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Author(s): ROBERT SAMET

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The Denouncers: Populism and the Press in Venezuela

ROBERT SAMET*

Abstract. Despite recent attention to the relationship between the media and populist mobilisation in Latin America, there is a misfit between the everyday practices of journalists and the theoretical tools that we have for making sense of these practices. The objective of this article is to help reorient research on populism and the press in Latin America so that it better reflects the grounded practices and autochthonous norms of the region. To that end, I turn to the case of Venezuela, and a practice that has been largely escaped attention from scholars – the use of *denuncias*.

Keywords: Populism, journalism, denuncias, corruption scandals, Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, José Vicente Rangel

Venezuela needs every citizen to be a denouncer. The *denuncia* has an ethical basis and I use it as a public service. It is a basic institution of democracy.

José Vicente Rangel¹

The knock at the door came swiftly. Late in the afternoon of 5 April 1988, Venezuelan intelligence officers showed up at the home of noted journalist and three-time presidential candidate José Vicente Rangel. Just 24 hours earlier Rangel used his popular news show to air a series of public accusations, referred to by journalists as *denuncias*. One of these concerned irregularities in an arms deal involving Venezuela's president and minister of defence. Rangel's

Robert Samet is an assistant professor of anthropology at Union College. Email: sametr@union.edu.

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¹ Elyina Gallardo and Mildred Hernandez, 'El periodismo de denuncia: destabilizador del sistema democrático?', unpubl. thesis, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1993, p. 145.

denuncias suggested high-level graft within the military, lack of civilian oversight, and possible links to the Iran-Contra affair. These accusations were not frivolous. They were backed by strong documentary evidence and Rangel's own reputation for integrity. Little wonder the government was quick to respond.

A visit from the normally secretive Dirección de Inteligencia Militar (Office of Military Intelligence) was intended to silence Rangel and quell news coverage of the affair. It had the opposite effect. In the days and weeks that followed, the Venezuelan press was flooded with stories about the arms deal scandal, which confirmed José Vicente Rangel's reputation as one of Latin America's foremost denouncer-journalists.

For purposes of this article, this episode serves as a window onto the relationship between the press and populist mobilisation. It is only recently that this relationship has gained the attention of scholars.² Even still there is a misfit between the everyday practices of Latin American journalists and the theoretical tools that we have for making sense of these practices. The starting point for most research on the press in Latin America is an assumed liberal democratic framework that fits awkwardly with the norms of journalism in much of the region.³ The objective of this article is to help reorient research on media in Latin America so that it better reflects the grounded practices and autochthonous norms of the place it seeks to describe. To that end, I turn to the case that I know best, Venezuela, and a practice that has largely escaped attention from scholars, the use of denuncias.⁴

² Gianpietro Mazzoleni, Julianne Stewart and Bruce Horsfield (eds.), *The Media and Neo-Populism: A Contemporary Comparative Analysis* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003); Sylvio Waisbord, 'Democracy, Journalism, and Latin American Populism', *Journalism*, 14 (2013), pp. 504–21; Eduardo Frajman, 'Broadcasting Populist Leadership: Hugo Chávez and *Álo Presidente*', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 46: 3 (2014), pp. 501–26.

³ Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini have gone furthest in probing how the media works in political systems that are democratic but not explicitly liberal. Their description of polarised pluralist systems is a good starting point for understanding the press in Venezuela. Like their colleagues in Latin America and Southern Europe, Venezuelan journalists advocate for specific causes. They are tied to such causes by a combination of socio-economic and historical forces. As Hallin and Mancini have observed, the price of advocacy is professional autonomy, a critique that Venezuelan journalists often echo. Still to be explored are the ideals that lead many journalists to embrace their role as advocates despite such misgivings. See Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Daniel Hallin and Stylianos Papathanassopoulos, 'Political Clientelism and the Media: Southern Europe and Latin America in Comparative Perspective', *Media, Culture & Society*, 24: 2 (2012), pp. 175–95. For an anthropological approach, see Naomi Schiller, 'Reckoning with Press Freedom: Community Media, Liberalism, and Press Freedom in Caracas, Venezuela', *American Ethnologist*, 40: 3 (2013), pp. 540–54.

⁴ By 'the press', I am referring to a spectrum of news media across different formats (print, broadcast, and digital) and different ownership structures (private, state sponsored, and community media). The dissemination of denuncias is common to all.

The term denuncia translates as ‘denunciation’, ‘accusation’ or ‘complaint’. In the legal field a denuncia is a report filed with the police or the courts in order to start an investigation. It is an indictment. Outside of the juridical realm, the term denuncia retains its accusatory significance but takes on aspects of public performance. It is a shaming of sorts.

My interest in denunciation grows out of nearly a decade of ethnographic research on journalism in Venezuela. I first recognised the importance of denuncias while conducting participant observation alongside reporters in Caracas (2007–09). These journalists saw denunciation as a fundamentally democratic practice. It was an act of consciousness-raising and an exercise of free speech. Through denuncias the press exposed the wrongdoings of the powerful before the court of public opinion. By speaking truth to power such press-fuelled revelations could provide the impetus for democratic reforms or even spark political revolution. However, if journalists’ use of denuncias was tied to their vision of democracy, these were not instruments of rational-critical debate, nor were they the outgrowth of a bourgeois public sphere. Rather, denuncias were tools of popular mobilisation.⁵

Under the right conditions, denuncias function as discursive building blocks of populist movements. Following the practice of denunciation reveals a relationship between populism and the press that has been largely ignored. Nowhere was this more evident than Venezuela at the turn of the twenty-first century. During the socio-economic crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, the private press functioned as Venezuela’s most influential political institution. It helped channel widespread discontent into a populist backlash against the two parties that governed the country since the fall of the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship in 1958. Although there is a massive body of literature about this

⁵ Denuncias, which proliferated in Latin America during the second half of the twentieth century, are linked to a legal-testimonial tradition with roots in Christian witnessing and the formation of modern nation-states. Curiously, a history of denuncias in Latin America has not been written. My research traces them to the *denunciatio* of canon law in medieval Europe, itself an adaptation of Roman law. See Paul Fournier, *Les officialités au moyen âge* (Paris: E. Plon et cie, 1880). Early versions of the denuncia likely arrived in the Americas with the Spanish Inquisition’s legal apparatus. See Henry Charles Lea, *The Inquisition in the Spanish Dependencies* (London: Macmillan, 1922); Irene Silverblatt, *Modern Inquisitions* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). A similar practice was evident in letters of complaint addressed to the Spanish crown by colonial subjects, e.g., Bartolomé de las Casas’ *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (Madrid: Catedra, 2006 [1542]). This genealogy notwithstanding, the denuncias that proliferated across Latin America during the twentieth century most closely resembled the style of denunciation practised in Revolutionary France. See Jacques Guilhaumou, ‘Fragments of a Discourse of Denunciation (1789–1794)’, in Keith M. Baker (ed.) *The Terror* (Emerald Group, 1994), pp. 139–53; Colin Lucas, ‘The Theory and Practice of Denunciation in the French Revolution’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 68: 4 (1996), pp. 768–85. Unlike the Inquisitorial system, denunciation during the French Revolution tied the defence of the nation to mass publicity.

social crisis and the rise of Hugo Chávez, little has been written on the role of the press. This elision is surprising. Among Venezuelan journalists it is widely acknowledged that the private press played a key role in the return of populism. The antagonism that would later put Chávez and the press on opposite sides of the political divide has effectively concealed their historic entanglement.⁶

I revisit this chapter from Venezuela's recent past in order to make a broader theoretical claim about populism and the press. To this end, I focus on José Vicente Rangel and the arms deal scandal. Rangel stands out as an exemplar of this style of journalism, although a similar story could be written using any one of a number of journalist-denouncers from this period including Rafael Poleo, Marcel Granier, Alfredo Peña, or Miguel Henrique Otero. Concentrating on one denouncer and a single corruption scandal is deliberate. My purpose is to describe the tacit knowledge that informs the practice of denunciation by reporters, their editors and their sources. This particular corruption scandal and the firestorm that erupted around Rangel's use of denuncias was a rare example in which that tacit knowledge became explicit. It usefully illustrates a larger pattern that I observed during fieldwork, a pattern that linked mass media and populist mobilisation.⁷

Before proceeding, a word about populism and what it means in the context of this article. Populism is rarely a term of endearment. It is commonly associated with demagoguery, mob mentalities and charismatic leadership. For my purposes, populism is not a pejorative but a descriptive term for analysing the relationship between the press and popular movements. This approach builds on the work of Ernesto Laclau and others.⁸ It highlights affinities between populism and democracy, affinities rooted in the ideal of popular sovereignty.⁹

⁶ This is not to downplay the multiple factors that animate populist movements, nor is it to suggest that the private press was the sole engine of populist mobilisation in Venezuela. Rather, it is an attempt to emphasise one factor that is routinely overlooked.

