrio* came from its junta. They were systematically addressed by the junta’s president to a municipal councillor belonging to the same party. The relations between the two entities thus fell within the domain of partisan sociabilities. These activist links dated back to the creation of the first Juntas Pro-Mejoras on the initiative of the Partido Democrático Nacional members in 1938. They were re-established and systematized from February 1958 onwards.

The politicization of the juntas became a key issue in Caracas politics on 16 June 1958, when the governor of Caracas, Colonel Vicente Marchelli, dismissed Fortoul as director of the Plan. Fortoul had become an embarrassing political figure as far as the conservative circles were concerned, which Marchelli was closely associated with. Fortoul had become extremely popular with the *barrios* inhabitants for his implementation of the Plan. He was also, more importantly, an open member of the Marxist wing of AD, known as the “muchachos.”

On 17 June, thousands of demonstrators descended on Plaza Bolívar to demand that Fortoul remain in his post. Larrazábal, president of the government’s junta, concurred with their demand. Fortoul kept his post, and Governor Marchelli resigned that evening.⁷⁷ The PCV’s regional committee quickly drew conclusions from this show of force. The Frente Pro-Fomentista was created less than two weeks later by a group of communist activists,⁷⁸ many of whom had led the demonstration of 17 June. The first post-dictatorship federation of Juntas Pro-Mejoras was thus established, and it was communist.

The PCV subsequently rationalized and structured the link between the formation of a junta and entry into the party. The mobilization of activism in the *barrios* responded to the inhabitants’ expectations. In July, for example, activists from the La Ceiba *barrio* in San Agustín drew up a plan for political and cultural activities in their neighbourhood and asked their parish committee how they could “get in touch with the Juntas Pro-Fomento to find out how they are organized and how our companions can join in.”⁷⁹ The parish’s Juntas Pro-Fomento were organized during July and August under the aegis of Olga Luzardo, a journalist and poet in charge of the parish committee.⁸⁰ In August, with an eye on the general elections of 7 December, the PCV’s regional committee set to work on growing the party. It adapted the party’s organizational structure to the urban fabric of the rapidly expanding *barrios*. Each cell

⁷⁷ Velasco, *Barrio Rising*, *op.cit.*, 78–9.

⁷⁸ “Fundan Confederación de Juntas Pro-Fomento más de doscientas organizaciones populares,” *Tribuna Popular*, 28 June 1958.

⁷⁹ Report, *Celula no. 6* to the *Comité de Radio*, Caracas, 2 July 1958, Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 5.

⁸⁰ Resolutions, *Comité de Radio*, Caracas, 6 July 1958, Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 5.

was to be given a “precise zoning” of its parish so that it could be regularly redivided⁸¹ as new *barrios* were established and subdivided. An “organization week” at the end of October concluded the restructuring of the *pecevista* (PCV) activism in the capital and launched the last phase of the electoral campaign. Described as “peripheral work,” all activists living in the *barrios* were required to contribute to the operation of their neighbourhood junta and try to integrate it into the Juntas Pro-Fomento network.⁸² Communist activism therefore implied participation in the *barrios* juntas.

In the working-class parishes of Caracas, the partisan networks had emerged emaciated from the dictatorship and the clandestinity imposed in 1948 on AD and the PCV and then in 1952 on the URD. The Christian democrat party, COPEI, which had remained legal during the dictatorship, was still a party of the wealthy classes in the capital.⁸³ The PCV had been the quickest to rebuild its networks in the *barrios*. The sources give no information on the total number of communist activists in Caracas in 1958, but it is possible to estimate them at a few thousand, perhaps four thousand at the most, because 4,490 were registered with the regional committee in July 1959.⁸⁴

Larrazábal left his post as president of the government’s junta and arrived late to the campaign trail on 14 November 1958. He was the URD’s official candidate and had accepted the PCV’s support, despite declaring he was in no way a communist. The campaign quickly swung in his favour in Caracas. The three main reasons for this were his prestigious reputation, due both to his personal charisma and his association with the Plan de Emergencia, his large activist support in the *barrios* from the URD and the PCV, and the AD regional committee’s fierce political opposition to their own party’s candidate, Rómulo Betancourt.