⁷ It is possible to concentrate on a single case thanks to the robust body of research that supports key facets of my argument. Readers interested in further evidence about the role of the press and populist mobilisation in Venezuela during the 1980s and 1990s can be directed to a pair of studies about the impact of anti-corruption campaigns. Aníbal Pérez-Liñán's *Presidential Impeachment and the New Political Instability in Latin America* demonstrates that sustained exposure to mass mediated corruption scandals during this period decreased presidential popularity, fuelled public outrage and increased the probability of presidential impeachment (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Kirk Hawkins' *Venezuela's Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective* shows that corruption scandals gave rise to a series of populist movements, of which Hugo Chávez's Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement (MBR-200) was just one of several examples (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁸ Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (New York: Verso, 1977); Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2005).

⁹ Torcuato Di Tella, 'Populism and Reform in Latin America', in Claudio Véliz (ed.), *Obstacles to Change in Latin America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 47–73; Peter Worsley, 'The Concept of Populism', in Ghita Ionescu and Ernesto Gellner (eds.), *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson,

The advantage of this approach is that it allows us to study the formation of populist movements from the ground up, starting with the practices of journalists, editors and media owners.¹⁰ Specifically, I argue that denuncias are an articulating practice, the discursive glue, that transforms isolated demands into what Laclau calls ‘chains of equivalence’.¹¹ I offer this as an alternative to much of the current research on media and populism, which takes a top-down approach and tends to reduce the media to a tool of charismatic leadership. If the emergence of charismatic leaders is one potential outcome of populist movements, it is not their necessary precondition. The Venezuelan case attests to this.¹²

The Anti-Power Broker (1950s–1970s)

In 1998, on the eve of Hugo Chávez’s first electoral victory, an interviewer asked José Vicente Rangel if he would join the new government. ‘No, no, never, absolutely not’, replied Rangel. ‘I am the anti-power in Venezuela.’¹³ The irony, of course, is that Rangel went on to become one of the most prominent members of the Chávez administration. He served as vice-president of the republic (2002–07), minister of defence (2001–02) and minister of foreign affairs (1999–2001). Even before that, though, he played an

1969), pp. 212–50; Margaret Canovan, ‘Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy’, *Political Studies*, 47: 1 (1999), pp. 2–16; Benjamin Arditi, ‘Populism as a Spectre of Democracy: A Response to Canovan’, *Political Studies*, 52 (2004), pp. 135–43; Francisco Panizza (ed.), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (New York: Verso, 2005).

¹⁰ By focusing on the press and populist mobilisation, I am bracketing the question of how populist movements evolve once they attain power. For much the same reason, I do not examine the networks of patronage and influence that populist governments establish once they come to power, i.e., clientelism. For a similar approach see Robert Jansen, ‘Populist Mobilization: A New Theoretical Approach to Populism’, *Sociological Theory*, 29: 2 (2011), pp. 75–96.

¹¹ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, pp. 77–83.

¹² This approach has implications for analysing the Chávez era, which are important to note from the outset. Most commentators focus exclusively on the populism of *chavismo*, downplaying the extent to which a populist logic also organises the opposition. There are certainly differences between these two projects. Whereas the Bolivarian Revolution grew out of a kind of Left populism, large swathes of the opposition were associated with the neoliberal populism of Reagan and Thatcher. Close attention to their political practices, however, reveals striking similarities in the ways that these two movements attempt to mobilise support. Denunciation is common to both. Increasingly, scholars are beginning to recognise these parallels. Robert Samet, ‘The Photographer’s Body: Populism, Polarization, and the Uses of Victimhood in Venezuela’, *American Ethnologist*, 40: 3 (2013), pp. 525–39; Luis Fernando Angosto-Ferrándiz (ed.), *Democracy, Revolution, and Geopolitics in Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Kenneth Roberts, *Changing Course in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹³ César Rondón, *País de estreno* (Caracas, Venezuela: Libros de El Nacional, 1998), p. 73.

instrumental role in events that gave rise to *chavismo*. Rangel and his colleagues in the press led the charge against the government of President Carlos Andrés Pérez and the two political parties that governed Venezuela for 30 years.¹⁴ Instead of tanks and military tactics, they relied on mass-mediated denuncias like the arms deal scandal.

Following the early stages of Rangel's career, we can observe the evolution of denunciation as a political practice in Venezuela and trace a genealogy of the Bolivarian Revolution that is too often forgotten by those who focus on charismatic leadership. This genealogy dates back to the Cold War period.¹⁵ Denuncias went from being weapons in the fight against dictatorship during the 1950s, to instruments of leftist struggle during the 1960s, to a protest against corruption during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Rangel was in the vanguard of struggles against state oppression every step of the way, skilfully merging careers in both journalism and politics.

Rangel's political career was born in the trenches of leftist struggle against the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1951–58). As a member of Unión Republicana Democrática (URD) he campaigned for constitutional reform and free elections. For these activities he was briefly imprisoned and then exiled to Chile and Spain. Upon returning to Venezuela in 1957, Rangel once again joined the clandestine campaign to restore democratic rule.¹⁶ On 20 January 1958 the Venezuelan press, or what was left of it after years of censorship and attrition, famously went on strike, helping spark the popular uprising that ousted Pérez Jiménez. That same year Rangel won a position in the fledgling congress as a representative for URD.

It was as director of URD's newspaper *Clarín* that Rangel first assumed the mantle of denouncer-journalist. His primary target was the government of President Rómulo Betancourt (1959–64) and the political pact that founded the ostensible democracy. The 'Punto Fijo' pact included URD, but it intentionally excluded the Communist Party of Venezuela (PCV) despite the fact that the PCV had been the most active campaigner against the dictatorship and had sacrificed the most in the cause of democracy. Their marginalisation was a precursor to outright persecution. Rangel along

¹⁴ Pérez was removed from office in August 1993 on corruption charges related to the misuse of a discretionary fund. Rangel was the journalist who broke the story of the so-called 'partida secreta'.

¹⁵ On the historical roots of the Bolivarian Revolution see Steve Ellner and Daniel Hellinger (eds.), *Venezuelan Politics in the Chávez Era* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2003); Alejandro Velasco, "'We Are Still Rebels': The Challenge of Popular History in Bolivarian Venezuela", in David Smilde and Daniel Hellinger (eds.), *Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 157–86; George Ciccariello-Maher, *We Created Chávez: A People's History of the Venezuelan Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Alfredo Peña, *Conversaciones con José Vicente Rangel* (Caracas: Editorial Ateneo de Caracas, 1978).

with the left-wing of URD sided with their former allies. Whereas some took up arms, Rangel dedicated himself to another form of struggle. He and his colleague used *Clarín* to broadcast a message of dissent. Looking back he remembers the newspaper ‘as a media outlet dedicated to the denuncia; one that gave space to all sectors of the left and took on the atrocities of the government, human rights violations, and military and political repression’.¹⁷ Some of the most powerful accusations levelled by *Clarín* concerned the torture and disappearance of political activists. In response to these denuncias, the government suspended the paper on at least half-a-dozen occasions before finally shutting it down in 1964.

Rangel cemented his reputation as Venezuela’s denouncer extraordinaire thanks to the Lovera case, which exemplified the use of denuncias as a tool of leftist struggles during the 1960s.¹⁸ Professor Alberto Lovera was a trade unionist and a key figure within Venezuela’s communist party (PCV). On 18 October 1965, he was apprehended in Caracas by the secret police, tortured, and eventually murdered. His remains were dumped off the coast of Lechería, 200 miles east of Caracas. It would have been a classic disappearance had not the disfigured body been tangled in the nets of a local fisherman.

Rangel first denounced the Lovera case before congress on 24 November 1965. In a series of detailed statements he used the murder to expose a systematic campaign of state terror. It was a bold stand. At a moment when leftists were being openly persecuted, Rangel was taking his life in his own hands. Looking back, the noted Venezuelan writer Orlando Araujo praised his grace under fire, likening the case to the Dreyfus affair and Rangel’s denuncias to Émile Zola’s ‘*J’Accuse*’.¹⁹

The Lovera case helped catapult denunciation to the forefront of leftist political strategy in Venezuela. By the early 1970s it had become clear that armed struggle had failed, and leftist revolutionaries turned to electoral politics.²⁰ When a group of ex-guerrillas formed Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) in 1971, it seemed only natural that Rangel would become the party’s first presidential candidate.