This last, purely political reason had consequences. The AD section’s executive committee in the Capital District had been led since 23 January by the leftist wing of the party, the “muchachos,” who had taken over the reins of AD when it had gone underground and all its founders had either disappeared or gone into exile. This young generation of Adecos, led by Alberto Domingo Rangel and Simon Saéz Mérida, had honed their activist and leadership skills in their struggle against the dictatorship alongside the communists. They aspired to radical social change and adhered more to Marxist-Leninist theses⁸⁵ than the social democracy that Betancourt wanted to build.⁸⁶ There was thus a deep chasm between them and the party caciques, who were two decades older and practically strangers and who had just walked back in and taken over the leadership of the party again in the August.

In Caracas, the “muchachos” had kept the party going throughout 1958. Until the last day of the campaign, the AD machine never really supported its presidential candidate. In fact, the “muchachos” had supported Larrazábal. Fortoul, who had been appointed secretary general of the AD’s regional executive committee (Comite Ejecutivo Seccional) in Caracas in July,⁸⁷

⁸¹ Bulletin, Comité Regional del D.F., Caracas, August 1958, Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 5.

⁸² Bulletin, Sec. de org. del CR., Caracas, October 1958, Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 5.

⁸³ Ángel E. Álvarez, “COPEI: la triste historia de un partido sin vocación de poder,” in *Los partidos políticos venezolanos en el siglo XXI*, ed. José E. Molina and Ángel E. Álvarez (Caracas: Vadell Hermanos Editores, 2004), 170.

⁸⁴ Organizational plan, CR del DF. Caracas, 30 July 1959, Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 5.

⁸⁵ Héctor Pérez Marcano, interviewed by Agustín Blanco Muñoz, in *La lucha armada: la izquierda revolucionaria surge*, ed. Agustín Blanco Muñoz (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1981), 293.

⁸⁶ Simón Sáez Mérida, interviewed par Agustín Blanco Muñoz, in *Ibidem*, p. 102 et p. 121. Lino Martínez, interviewed par Agustín Blanco Muñoz, in Agustín Blanco Muñoz, *La Lucha armada: hablan tres comandantes*, Caracas, Universidad central de Venezuela, 1982., p. 22.

⁸⁷ According to Gabriel Moro, “Por que perdió A.D. en Caracas?” *Momento*, 5 May 1963, 30–1.

had pushed Larrazábal to visit the *barrios* and the Plan's construction sites with him. The distribution of the Plan's resources thus fell to a composite frontline of anti-Betancourt activists. The revolutionary youth of AD, which had effectively managed the Plan, made sure it benefited those *barrios* juntas with the same political leanings as them, in other words those affiliated to the URD and the PCV.

The URD and PCV activists conducted a fierce campaign in Caracas in support of Larrazábal, specifically targeting the *barrios* vote.⁸⁸ With two weeks to go before the election, the PCV's regional committee organized a full afternoon of Frente Pro-Fomentista plenary meetings.⁸⁹ Between the active support of the URD and PCV activists and the discreet support of the Adecos, the electoral campaign in the capital's working-class districts almost exclusively supported Larrazábal.⁹⁰

The former president of the government's junta had proved unexpectedly popular among the people. In addition to being associated with the benefits of the Plan de Emergencia, he had, during his interim term as president, shown a great talent for communication. His "singular, trailblazing personality"⁹¹ came into its own during walkabouts, and he made sure he did as many as possible during his short election campaign in the big cities. He ended his campaign winding his way through the *barrios* in the west of Caracas standing or sitting on the roof of a car and wearing a Creole shirt and. This was the first time a major presidential candidate had openly and personally campaigned in the *barrios*.

The end of the democratic transition came on 7 December with a peaceful election and a voter turnout of 92.15%.⁹² This democratic victory belonged first and foremost to Betancourt, who won 49.18% of the votes, followed by Larrazábal with 34.61%.⁹³ In Caracas, however, Larrazábal won the vote with 69.33% against only 14.15% for Betancourt, who took third place.⁹⁴ AD in fact took fourth place in the capital, overtaken by COPEI, the PCV, and the URD, with a landslide victory. Never had the electoral gap between Caracas and the rest of Venezuela been so great. In the city's working-class parishes, Larrazábal enjoyed a sweeping victory.

For politicians on all sides, it was clear that 1958 had redefined the political and electoral landscape in Caracas. In a capital that was in a state of social and political turmoil, the new government identified the reasons for Larrazábal's popularity and used them to formulate a strategy to win over the popular electorate and a "policy of the masses" that could stabilize the new regime. The winning formula was clear. The government must subsidize the installation of utilities and facilities in the *barrios* via politicized Juntas Pro-Mejoras and publicly recognize, through municipal and even national elected representatives, the legitimacy of these juntas' demands. Through the streets and the ballot box, an official and eminently political order supporting the recognition of the *barrios*' permanence was therefore established without a single urban planning debate or legislative action.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

⁸⁹ Bulletin, CR. del DF., Caracas, November 1958, Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 5.

⁹⁰ Moro, "Por que perdió A.D. en Caracas?," *op. cit.*, 30.

⁹¹ Velásquez, "Aspectos de la evolución," *op. cit.*, 205

⁹² Consejo Supremo Electoral, *Los partidos políticos y sus estadísticas electorales (1946-1984)*, Vol. 1, Caracas, Consejo Supremo Electoral, 1987, 55.

⁹³ Consejo Supremo Electoral, *Resultad de las votaciones efectuadas el 7 de diciembre de 1958*, Caracas, Consejo Supremo Electoral, 1959, 5.

⁹⁴ Consejo Supremo Electoral, *Los partidos políticos*, *op. cit.*, 347.

3. 1959–1964: the official informal order supporting the *barrios*, a social democrat regime’s compromise in the midst of the Cold War

In February 1959, Betancourt was appointed head of an AD/URD/COPEI coalition government. However, this did nothing to calm the social and political situation in Caracas. Immigration to Caracas continued to rise, the *ranchos* continued to be erected, and the *barrios* continued to expand. In 1961, Caracas had 1,336,464 inhabitants, 5% more than at the end of 1959. However, according to many contemporary critics, the population of the *barrios* had doubled in these two years. One parliamentary commission reported in 1969 that the figures suggested a population rise in the capital from 20% to 40% between 1959 and 1961.⁹⁵

In addition, a dual economic and political constraint had prompted the government not to review the policy of supporting the Juntas Pro-Mejoras. As the economic slump continued, the business community sought to revive activity. It blocked any urban and land reforms and therefore any regularization of the *barrios*, even though the inhabitants could not afford the finance for regular housing due to mass unemployment. Politically, the country was entering a new Cold War phase marked by the Cuban Revolution. The Marxist left, which had won the *barrios* vote in December 1958, launched an insurrectionary and soon armed opposition to the government in 1960. For Betancourt and AD, it was essential for the stability of the regime to prevent the *barrios* from becoming red bastions. They therefore decided not to review the Juntas Pro-Mejoras policy that had made Larrazábal so popular in the *barrios* but to build on it and turn it to their advantage.

3.1. Reassuring the business community and ousting the Marxists from the *barrios*

The country was experiencing a liquidity crisis and sluggish growth during this period. Between 1959 and 1961, GDP growth slowed to 1.5% per year. The construction industry was on its knees, and almost half of the workers in the sector, many of whom were *barrios* inhabitants, remained unemployed.⁹⁶ To boost recruitment and honour the 1958 agreements with employers, the government introduced a “stimulus policy for the private sector”⁹⁷ and provided the country with the credit institutions and mortgage lenders needed to finance the private real estate market.

The land tenure system, which protected investors and only allowed expropriations in exchange for compensation at the market price, was therefore maintained, making the cost of new public land reserves in areas occupied by the *barrios* prohibitive. This was the case, for example, with the Banco Obrero’s attempted expropriation in 1961 of the 500 hectares of the La Urbina hacienda in Petare, where a dozen new *barrios* had recently been established. The

⁹⁵Acción en Venezuela, Departamento de Estudios e Investigaciones, *Informe para la “comisión especial del congreso sobre el problema de los barrios a nivel nacional” presida por el Dr. Raúl Ramos Calles*, Caracas, 1969, 3. These estimates were subsequently revised downwards.

⁹⁶See James Hanson, “Cycles of Economic Growth and Structural Change since 1950,” in *Venezuela: the Democratic Experience*, ed. John. D. Martz and David Myers (London: Praeger, 1977), 76–7.