As the Venezuelan left began to embrace the media and elections as the core of its political strategy, the object of journalistic denuncias shifted from state terror to corruption. The magazine *Reventón*, which appeared in 1971, epitomised the shift. Youthful and irreverent, *Reventón* prioritised political and corporate malfeasance. Its first edition featured a slate of investigative articles all dedicated to the theme of corruption with titles like ‘Who Owns Venezuela’,

¹⁷ Alejandro Botía, *Auge y crisis del cuatro poder: la prensa en democracia* (Caracas: Debate, 2007), p. 18.

¹⁸ José Vicente Rangel, *Expediente negro* (Caracas, Venezuela: Imprenta Nacional, 2004), p. 104.

¹⁹ Rangel, *Expediente negro*, p. 104.

²⁰ Velasco, ‘We Are Still Rebels’, pp. 165–74; Ciccariello-Maher, *We Created Chávez*, pp. 22–66.

'Venezuela Smells Bad', 'How to Evade Taxes', 'The Oil Companies', 'The Secret of the Country [Club]', and 'Complete List of Venezuelan Businesses Controlled by Foreign Companies'.²¹ Although the topic of state terror did not vanish, it was increasingly overshadowed by the spectre of corruption. Rangel's writings from this period underscore the shift. Corruption became the central theme of his opinion columns from 1971 forward. He repeatedly wrote of his fear that 'corruption was rapidly inundating the national body politic' gradually merging politics and criminality.²²

Denuncias of corruption fused leftist struggle with widespread discontent among Venezuelans of all political stripes. It was not just communists and their sympathisers who were being wronged. It was the entire country. This new wave of denunciations brought together a heterogeneous mix of political actors so that by the mid-1980s, denuncias were a mainstream practice among journalists and politicians across the political spectrum. The arms deal scandal was just one example of the hundreds, possibly thousands, of denuncias that proliferated during this period of acute socio-economic crisis. However, before turning to this episode in Venezuelan history, it helps to situate the practice of denunciation within a broader context. Drawing on the body of research about the rise and spread of *testimonio* (testimonial) literature, I show that denuncias are an outgrowth of a much older representative tradition in which Latin American journalists imagined themselves as extensions of the popular will.

Truth in Journalism

The proliferation of denuncias near the end of the twentieth century coincided with the rise of press power. This was not just in Venezuela. Rather, it was part of a region-wide movement in which Latin American journalists transformed themselves into crusaders against the abuse of state power. Seemingly overnight, the presses of Latin America were flooded with muckraking stories about political malfeasance, economic corruption and human rights abuses.²³ This was a profound shift. For much of the twentieth century the mainstream media in Latin America was subservient to ruling elites.²⁴ Military regimes and entrenched political parties used a combination of coercion and brute force to silence opposition from the mass media. Under these

²¹ *Reventón*, 1 (1971), Archivo de la Universidad Central de Venezuela, Caracas.

²² José Vicente Rangel, *Tiempo de verdades* (Caracas: Ediciones Centauro, 1973).

²³ See Aníbal Pérez-Liñán on this quantitative jump in mass mediated scandals. *Presidential Impeachment and the New Political Instability in Latin America*, p. 65.

²⁴ Sylvio Waisbord, *Watchdog Journalism in South America: News, Accountability, and Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Rosental Alves, 'From Lapdog to Watchdog', in Hugo de Burgh (ed.), *Making Journalists* (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 181–202; Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, *Presidential Impeachment and the New Political Instability in Latin America*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

circumstances, it was rare for mainstream news outlets to denounce wrongdoing. This pattern of behaviour suddenly changed in the 1980s and 1990s with a series of press-driven scandals in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela. Unlike its 'lapdog' predecessors, this new brand of journalism prioritised the discovery and denunciation of such wrongdoings.²⁵ News outlets adopted a crusading style of reporting, which exposed the sordid underbelly of ruling elites and transformed the press into a formidable political force. Nowhere was the rise of press power more evident than in Venezuela, where journalists, scholars and pundits observed the emergence of what was widely known as *el periodismo de denuncia*, the journalism of denunciation.²⁶

The euphoria of democratisation that swept across Latin America at the end of the twentieth century led many observers to imagine that the journalism of denunciation presaged a shift towards liberal democracy. Take, for example, the historian and literary critic Ángel Rama. In his description of the Argentine reporter Rodolfo Walsh, Rama extols him as the archetypal 'denouncer-journalist, who is dedicated only to the truth, who discovers secret plots and brings them to light with the written word, the guardian of honesty, the incorruptible servant of justice, in sum, this descendent of North American liberalism, more mythic than real, in whom certain central cultural values of the past have persisted'.²⁷ Lost in Rama's celebration of the denouncer-journalist is the fact that these ideals of truth-telling have been anathema to the North American tradition of reporting since the late nineteenth century.²⁸ What Rama depicts better fits the Spanish-American tradition of representation described by François-Xavier Guerra or Jesús Martín-Barbero.²⁹ Historians and literary scholars have explored this tradition

²⁵ Alves, 'From Lapdog to Watchdog', pp. 181–202.

²⁶ This new style of journalism has been referred to as 'the vanguard press', 'watchdog journalism', 'civic journalism', and 'mass-mediated scandal'. In Venezuela it was referred to as 'the journalism of denunciation' throughout the 1990s. Rosental Alves, 'Democracy's Vanguard Newspapers in Latin America', paper presented at International Communications Association meetings in Montreal, 1997; Waisbord, *Watchdog Journalism in South America*; Sallie Hughes, *Newsrooms in Conflict: Journalism and Democratization in Mexico* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006); Pérez-Liñán, *Presidential Impeachment and the New Political Instability in Latin America*.

²⁷ Ángel Rama, 'Rodolfo Walsh: la narrativa en el conflicto de las culturas', in *Ficciones argentinas: antología de lecturas críticas* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2004), p. 298.

²⁸ As a journalistic ideal, objectivity emerged in the wake of World War I, as doubts about the perfectibility of democracy and the possibility of unvarnished facts crept into the consciousness of North American journalists. Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

²⁹ François-Xavier Guerra, 'The Spanish-American Tradition of Representation and its European Roots', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 26: 1 (1994), pp. 1–35; Jesús Martín-Barbero, *Communication, Culture, and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations* (London: Sage, 1993).

at great length, describing its impact on everything from elections to telenovelas; however, its importance is most explicitly spelt out in the body of research on testimonio.

Testimonio helps us understand the journalism of denunciation as a cultural form whose political stakes are linked to a particular representational logic.³⁰ There have been numerous debates about the formal and historical parameters of testimonio, which I will not revisit here.³¹ Suffice it to say that during the late 1960s it gained recognition as a distinctive literary genre in which the popular sectors, long silenced, asserted their right to self-representation. George Yúdice has defined testimonial writing as ‘an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g. war, oppression, revolution, etc.)’. This is not biography per se because the witness is doing more than describing his or her own life story. He or she is performing as a self-conscious agent of *el pueblo* who denounces ‘a situation of exploitation and oppression’.³² Testimonio is popular culture in that its urgency and authenticity is predicated upon its identification with popular struggles. The ideal protagonist of testimonio is both a representative of the popular sectors and a witness to their suffering.

The power of testimonio, what captured the attention of scholars worldwide, was its promise to move people who had been marginalised throughout history to the centre of national and international politics.³³ Testimonio represented the hope for a popular democratic movement in which subaltern populations finally claimed their rightful place as citizens. Per John Beverley’s famous formulation, testimonio was nothing less than the cultural form taken by popular struggles for political representation in the late twentieth century. Just as the eighteenth-century novel heralded the rise of the European bourgeoisie, testimonio was the literary expression of popular resistance in the Americas.

Scholarly interest in testimonio as an emergent cultural form focused almost exclusively on film and book-length works, yet the alternative press played an equally important role in popular struggles. Like testimonio, the alternative press functioned as a forum for popular resistance in which tropes of

³⁰ One of the disservices done to testimonio was the refusal by some North American critics to recognise it as a unique representational practice, despite the fact that its authors were explicit on this point. Mary Louis Pratt, ‘I, Rigoberta Menchú and the “Culture Wars”’, in Arturo Arias (ed.), *The Rigoberto Menchú Controversy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press), pp. 29–57; John Beverly, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

³¹ Miguel Barnet, ‘La novela-testimonio: socioliteratura’, in *Union*, 6 (1969), pp. 99–122; John Beverly, ‘The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio*’, in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 35 (1989), pp. 11–28; George Yúdice, ‘*Testimonio* and Postmodernism’, in *Latin American Perspectives*, 18: 3 (1991), pp. 15–31.