⁹⁷Under the Punto Fijo pact, employers’ organizations had to be represented in the national coalition government. See Presidencia de la República, *Documentos que hicieron historia*, Tomo II, Caracas, Publicaciones de la presidencia de la República, 1962, 444 and 445 and Margarita López Maya, Luis Calcaño Gómez, and Thais Maingón, *Del pacto de Punto Fijo al pacto social: desarrollo, hegemonía y actores políticos en la Venezuela actual*, Caracas, Fondo Editorial Acta Científica Venezolana, 1989, 109.

compensation requested by the owners, which was deemed to be legal, was far too costly, and the expropriation was cancelled.⁹⁸

The 1960 law on the sale by lots of parcelled land further alienated the *ranchos* from the legal regime. While it protected apartment and house purchasers from developers, it accentuated the illegality of the *barrios* housing. Whether they had “invaded” or bought their plot of land, very few *barrios* residents had received the “documento de urbanización y de loteamiento” (urbanization and subdivision document) required by this law. This document was supposed to contain a list of the property titles for the twenty years prior to the acquisition and a summary of the collective utilities and facilities installed in accordance with the municipal decrees, both of which were impossible to provide for the *barrios*.⁹⁹ Despite these measures, the business community was still wary of AD, whose Marxist origins they had not forgotten.¹⁰⁰ Betancourt tried to give them guarantees and implemented an austerity policy, which was rejected by the left.

The other major source of confrontation between the government and the Marxist left was the Cuban Revolution. The movement was very popular in Venezuela, where Fidel Castro had made his first official visit as head of state on 23 January 1959, barely two weeks after entering Havana.

The PCV and more importantly the new Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria Revolutionary (MIR, revolutionary left movement), founded in July 1960 by the former “muchachos,” who had definitively severed their connections with Betancourt, were won over by the Castro ideal. In 1960, the confrontation between the two Marxist parties and the government pushed the country to the brink of civil war. Following the breakdown in diplomatic relations between the Betancourt government and Havana on 11 November, the PCV and the MIR called a general strike. This evolved into an armed insurrection, particularly in the Dos de Diciembre district, which had been renamed 23 de Enero (23 January).¹⁰¹ The PCV and the MIR then opted for an armed struggle, which drove them underground in May 1962.

The Marxist left’s entry into guerrilla warfare distanced it from the activism of the *barrios* and the life of the juntas. However, the PCV was able to draw on its Juntas Pro-Fomento to prepare the uprisings of November 1960.¹⁰² From 1960 to 1962, the insurrectionary climate prevailed, and the *barrios* were at the heart of governmental concerns. For AD, the rallying of the Juntas Pro-Mejoras was a key element in the struggle against the Marxist subversion.

3.2. The *barrio* transfigured into a *comunidad*: administering and installing utilities and facilities in the *barrios* without regularizing them

The Plan de Obras Extraordinarias was gradually phased out by the government between August 1959 and March 1960. Deprived of the Plan’s resources, the *pecevista* (PCV), *uredista* (URD), and *mirista* (MIR) juntas faced an “embargo”¹⁰³ from the Ministerio de Obras Públicas.

⁹⁸ See Luis Lander, *La vivienda popular en Venezuela La vivienda popular en Venezuela: especulación de tierras como un obstáculo para el desarrollo urbano*, Caracas, Cendes, UCV, 1976, 20.

⁹⁹ “La Ley de Ventas de Parcelas de 1960,” *Revista del Ministerio de Justicia*, Año X, 36, Caracas-Venezuela.

¹⁰⁰ See Arturo Sosa and Eloi Lengrand, *Del garibaldismo estudiantil a la izquierda criolla. Los orígenes marxistas del proyecto de Acción Democrática, 1928–1935* (Caracas: Centauro, 1981).

¹⁰¹ Velasco, *Barrios Rising*, *op. cit.*, 105–8

¹⁰² In *Boletín*, Comité Regional del D.F, Caracas, 18 September 1960, Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 7.

¹⁰³ Ray, *The Politics of the Barrios*, *op. cit.*, 116.

In November 1959, the PCV's regional committee noted "a certain decline in the *movimiento Pro-fomento* ... in response to the government's decision to wind down the Plan de Obras Extraordinarias."¹⁰⁴ When the PCV went underground in 1962, it had already lost control of the majority of the juntas previously affiliated to the Movimiento Pro-Fomento. Disillusioned by the armed struggle and the impossibility of ever having services installed in their *barrios*, many neighbourhood leaders distanced themselves from the party.