³² Yúdice, ‘*Testimonio* and Postmodernism’, p. 17.

³³ Beverley, ‘The Margin at the Center’, pp. 11–28.

witnessing and denunciations of wrongdoing were laden with a palpable sense of political urgency. And like *testimonio* it provided a medium through which popular political identities became visible as such. From the standpoint of cultural production, *testimonio* and alternative journalism emerged from the same historical conjuncture, included many of the same figures and drew on similar representational strategies.³⁴

The practice of denunciation marks a subtle but important departure from the ideal of ‘objectivity’ enshrined in North American journalism. ‘Truthfulness’ is the dominant ideal that is recognised by Venezuelan audiences and journalists alike. While facts are one important element in constructing a truthful account, Latin American journalists do not put their faith in facts alone. Truthfulness means recognising that facts are situated within a social-political context and that journalism, as such, is an explicitly political endeavour. These values are implicit in the practice of denunciation, which channels popular outrage over persistent injustice and the hidden wrongdoings of the powerful.

A brief illustration must suffice in place of further elaboration on ‘objectivity’ and ‘truthfulness’ as two regimes of truth.³⁵ In the Anglo-American tradition, news outlets are frequently accused of bias, but they are almost never accused of lying. Indeed, labelling someone a ‘liar’ is almost unthinkable in Anglo-American journalism. In Venezuela, the charge of bias is superfluous and never made because it is assumed from the start; however, it is quite common to call a news outlet, a journalist or a politician a ‘liar’ because the measuring stick for journalistic integrity is truthfulness rather than objective distance.

The point is not to elevate one ideal (truthfulness or objectivity) over the other; rather it is to insist that different regimes of truth produce different outcomes and function according to different logics. Objectivity, as it has come to be understood in the Anglo-American tradition, is tied to ideals of consensus and the public good. These beliefs are encapsulated in Jürgen Habermas’ description of the bourgeois public sphere, the promises and perils of which are

³⁴ The line between literature and journalism is particularly difficult to distinguish in Latin America given the tradition of the *letrado*. Men (and later women) of letters wrote across many genres, so that literary and journalistic careers overlapped. On the confluence of journalism and literature see Ángel Rama, *The Lettered City* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996). On the relevance of journalism to *testimonio* see Michael Moody, ‘Isabel Allende and the Testimonial Novel’, *Confluencia*, 2 (1986), pp. 39–43; Margaret Randall, ‘Reclaiming Voices: Notes on a New Female Practice in Journalism’, *Latin American Perspectives*, 18 (1991), pp. 103–13.

³⁵ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977* (New York: Vintage, 1980). For a slightly different application of this concept to media production in Venezuela see Naomi Schiller, ‘Liberal and Bolivarian Regimes of Truth: Toward a Critically Engaged Anthropology in Caracas, Venezuela’, *Transforming Anthropology*, 19: 1 (2011), pp. 35–42.

well known.³⁶ Truthfulness, as it functions in Latin America, is more closely associated with ideals of self-determination and popular sovereignty (i.e. government of the people, by the people and for the people). It is not the public but ‘el pueblo’ that dominates discourse on the body politic. This is not to say that a powerful belief in the public good is absent in Latin America or that the Anglo-American tradition has abandoned the people and popular sovereignty. Nor is it to say that these particular ideological configurations will persist indefinitely. Both concepts of the people and the public were crucial to the development of modern republics at the dawn of the nineteenth century, and they remain constitutive poles of democratic representation. However, it is fair to say that in Latin America the people and popular sovereignty are the ideals that are most often invoked in political discourse, including the discourse of democracy.

We must situate the journalism of denunciation against a historical and ideological backdrop in which ‘the people’ represent the *sine qua non* of politics. As a style of reporting, it is concerned with mobilising popular, democratic resistance to the wrongdoings of the powerful. Journalistic denuncias are not intended to foster deliberation on the part of one or many publics. Rather, they are imagined as an articulation of the popular will. In Venezuela at the end of the twentieth century, taking the side of the people against entrenched interests was a conscious choice on the part of a handful of powerful journalists and one that coincided with the professional obligation to expose the truth. Putting themselves at the service of the popular will, journalists became political protagonists who helped create the conditions for populist mobilisation.

The Delinquent Society (1980s–1990s)

The relationship between the private press and populist mobilisation in Venezuela was most clearly observable during the late 1980s when mass-mediated denuncias of corruption fanned flames of discontent. Reflecting back on this period, the journalist Nelson Rivera writes: ‘It was the perception that there was something rotten that only benefited a few, that there was an insurmountable breach between words and deeds, which converted the mass media into the political vanguard of Venezuela’s twentieth century.’³⁷ What animated popular outrage against political corruption was the crisis of the Venezuelan petro-state. For three decades tremendous oil wealth had created

³⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); Nancy Fraser, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy’, *Social Text*, 25/26 (1990), pp. 56–80; Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Spheres* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

³⁷ Nelson Rivera, ‘La raya en la retina: los medios de comunicación y las metáforas de la vida pública venezolana de 1958 a 2003’, *Comunicación*, 125 (2004), pp. 37–40.

a golden age of prosperity that insulated Venezuela from the social and economic strife afflicting Latin America and the Caribbean. The country's two-party democracy rested atop an oil platform and the explicit promise that oil rents were public patrimony. When that wealth dried up and the political pacts between elites began to unravel, one question reverberated in the collective consciousness: 'Where has the money gone?'³⁸ The government was pressed to explain the sudden failure of Venezuela's fortunes, and accusations of corruption and ineptitude were levelled at the two main political parties, Acción Democrática (AD) and Partido Social Cristiano (COPEI). Popular opinion held that these two parties were staffed by a coterie of incompetents, liars, and thieves, who had squandered the bounty of successive oil booms.³⁹

As the promise of national prosperity soured, it was replaced with a discourse about a corrupt, delinquent society fuelled by greed and rotting from the inside out.⁴⁰ A crime had been committed against the Venezuelan people, or so the story went, and the press set out to discover whodunnit.

High profile journalists like José Vicente Rangel did not create the crisis that engulfed Venezuela, but they certainly channelled popular responses to it. Thanks to extensive media coverage, corruption scandals became the most visible explanation for the country's declining fortunes. In one neat package, the corruption hypothesis explained why the project of modernity had failed and who was to blame. This is not to say that corruption was a figment of the journalistic imagination. There is some evidence that fraudulent dealings were on the rise in Venezuela,⁴¹ but it is important to stress that corruption was just one facet of a much larger crisis tied to the perils of Venezuela's rentier economy⁴² and fractious, intra-party struggles.⁴³ Nonetheless,

³⁸ Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 357; Terry Karl, *The Paradox of Plenty* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), p. 156.

³⁹ Andres Templeton, 'The Evolution of Popular Opinion', in *Lessons of the Venezuelan Experience* (Washington, DC: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1995), pp. 79–114; Pérez-Liñán, *Presidential Impeachment and the New Political Instability in Latin America*; Leslie Gates, *Electing Chávez: The Business of Anti-Neoliberal Politics in Venezuela* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).

⁴⁰ Rogelio Pérez Perdomo, 'Corruption and Political Crisis', in *Lessons of the Venezuelan Experience* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 1995), pp. 311–33; Coronil, *The Magical State*, pp. 321–66.

⁴¹ Kurt Weyland, 'Politics of Corruption in Latin America', *Journal of Democracy*, 9 (1998), pp. 108–21.

⁴² Coronil, *The Magical State*; Karl, *The Paradox of Plenty*.

⁴³ Michael Coppedge, *Strong Parties and Lame Ducks: Presidential Partyarchy and Factionalism in Venezuela* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994); Brian Crisp and Dan Levine, 'Democratizing the Democracy: Crisis and Reform in Venezuela', *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 40 (1998), pp. 27–61; Miriam Kornblith, *Venezuela en los 90: la crisis de la democracia* (Caracas, Venezuela: Ediciones IESA, 1998); Julia Buxton, *The Failure of Political Reform in Venezuela* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001).

corruption came to symbolise the enormity of Venezuela's political and economic failures. Corruption was the master signifier for a whole host of problems that extended far beyond the misuse of public patrimony. And it was underneath the banner of anti-corruption campaigns that a series of new populist movements became visible for the first time.⁴⁴

No politician was more closely linked to corruption than Carlos Andrés Pérez, twice president of Venezuela. His first administration (1974–79) overlapped with a massive oil boom, which flooded the country with foreign currency. By the end of his term, the dream of using petro-dollars to build a 'Grand Venezuela' had soured, replaced with talk of oil's corrupting influence. Evidence suggests that illicit dealings expanded under the administrations of Luis Herrera Campins (1979–84) and Jaime Lusinchi (1984–89). By the time Pérez took office for the second time (1989–93), corruption scandals were rampant. *The Dictionary of Corruption*, a three-volume compendium dedicated to Venezuelan corruption scandals, describes this period as the frenetic culmination of a creeping social decay in which 'all the wrath of the gods is unleashed'. During the late 1980s and early 1990s 'administrative disorder grows at a vertiginous speed and magnitude and denuncias multiply ... as if there is a pool of corruption cases that appear with certain frequency in the collective conscience only to be forgotten all over again, like wayward phantoms searching for the grave'.⁴⁵

The spike in corruption scandals at the end of the 1980s reflected a shift in the practices of mainstream news organisations in Venezuela. It was not that corruption suddenly proliferated but that the press began speaking out against it.⁴⁶ For decades mainstream news outlets were complicit in covering up stories of official misconduct. Corruption was a public secret that was widely acknowledged, seldom denounced and almost never investigated by the media.⁴⁷ However, as the crisis of the Venezuelan state deepened, the mechanism of controls that kept the press in check diminished

⁴⁴ Kirk Hawkins argues that the denunciation of corruption is a hallmark of populism. More importantly for my argument, he shows that this was a shared feature in the presidential campaigns of both Rafael Caldera (1993) and Hugo Chávez (1998). According to Hawkins, populism was the common denominator of nearly every political project following the fall of Venezuela's pacted-democracy. See Hawkins, *Venezuela's Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective*, 2010.

⁴⁵ Ruth Capriles Méndez, *Diccionario de la corrupción en Venezuela: 1984–1992*, vol. 3 (Caracas, Venezuela: Consorcio de Ediciones Capriles, 1993), p. 10.

⁴⁶ Rogelio Pérez Perdomo, 'Corruption and Business in Present Day Venezuela', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 9: 7 (1990), pp. 555–66.

⁴⁷ Andres Templeton argues that Venezuelans were very tolerant of behaviour usually classified as corruption. For example, a 1991 survey that asked respondents to rate certain behaviours showed the majority of Venezuelans did not consider government officials exchanging favours with businessmen bidding on a contract to be especially bad behaviour. Templeton, 'The Evolution of Popular Opinion', pp. 79–114.

appreciably.⁴⁸ By the end of President Lusinchi's term in office, 'the media had become a sounding board for anyone who wished to make a denuncia' about official corruption.⁴⁹ Journalists took it upon themselves to battle the great sin of Venezuelan society, the criminality gnawing away at the very soul of the moral order. A handful of powerful editors, owners and journalists began pursuing accusations of corruption with such single-minded determination that commentators heralded the genesis of a new style of journalism. The expression 'periodismo de denuncia' originated at the close of the 1980s. By 1990 it was sufficiently well established for the National College of Journalists to hold a four-day forum in Caracas on 'The Journalism of Denunciation as a Social Good'.⁵⁰

Populism and the Press

What are denuncias? Across Latin America, the term has different connotations. It is most commonly recognised as a juridical expression. Denuncias are official reports that initiate a trial or an investigation. In contrast to the denuncia as a formal legal instrument, journalistic denuncias circumvent the police and the judiciary and go straight to the court of popular opinion. They are public acts of bearing witness to injustice or wrongdoing.⁵¹ More than a form or a genre, denunciation is widely recognised as a journalistic practice. In Venezuela this practice helped create the conditions of possibility for a series of new populist movements.⁵²

For years, one puzzle that confounded scholars of populism was its lack of ideological coherence. Rather than representing a single constituency or cause, populism mobilises heterogeneous, often contradictory demands.⁵³ What

⁴⁸ Jairo Lugo and Juan Romero, 'From Friends to Foes', *Sincronía* (Spring 2003), available at <http://sincronia.cucsh.udg.mx/lugoromero.htm>.

⁴⁹ Pedroza, 'La denuncia, género periodística de la crisis', unpubl. thesis, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1994, p. 151.

⁵⁰ Gallardo and Hernández, 'El periodismo de denuncia', pp. 145–50.

⁵¹ In contemporary Latin America denuncias are generally associated with publicity, but this is not universally the case. Under non-democratic regimes denunciations are covertly passed to state officials. See Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately (eds.), *Accusatory Practices: Denunciation in Modern European History, 1789–1989* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

⁵² If denuncias can function as a tool of populist mobilisation they can also function as an instrument of political reform. Elsewhere I have distinguished a reformist and a populist style of denunciation. Robert Samet, 'Deadline: Crime, Journalism, and Fearful Citizenship in Caracas, Venezuela', unpublished PhD diss., Stanford University, 2013.

⁵³ Torcuato Di Tella, 'Populism and Reform in Latin America', in Claudio Veliz (ed.), *Obstacles to Change in Latin America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 47–72; Francisco Weffort, 'State and Mass in Brazil', *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 2 (1966), pp. 187–96; Gino Germani, *Authoritarianism, Fascism, and National Populism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1978).

holds together such a coalition? How does a movement at cross-purposes with itself emerge in the first place? Ernesto Laclau has gone furthest in explaining this enigma. According to Laclau, populist movements emerge when a series of heterogeneous demands are discursively joined into a 'chain of equivalence'. To illustrate this logic, he gives us the following example:

Think of a large mass of agrarian migrants who settle in the shantytowns on the outskirts of a developing industrial city. Problems of housing arise and the group of people requests some kind of solution from the local authorities. Here we have a *demand*, which is perhaps only a *request*. If the demand is satisfied, that is the end of the matter; but if it is not, people can start to perceive that their neighbours have other, equally unsatisfied demands, problems with water, health, schooling, and so on. If the situation remains unchanged for some time, there is an accumulation of unfulfilled demands and an increasing inability for the institutional system to absorb them.⁵⁴

Laclau's example demonstrates how otherwise unrelated demands are linked through their shared opposition to the institutional system. How are these demands carried beyond their immediate context? What are the mechanisms through which this logic of equivalence transforms diffuse pockets of discontent into movements with a wide base of support? This is where Louis Althusser's concept of 'articulation' becomes essential.⁵⁵

Articulation can be defined as the discursive process whereby disparate elements are joined into an apparently seamless whole. In this sense it draws on the two senses of the word 'articulate', which means 'to link' and 'to speak'.⁵⁶ The concept is particularly useful because it allows us to see the contingent, historically situated circumstances that help determine any particular political formation. Articulation is more than simply a social-structural fact. In respect to populist movements, articulation is also the practice through which chains of equivalence are formed.⁵⁷ My contention is that in Venezuela and much of Latin America journalistic denuncias have functioned as an articulating practice through which demands are transformed into the raw material of national popular movements. To state it somewhat differently, mass-mediated denuncias join otherwise disparate demands for political change through appeals to shared discontent. They are the vehicles through which chains of equivalence take shape.

⁵⁴ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 73.

⁵⁵ Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London: Verso, 1965); Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978); Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*; Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (New York: Verso, 1985).

⁵⁶ Stuart Hall and Lawrence Grossberg, 'On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10 (1986), pp. 45–60.

⁵⁷ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

As an articulating practice, denuncias allow us to examine the activities that give birth to ‘the people’, that all-important subject of populist movements. Like ‘the public’, the will of ‘the people’ is never self-evident; it is a performance of collective identity. Populist identities invariably invoke the righteousness of the people against the transgressions of the powerful. While the former is portrayed as the embodiment of good, the latter is treated as the personification of evil. The creation of an external enemy is crucial to the articulation of populist identities, which I have described elsewhere.⁵⁸ Here, I want to focus on the ‘linking’ and ‘voicing’ effects of denuncias.

The journalism of denunciation articulates popular identities through two simultaneous processes; it *links* disparate social sectors behind a common cause and it *gives voice* to the discontents of an otherwise mute entity, the people. Properly speaking, these are part of the same process; however, for purposes of analysis we can distinguish between a ‘linking effect’ and a ‘voicing effect’.