The government's main concern was to link the Juntas Pro-Mejoras to the regime, in other words to the administrations and to AD. The project was led by Alejandro Oropeza Castillo, appointed by the president as governor of the Capital District in 1960. Oropeza Castillo was a longstanding AD official, a member of the party's hard core for three decades, and a loyal Betancourt supporter. His career had also made him a specialist in housing. As director of the Banco Obrero during the El Trieno Adeco, he had authored the 1946 report supporting aid for self-construction in the *barrios*. During his subsequent exile under the military dictatorship, he worked as an international civil servant, heading up the UN's technical assistance office for Latin America. All the tools and personnel required for an informal, permanent, and politicized administration of the *barrios* were set up under his leadership from 1962 to 1964.

The intention was to administer not the *barrios* as such but rather their "community" of inhabitants, because the Juntas Pro-Mejoras officially became the instruments of a community development policy rather than urban planning or urban policy tools. Community development (*desarrollo de la comunidad*) was established as an objective of the 1960 four-year national economic and social development plan¹⁰⁵ and was described, broken down, and defended in publications and conferences by senior civil servants integrated into the networks of the United Nations and its Economic Commission for Latin America.¹⁰⁶ The *desarrollo de la comunidad* characterized the new regime's developmentalism and quickly permeated the public discourse of its officials. The Adeco political/administrative apparatus was deployed in the *barrios* under this *desarrollo de la comunidad* banner, and its discursal elements were widely mobilized.

In January 1962, the government created a financial and technical lever for its *desarrollo de la comunidad* policy called FUNDACOMUN, which was financed by USAID as part of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy's Alliance for Progress programme. FUNDACOMUN was a private funding agency that supported municipal councils in small-scale projects. Its president was appointed by the president of the Republic. Oropeza Castillo took over as its head in 1964, shortly before his death in a plane crash that same year.

In the spring of 1962, Oropeza Castillo had created the Movimiento Pro-Desarrollo de la Comunidad to coordinate the services of the Ministerio de Obras Públicas, Libertador's municipal council, and FUNDACOMUN. It was common knowledge that the Movimiento was an offshoot of AD. The governor appointed an Adeco activist, Ruben "Charlita" Muñoz, as its president.¹⁰⁷ Whether in his capacity as president of the Movimiento or as AD activist, Muñoz

¹⁰⁴ *Boletín*, Comité Regional del D.F., Caracas, 3 November 1959, Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Caja 5.

¹⁰⁵ CORDIPLAN, *II Plan de la Nación*, Oficina Central de Coordinación y Planificación de la Presidencia de la República, 1960, Chapter V.

¹⁰⁶ Synthesized in Maritza Izaguirre and Carola Ravell, *Nuevo enfoque en el desarrollo de la comunidad* (Buenos Aires: Humanitas, 1968).

¹⁰⁷ The *desarrollo de la comunidad* remained a special interest of Charlita Muñoz for a long time. He published a book at the end of the 1980s to popularize the concept, but it had already largely fallen out of favour in public policy by that time. Rubén Charlita Muñoz, *Desarrollo de la comunidad: Definición, interpretación, teoría y práctica* (Caracas: Ediciones Centauro, 1987).

would always publicly defend AD¹⁰⁸ and told US State Department officials that the Movimiento was dedicated to “isolating and eliminating leftist groups” in the *barrios*.¹⁰⁹

At the beginning of July 1962, a Comité de Remodelación de Barrios (committee for remodelling the barrios) was created within the municipal town planning office, again on the governor’s initiative.¹¹⁰ Oropeza Castillo oversaw this Comité as well as the Movimiento, which both worked hand in hand. As a municipal administration, the Comité applied for and obtained funds from FUNDACOMUN, which it then transferred to the Movimiento.¹¹¹ The *barrios* juntas affiliated to the Movimiento, which were often referred to as Juntas Pro-Desarrollo de la Comunidad, were also directly supported by FUNDACOMUN and the Ministerio de Obras Públicas, with whom they had signed contracts.¹¹² In 1964, the Movimiento expanded to the Petare *barrios* in the Distrito Sucre in the east.

By the time Betancourt handed over power in March 1964 to the newly elected president, his Adeco comrade Raúl Leoni, AD had become the leading electoral force in the *barrios* of Caracas. Its activists ran the majority of the Juntas Pro-Mejoras. These Juntas worked with public institutions and agencies, which recognized them as representatives of their “community.”