The linking effect

Cross-class alliances are a hallmark of populist movements. During the 1980s and 1990s, denuncias of corruption created the terrain upon which populist alliances could form between otherwise unaligned sectors of Venezuelan society. Keep in mind that corruption was not the only grievance that people had during this period. It was not even the principal concern among voters. Opinion polls from the height of the crisis show that unemployment and inflation were the primary issues of the day.⁵⁹ What such polls elide is the fact that there was no consensus over the necessary steps to improve Venezuela’s economic crisis. Neoliberal adjustments roiled the popular sectors, while the middle classes were silently complicit in such policies. What these otherwise disparate sectors had in common was shared outrage over corruption and the seeming impunity of powerful elites. The journalistic crusade against corruption created a common cause that transformed these sectors into a powerful political block.

The linking effect of denuncias was evident in the diverse coalition of journalists that came together behind accusations of corruption. Along with Rangel, this relatively small group of journalist-denouncers included Marcel Granier, Rafael Poleo, Miguel Henrique Otero and Alfredo Peña. These were strange bedfellows. Granier (owner of Radio Caracas Television and host of the show *Primero Plano*) was a champion of neoliberalism. He founded the ‘Roraima Group’, which argued that the country’s crisis was

⁵⁸ Robert Samet, ‘The Photographer’s Body: Populism, Polarization, and the Uses of Victimhood in Venezuela’, in *American Ethnologist*, 40: 3 (2013), pp. 525–39.

⁵⁹ Templeton, ‘The Evolution of Popular Opinion’, pp. 79–114.

the result of an omnipotent state and ossified political parties.⁶⁰ Poleo (director of the newspaper *El Nuevo País* and the magazine *Zeta*) was, in contrast, an outspoken critic of neoliberalism. A member of Acción Democrática and an associate of Rómulo Betancourt, he opposed the party's embrace of privatisation and austerity. Otero (owner of *El Nacional*) could best be described as a liberal centrist and his political allegiances vacillated. He eventually teamed up with Peña (host of a news programme on Venevision and future editor of *El Nacional*) who started his journalistic career as a militant leftist before drifting towards the centre. Politically, these denouncer-journalists represented constituencies that had very little in common other than opposition to the status quo.⁶¹

The voicing effect

Populist movements become coherent through claims to represent the unified will of the people. By speaking out against rampant corruption, Venezuelan journalists positioned themselves as the voice of the silent majority. They became the conduit through which popular outrage manifested itself. If the journalism of denunciation was unashamedly partisan, this partisanship was not exclusively tied to any particular party or political faction. Time and again, high profile journalists justified the campaign against corruption by declaring their allegiance to 'the people', 'the country' or 'the majority of decent citizens'. Through denuncias of corruption, journalists transformed themselves into the people's champions, a role often reserved for charismatic leaders. Although much of the writing on populism in Venezuela focuses on the person of Hugo Chávez, the private press was actively fulfilling this role long before his rise to prominence. News outlets like *El Nacional*, *El Nuevo País* and RCTV assumed the position of political vanguard. For a time the media rivalled and even surpassed the executive, the legislative and the judiciary branches as the most influential institution of state power in Venezuela. Sociologist Tulio Hernández writes:

⁶⁰ Marcel Granier, *La generación de relevo vs. el estado omnipotente* (Caracas: Seleven, 1984).

⁶¹ The strangeness of this coalition deserves emphasis. It is often forgotten that popular demands for the deepening of democracy, the kind that helped bring Hugo Chávez to power, were entangled with neoliberal visions of privatisation and decentralised control. These two projects overlapped, bringing together revolutionaries and technocrats, ex-guerrillas and the owners of capital. Whereas the former imagined reinventing the state, the latter planned to dismantle it. In the wake of Hugo Chávez's victory, stalwarts within AD and COPEI blamed media figures like Marcel Granier for promoting a neoliberal agenda that discredited the party system. It was not just journalists but also politicians who formed strange alliances during this period of upheaval. Two prominent examples were the presidential Comisión para la Reforma del Estado (COPRE) initiated in 1984 by President Lusinchi and La Causa R's 'triple alliance' with MAS and COPEI during the late 1990s. Thanks to the anonymous reviewer for these last two examples.

The media began to echo the frustrations of the population, becoming more active than ever in the diffusion of denuncias of corruption. The majority of media corporations assumed an open position to all kinds of information, denuncias or analyses that confronted [the political] leadership, marking the beginning of a battle that pitted the media against the government, the institutions of the state, the political parties and ultimately the ruling class.⁶²

By taking on corruption in the name of the Venezuelan people, the journalism of denunciation augmented the power and prestige of the press. In turn, it was through the press that nascent populist movements became visible as such. It was little wonder, then, that one of José Vicente Rangel's fellow journalists described him as nothing less than 'the sovereign voice of the people'.⁶³

The linking effect and the voicing effect are two aspects of denunciation as an articulating practice, which allows us to see the discursive labour that goes into creating populist identities. Before the people can emerge as the protagonists of popular struggles, it must first be invoked. Denuncias provide the performative scaffolding for such invocations. They are a discursive form through which a multitude of demands are transformed into an expression of the popular will. Like all performances, denuncias do not necessarily achieve their desired outcome; they are not always 'felicitous' as J. L. Austin would say.⁶⁴ Timing is essential as is the skill of the performer. In conclusion, I want to look more closely at how José Vicente Rangel harnessed the journalism of denunciation to the service of a new popular democratic project.

*The Dogs of War*⁶⁵

Among the first to recognise the significance of mass-mediated denuncias in Venezuela was the noted journalist Eleazar Díaz Rangel (no relation to José Vicente). In 1988 he published a book-length compilation of news articles, interviews and opinion pieces titled *The Right to the Denuncia: José Vicente Rangel, the 'Dogs of War' and the 'Military Secret' in Venezuela*. The volume concentrates on Rangel's battle with the minister of defence, the same battle that led military intelligence officers to detain him on the afternoon of 5 April 1988. Compared to massive revelations of corruption that were made in subsequent years, Rangel's quarrel with the minister of defence may seem pedestrian. It was exceptional in at least one respect, however; it provoked a heated public debate about the practice of denunciation and its implications for journalism, democracy and popular mobilisation.

⁶² Tulio Hernández, 'Cuarta ponencia: medios y conflicto político', in *Medios de comunicación y democracia* (Caracas: UCAB, 1995), pp. 107–33.

⁶³ Eleazar Díaz Rangel, *El derecho a la denuncia: José Vicente Rangel, los 'perros de la guerra', y el 'secreto militar' en Venezuela* (Caracas: Ediciones Centauro, 1988), p. 182.

⁶⁴ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press, 1965).

⁶⁵ A euphemism referring to arms traffickers.

A bit of context helps to situate the Dogs of War scandal and ensuing debates about denuncias. Rangel's accusation of military malfeasance was just one of a trio of sensational stories that he was pursuing at the time. He detailed all three in a bombshell television interview with Marcel Granier on 7 February 1988. These denuncias dominated the news cycle for the next four months. All three were linked to a larger narrative about political corruption, narcotrafficking and covert operations in Venezuela.⁶⁶

Rangel's first and most sensational denuncia alleged that the presidential campaigns of Venezuela's two major political parties were bankrolled by drug money. Although he admitted a lack of concrete evidence, the denuncia set off a chain of accusations about the *narcocampaña*. For nearly six weeks, AD and COPEI alternately pleaded innocent and leaked evidence of their rival's guilt. The mudslinging contest damaged the credibility of both parties even though conclusive proof of wrongdoing never surfaced.⁶⁷

Rangel's second denuncia was more targeted. He revealed that the minister of justice, José Manzo González, had created a covert para-police force, possibly with monies from the United States Drug Enforcement Agency. Just a few months later these allegations about 'Manzopol' were substantiated in a series of investigative pieces. While links to the DEA were never proved, the minister of justice was forced to resign nonetheless.⁶⁸

Rangel's third denuncia had the potential to be the most explosive. It dated back to December 1987 and a letter that circulated among select members of the press. The letter warned of a dubious arms deal in the works that tied Venezuela's military to the architects of the Iran-Contra affair. Addressed to President Jaime Lusinchi, it was notarised in Texas and penned by one Alex Pulido, a North American scholar. According to Pulido, GeoMiliTech Consultants Corporation, a group that was headed by a right-wing talk show host and closely linked to covert operatives, was brokering the deal.⁶⁹ Pulido's accusations were made public on 7 January 1988, when the newspaper

⁶⁶ *El Mundo*, 8 Feb. 1988, 'El CSE debe investigar denuncias de J. V. Rangel', Archivo Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Caracas; *Diario de Caracas*, 8 Feb. 1988, 'José Vicente ratificó graves denuncias en el programa "Primer Plano"', Archivo Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Caracas; *Diario de Caracas* 17 Feb. 1988, 'Hoy llegarán a la Fiscalía las denuncias de Rangel sobre drogas', Archivo Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Caracas.