Informal status meant parallel administration. The *barrios* space was managed through the “participation” of the “community,” in other words through local leaders joining dedicated AD networks, which had been formalized as the Movimiento Pro-Desarrollo de la Comunidad. The Movimiento gathered together all the stakeholders, from junta members all the way up to the state governor, and defined the framework for an informal, semi-professionalized, undeclared administration of urban planning in the *barrios*. Financed by a private foundation (FUNDACOMUN) and operating in the name of the UN, inter-American cooperation, and the regime’s programmatic value (the *desarrollo de la comunidad*), it coordinated and facilitated the administration of the *barrios* and the installation of services by the municipalities and the Ministerio de Obras Públicas at the margins of both the law and the state-approved municipal and federal budgets.

3.3. The *juntas*: informal institutions for producing the *barrios*

In 1964, although it stopped short of legalizing the *barrios*, AD put in order all the political and administrative supports that had allowed them to develop since 1958, thus institutionalizing the “official informal order” noted by Pérez Perdomo and Nikken fifteen years later.

This newly institutionalized order led to an official *contra legem* recognition of the *barrios* through the links that united the Juntas Pro-Mejoras with public institutions and above all the municipal councils. These links were based on Adeco cronyism (*compadrazgo adeco*). The informal administration of the *barrios* corresponded to a management based on individual ties. The founding and consolidation of a *barrio*, the two critical phases in its creation, thus depended on the association of three different actor profiles: the elected municipal official, the

¹⁰⁸ Moro, “Por que perdió AD,” *op. cit.*, 34.

¹⁰⁹ Ray, *The Politics of the Barrios*, *op. cit.*, p.117.

¹¹⁰ On 4 July 1962. See Teolinda Bolívar and Iris Rosas, “Los Caminos de la Investigación de los Asentamientos Humanos Precarios,” in *La Ciudad: de la planificación a la privatización*, ed. Teolinda Bolívar, Juan José Martín Frechilla, and Alberto Lovera (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, Consejo de Desarrollo Científico y Humanístico Fondo Editorial Acta Científica Venezolana, 1994), 122.

¹¹¹ According to information provided to the US Embassy by Muñoz himself, again reported by Talton Ray. See Talton Ray, *The Politics of the Barrios*, *op. cit.*, 122.

¹¹² See FUNDACOMUN, *Memoria y Cuneta, 1963* (Caracas: El Cojo, 1964).

civil servant (generally from the Ministerio de Obras Públicas), and a resident leader of the neighbourhood junta.

The Julián Blanco *barrio*, located in the former La Urbina hacienda in Petare, is a paradigmatic example of the early stages of the urbanization of a *barrio* and has been extensively studied by researchers.¹¹³ It was established in the form of an urban land “invasion” in August 1960 by seventeen families. The three men who organized it and ensured its success were the founder himself, who set up his own *rancho* there, a municipal police sub-commander, and a municipal councillor, Julián Blanco. All three were Adecos.

The urbanization of the *barrio* did not begin until 1968. The founder had moved away in the interim, leaving the junta lacking in dynamism. However, it had been taken over in 1966 by a new resident, Edmundo Rondon. At the age of 27, he already had a great deal of knowledge about how a junta operated from his experience in the older, more central Unión *barrio*, also located in Petare, where he had grown up. As head of the junta of the newly renamed Julián Blanco *barrio*, he worked with a senior official from the Instituto Nacional de Obras Sanitarias (INOS, which was affiliated to the Ministerio de Obras Públicas), the syndic from the municipal council, the *síndico procurador*, and the municipal councillor Julián Blanco, who was well respected by the residents. In 1968, the water supply was installed by INOS, the electricity infrastructure was extended to the *barrio* by Electricidad de Caracas, and the sewage system was installed. In 1973, the junta persuaded INOS to install sewers and construct steps on the slopes. The *barrio* was now considered “consolidated,” in other words it was now equipped with the basic urban utilities and facilities.

Both the foundation and the equipping of the *barrio* had thus resulted from an administration that was at once informal and official. It was official because the junta and therefore also the *barrio* were recognized by the municipal council, which allowed it to contract with INOS and other town planning agencies. In addition, the municipal council recognized the inhabitants’ residence and probity documents (*constancias*), which were issued by the junta’s presidency. More generally, the Departamento Libertador’s Juntas Comunales and Sucre’s municipal council would also provide land occupation permits, certificates of residence, and good conduct references for residents and their *ranchos*.¹¹⁴ In the case of the Julián Blanco *barrio*, the municipal council’s support also prompted the private landowners to accept the occupation. The administration was also informal because the *barrio* junta had no legal status. The president acted under his own name to contract with INOS and other agencies, recruit workers from among the inhabitants, and collect water charges. Rondon, like many other Juntas Pro-Mejoras leaders, was a true junta entrepreneur, an unavowed professional in the urbanization of his *barrio* and the management of its urban services.

Establishing and equipping this *barrio* as a permanent settlement was also an eminently political move. Every individual involved in the urbanization of the Julián Blanco *barrio* was an Adeco activist. They were all part of the Movimiento Pro-Desarrollo de la Comunidad created by Julián Blanco in the Distrito Sucre in 1964. The urbanization of the *barrio* was therefore dependent on intermediaries and elected representatives of the party in power. It was also subject to the electoral calendar; in the Julián Blanco *barrio*, the installation of services had been made possible by the cronyism links in the electoral years (1968 and 1973). There, as in the rest of the capital, the foundation and equipping of the *barrios* progressed in step with the elections.

¹¹³ Iraida Montaña, *Les invasions de terres urbaines au Venezuela: un problème...ou une solution?* (Phd thesis, Université de Paris Val-de-Marne, 1980).

¹¹⁴ The Junta Comunal of the working-class parish of El Valle issued 51 such documents relating to *barrios* housing during the first six months of 1975. Nikken, Pérez Perdomo, *op. cit.*, 56.

Conclusion

In the late 1970s, Pérez Perdomo and Nikken were surprised to find no court decisions concerning landowner/occupant disputes in the *barrios* of Caracas.¹¹⁵ Although the *barrios* had remained confined to an almost unchanged illegality since the early 1940s, they were now permanently situated in the Caracas landscape, albeit outside the legal and judicial systems.

Two major but contrasting shifts in the political and social environment that took place since the beginning of the 1940s, namely the legalistic and modernising authoritarianism of the military government and the democratisation of 1958, led to an official recognition of the *barrios*. These two political shifts resulted from an attempt, in an accelerated timeframe, to simultaneously respond to the pressure on land, to social issues, and to political tensions in the context of the Cold War.

From 1941 to 1948, the social democrat and communist parties gradually developed a position against their conservative opponents in support of the development of the *barrios*. The 1948 coup d'état brought down the Adeco government before the change in legislation that had been advocated by the national housing commission could be put on the agenda. The new military junta aligned itself with the interests of the real estate and landowner sectors by pursuing a resolutely legalistic policy towards the *barrios*, which were to be eradicated.

In a context of falling oil exports, the transition of 1958 saw the interim government put together, in a very short space of time marked by the social crisis and the electoral reconfiguration, an extralegal policy to install services in the *barrios*. While this new informal urbanization policy was a continuation of that proposed by the Adeco government of 1945–1948, it differed in two crucial respects, namely the unprecedented scale of the informal urbanization and the political benefit that the Marxist parties, not least the PCV, derived from it just as the Cuban Revolution had finally triumphed.

Towards the end of 1958, the Betancourt government realized it needed to recognize the *barrios* and equip them with utilities and facilities if it was to stand any chance of success in the upcoming elections against the revolutionary parties. In addition, the sanctuarization of land rights had to guarantee that the economic elites did not support a scenario similar to that of 1948. The “official informal order” to make the *barrios* permanent was thus institutionalized. It became a regime compromise, an improvised, urbanistic third way that consolidated the democratization. The social democrat councillors’ support for the irregular occupation of urban land and the challenge of preserving the fragile democratization in Venezuela contrasts with the Chilean situation of 1957 analysed in this volume by Emanuel Gianotti¹¹⁶ and explains why in Caracas, unlike in Santiago, the “tomas” were not the tools of choice to challenge the regime and the existing legal order.

The debate around the regularization of the *barrios* thus disappeared as the *barrios* massified. It was not until 1974 and the country was enjoying renewed prosperity thanks to the oil industry boom that the Venezuelan authorities tried to revive the plan for a legalistic management of the *barrios*, this time however by putting them “in order” through the installation of services and their hypothetical regularization.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 38.

¹¹⁶ Emanuel Gianotti’s chapter.

¹¹⁷ With decree no. 332, the president of the Republic established a “programme to put in order the areas occupied by the poor districts of the country’s cities.” (*Programa para el ordenamiento de las áreas ocupadas por los barrios pobres de las ciudades del país*). République du Venezuela, Presidencia de la República, *Gaceta Oficial* N°30.472 del 13-08-1974.