⁶⁷ *Diario de Caracas*, 9 Feb. 1988, 'La Fiscalía investigará narcocampaña electoral', Archivo Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Caracas; José Vicente Rangel, 'El narcotráfico en la democracia' (Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1988).

⁶⁸ *El Nacional*, 10–12 Feb. 1988, 'El libro interno de la "Manzopol (1–3)"', Archivo Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Caracas; *Diario de Caracas*, 14–16 March 1988, 'La historia Manzopol contada en video-casete', Archivo Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Caracas; *Diario de Caracas*, 29 March 1988, 'Manzo renuncio', Archivo Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Caracas.

⁶⁹ On GeoMiliTech see Alan Block, 'The Origins of Iran-Contra: Lessons from the Durrani Affair', *Crime, Law, & Social Change*, 33 (2000), pp. 55–84.

El Mundo published the contents of his letter. This was the opening salvo of the Dogs of War scandal.⁷⁰

The government initially denied knowledge of the letter. Minister of Defence, General Eliodoro Guerrero Gómez, claimed that it never reached President Lusinchi. He also dismissed the allegations of impropriety. Although the military was in the process of procuring arms, the general steadfastly refuted the involvement of GeoMiliTech.

Shortly thereafter Rangel entered the fray. He discreetly reached out to President Lusinchi with evidence that the military had, indeed, been working with GeoMiliTech and the international arms trafficker Oscar Martínez González. More damningly, Rangel discovered that the arms deal was overpriced by nearly US\$ 200 million. Confronted with proof of wrongdoing, President Lusinchi suspended the deal and expressly forbade future dealings with GeoMiliTech or Martínez.⁷¹

Scarcely three months later the deal was in motion again.

Upon discovering that the military intended to go through with the same arms deal, using the same intermediary, at the same exorbitant cost and in contradiction to the president's orders, Rangel again contacted Lusinchi. Unsatisfied with the president's response, he went public with the information. On 4 April, Rangel used his television show *Lo de hoy* to broadcast details of the arms deal and make a case for congressional investigation. The next day he was detained and questioned. That same afternoon, the office of the president disseminated a press release that claimed that the arms deal was legitimate, that Rangel's denuncias were false, and that the journalist was questioned by the police because his accusations 'call into doubt the seriousness and integrity of our Armed Forces'.⁷² For his part, the minister of defence refused to publicly acknowledge Rangel or his accusations, referring dismissively to him as 'that man'.⁷³ Rangel fought back. After all, the president himself had ordered the deal to be halted. To deny the validity of the accusations and to accuse Rangel of sowing dissension for pointing out the violation of a presidential order was patently absurd.

The story became national news and was followed extensively by every major media outlet. President Lusinchi and his supporters firmly denied wrongdoing and rejected further investigation on the grounds that it would compromise military secrets. The minister of defence accused Rangel of plotting to destabilise democracy, claimed that he was an agent provocateur and threatened him with prison. Rangel, however, held the upper hand. He had

⁷⁰ Díaz Rangel, *El derecho a la denuncia*, pp. 3–9.

⁷¹ Díaz Rangel, *El derecho a la denuncia*, pp. 3–9.

⁷² Díaz Rangel, *El derecho a la denuncia*, p. 13.

⁷³ *El Mundo*, 6 April 1988, 'Dijo el Ministro de la Defensa, "No tengo nada que aclarar ante lo dicho por J. V. Rangel"', Archivo Biblioteca Nacional de Venezuela, Caracas.

already produced evidence that the arms deal with GeoMiliTech was overpriced and may have involved international arms traffickers, evidence that the president seemed to corroborate when the deal was publicly suspended. Moreover, Rangel was careful not to make wild accusations. He stuck closely to his original story, insisting only that the president's order should be upheld and the case should be properly investigated. Finally and most importantly, Rangel's track record as a journalist and a politician was impeccable.

Rangel's reputation mattered for several reasons. First, it made the denuncia newsworthy. Thanks to his renown, the scandal spawned hundreds of news articles and opinion pieces. Second, Rangel's reputation gave the denuncia teeth and allowed it to withstand scrutiny. Almost without fail, denuncias of corruption are turned back on the denouncer so that corruption scandals quickly become webs of accusations and counteraccusations. As the primary witness, Rangel's credibility was essential. Despite the minister of defence's threats and accusations, Rangel received an outpouring of public support. The columnist Sanin called him 'the civic, legal, and moral conscience of the country'. His denuncias merited serious consideration because 'over the course of 30 years of democracy, Rangel has proven – in the Parliament, in the press, in the public tribunals – that he is a serious, responsible man, who deserves the confidences of Venezuelans'.⁷⁴ Finally, Rangel's good name mattered because much more was at stake than an arms deal. The denuncia was an indictment of the highest levels of the Venezuelan government. Moreover, the government's reaction against the denuncia was seen as an attack on the right to make a denuncia in the first place. If someone as reputable as José Vicente Rangel could be threatened with military justice for a denuncia that had all the trappings of sincerity, then no one was safe.

The Dogs of War scandal quickly came to symbolise the crisis that engulfed Venezuela and struggles over corruption, democracy and rule of law. Under the Lusinchi administration, talk of corruption was suppressed forcefully. For Rangel, denuncias were necessary to break the silence. In numerous interviews and articles he portrayed the fight against corruption as a Manichean struggle of good versus evil. 'The problem is that in this country the honest people, the decent people, the people with principles are the majority but they are not organised. In contrast the country of the corrupt, of the traffickers, of the speculators is organised and efficient.'⁷⁵ Rangel and his supporters saw denuncias as a last line of defence against the criminal deterioration of the country. Time and again they argued that denuncias were both a fundamental democratic right and a means through which citizens could enforce the rule of law. The denuncia represented freedom of expression in the service of the moral and

⁷⁴ Díaz Rangel, *El derecho a la denuncia*, p. 181.

⁷⁵ Díaz Rangel, *El derecho a la denuncia*, p. 276.

legal order. Addressing himself to the House of Representatives' Defence Committee, Rangel depicted the right to the denuncia as the dividing line that separated democracy from dictatorship. 'If there is no difference between the way that democracy and dictatorship treat denuncias, then there is no reason to fight for the former. Democracy is the rule of law, it is the right to the denuncia.'⁷⁶ To stifle denuncias was to suppress protest. It was to deny citizens their right to justice. It was to repudiate the very foundations of democracy.

'The truth is belligerent', observed the German dramatist Bertold Brecht in his essay 'Writing the truth: five difficulties'. José Vicente Rangel was inclined to agree. In the final act of the Dogs of War scandal, Rangel reflected on Brecht's essay, emphasising its relevance for the journalism of denunciation. The setting was a forum held in Rangel's honour. The man of the hour told the audience that, like Brecht, he believed truth was an instrument of popular struggle. If his denuncias had been successful, it was because they coincided with a 'moment of truth', a moment when people were ready for someone to speak truth to power. This was a truth that people already knew. It just needed someone to articulate it.⁷⁷

How could Rangel consider his denuncias successful? After all, the arms deal went through despite popular opposition. No one went to jail. No one lost his or her job. Seemingly nothing changed. It is tempting to view the Dogs of War affair in the light of subsequent scandals and to argue that it was successful because it contributed to the downfall of the next president, Carlos Andrés Pérez. But that would mean reading history backwards. The question remains: how could Rangel say that his denuncias were successful in June 1988, months before the popular protests of *el caracazo* and years before Pérez's impeachment?

To understand Rangel's celebratory position requires a shift of perspective. We usually evaluate denuncias and corruption scandals by who or what they destroy, but to reduce them to mere vehicles for punishment downplays their immense creative potential. Émile Durkheim first recognised popular justice as a vehicle of collective identity formation. Its effect, he argued, was to reaffirm bonds of social solidarity.⁷⁸ Seen in this light, denunciation is not simply about exposing injustice or punishing wrongdoing. Rather, it is a practice through which bonds of social solidarity are forged in the first place. This is precisely the role that Rangel and his companions in the private press played during the late 1980s and early 1990s. At the height of Venezuela's socio-economic crisis, these denouncers helped forge the bonds of social solidarity necessary for the emergence of new popular democratic

⁷⁶ Díaz Rangel, *El derecho a la denuncia*, p. 27.

⁷⁷ Díaz Rangel, *El derecho a la denuncia*, p. 349.

⁷⁸ Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

movements. Or, to put it in a slightly different register, they paved the way for a populist resurgence.

Conclusion

Just after 9.00 a.m. on 4 February 1992, when it was evident that their military uprising had failed, Lieutenant-Colonel Hugo Chávez made his first nationally televised appearance. Few moments are better remembered than the 90-second statement that propelled Chávez to overnight fame. The ‘por ahora’ speech is so famous that it often overshadows the build-up to this moment. We are left with the image of a charismatic leader who emerges fully formed from popular unrest ready to heroically (or opportunistically) shoulder responsibility in a country where no one was responsible for anything. Yet the stage was set long before the failed coup d’état. While Chávez and his fellow officers were secretly plotting revolution, the press was openly questioning the legitimacy of Venezuela’s political establishment. Denuncias of corruption channelled frustrated demands into a wave of anti-institutional sentiment. The journalism of denunciation further legitimised opposition to the old system and helped create the conditions of possibility for the rise of new populist projects. I stress the plurality of populisms because chavismo was never a foregone conclusion. It was simply one of several possibilities that emerged out of the crisis. After the fall of Pérez the vast majority of political candidates were competing to direct the crescendo of popular outrage.

It is not surprising that the close ties between the press and populist mobilisation were largely forgotten following Chávez’s rise to power. The most distinctive feature of politics in the Chávez era (1999–2013) was the standoff between the president and the media to the extent that news outlets functioned as the de facto mouthpiece of opposition in Venezuela. Given the atmosphere of extreme polarisation, most political analysts emphasised the differences between chavismo and the opposition. However, these two movements also shared strong affinities: they grew out of the same moment of political crisis, they drew on similar tropes of popular sovereignty, and they relied on mass-mediated denuncias to mobilise broad-based support. Following the death of Chávez, it is worth viewing contemporary Venezuela in light of these parallels. Doing so reveals one of the most underappreciated features of the Chávez era, namely that it was shaped by two populist projects, each competing for the mantle of democratic authority.

Throughout the Chávez era, mass-mediated denuncias continued to play an important role in populist mobilisation, and José Vicente Rangel continued to play an active part in their dissemination. From 1999 onward, his career trajectory diverged from many of his former colleagues. Rangel’s incorporation into the Chávez government meant that the self-proclaimed ‘anti-power’

became firmly entrenched within the state apparatus.⁷⁹ This did not stop his penchant for denunciation. It did, however, shift his focus. Instead of mobilising against the government, Rangel's denuncias targeted the spectre of counter-revolution, opposition plots and incursions by foreign powers. This put him and most of his one-time allies on opposite sides of the political divide.

Although empirical analysis of the Chávez era is beyond the scope of this article, its theoretical framework offers a perspective from which to understand journalism during this period as well as the denuncias and counter-denuncias that ricocheted back and forth. Actors within both chavismo and the opposition used mass-mediated denuncias to marshal support for their respective causes. This practice fuelled political polarisation at the same time that it served to consolidate the movements around contrasting visions of 'the people'.⁸⁰ A number of high profile journalists, like José Vicente Rangel and Marcel Granier, were firmly entrenched in one camp or the other. Most ordinary journalists, like the beat reporters with whom I have conducted research, found themselves in complex and contradictory positions vis-à-vis the political landscape. They did not see themselves as agents of popular mobilisation, but neither could they escape the fact that their reporting was swept up in this dynamic. Recognising the practices through which the press can act as a conduit for populist mobilisation in present-day Venezuela makes the behaviours of a whole spectrum of journalists intelligible. Moreover, it gives us a position from which to study the politics of the Chávez era without falling victim to its polemics.

The Venezuelan case also has wider relevance for studies of populism and the press in Latin America. Scholars have made much ado about charismatic leadership as the driving force behind the populist resurgence of the late twentieth century. In this formulation personalism is contrasted with the institutions of civil society; the former erodes the latter, chipping away at the foundations of democracy. My research on the private press in Venezuela suggests that this formula, while convenient from a policy standpoint, is imprecise at best. No institution of civil society was more closely aligned with democracy in Venezuela than the private press, and it was the private press, not some charismatic figure, that created the conditions for populist mobilisation in the first place. A historically informed reading suggests that the institutions of democracy were not the victims of populism, but rather one of their preconditions.

⁷⁹ Rangel's reputation suffered as a result. Although still a powerful voice within the Bolivarian Revolution, his denuncias no longer carried the same weight because their credibility was questioned.

⁸⁰ See Luis Duno-Gottberg, 'The Color of Mobs: Racial Politics, Ethnopolitics and Representation in Venezuela in the Chávez Era', in David Smilde and Daniel Hellinger (eds.), *Venezuela's Bolivarian Democracy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 271–97; Samet, 'The Photographer's Body', pp. 525–39.

The point is neither to condemn populism nor to celebrate it, but to emphasise the cultural particularity of journalism in Latin America. Expanding our perspective beyond a liberal democratic framework has important implications for how we understand the role of the press. First, it suggests that there may be a style of journalism that is distinctive to Latin America. Some of the features of this style have been touched upon: 1) it is more finely attuned to popular mobilisation than scholars have generally acknowledged; 2) it values truthfulness over objectivity; 3) its professionalisation is not necessarily at the expense of political advocacy. There are likely more features, which may be drawn out by further research.

Second, a distinctively Latin American style of journalism asks us to reconsider tacit assumptions about the role the press plays in democracy. Most research on the press in Latin America focuses on the institutions of liberal (or representative) democracy such as elections, public opinion polls and mechanisms of accountability. It fails to acknowledge how, in the name of popular sovereignty, the press also promotes activities that fall outside of a liberal definition of democracy. The example that I have used in this article is the relationship between denuncias and populist mobilisation, but we could also include news coverage of protests or forms of direct action on the part of reporters, editors and media owners. It is important to recognise that for Latin American journalists and their audiences populist mobilisation is internal to democracy. Sweeping it under the rug is dangerous because it means overlooking a whole range of practices, some promising, others deeply problematic, that inform the press and other institutions of democracy.

Third, and finally, it challenges us to revisit democratic ideals like press freedom, not in order to restrict their scope, but potentially to expand them. In Venezuela, and Latin America more generally, press freedom is closely linked to freedom of assembly (both are fundamental elements of free expression). This is a link that has been gradually disarticulated within North America and much of Europe, where protests and other forms of popular mobilisation are increasingly restricted in the name of public security. Much of the research and writing about the press in Latin America compares it unfavourably to North America and Europe. A shift in perspective allows us to see how Latin American journalism is, at least in this respect, far more faithful to the democratic tradition. Rather than simply pointing to the shortcomings of the press in Latin America, we might also see it as a source of inspiration.

Spanish and Portuguese abstracts

Spanish abstract. Pese a la reciente atención a la relación entre los medios de comunicación y la movilización populista en Latinoamérica, existe una incongruencia entre las prácticas cotidianas de los periodistas y las herramientas teóricas que tenemos

para darle sentido a tales prácticas. El objetivo de este artículo es ayudar a reorientar la investigación sobre el populismo y la prensa en Latinoamérica para que refleje de mejor manera las prácticas enraizadas y las normas propias de la región. Para tal fin, se verá el caso de Venezuela, junto a una práctica que ha escapado grandemente de los estudios académicos: el uso de denuncias.

Spanish keywords: populismo, periodismo, denuncias, escándalos de corrupción, Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, José Vicente Rangel

Portuguese abstract. Apesar da atenção dada recentemente à relação entre a mídia e mobilizações populistas na América Latina, existe um desencontro entre as práticas cotidianas dos jornalistas e o arcabouço teórico disponível para dar sentido a estas práticas. O objetivo deste artigo é colaborar com a reorientação das pesquisas acerca da relação entre o populismo e a imprensa na América Latina, de modo que estas pesquisas reflitam de maneira mais precisa as práticas enraizadas e as normas autóctones da região. Para este fim, utilizo o caso da Venezuela e considero uma prática que tem sido negligenciada por pesquisadores: o uso de denúncias.

Portuguese keywords: populismo, jornalismo, denúncias, escândalos de corrupção, Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, José Vicente Rangel