

# Hugo Chávez's autocratic acceleration for the demolition of the Venezuelan Historical State (2006-2009)

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**Abstract**— This article analyzes the process of political radicalization in Venezuela during the 2006-2009 period, characterized by what we term the autocratic acceleration of Hugo Chávez. It examines how, following the 2006 reelection, the government transitioned from a referendum, based authoritarianism toward a model of communal socialism that sought the systematic dismantling of the Venezuelan Historical State. The study details the replacement of republican institutions and the autonomous university with the 'Missions' system and the new bureaucracy of People's Power, tools designed to supplant the functional pillars of the traditional republic. Likewise, it addresses the symbolic dimension of this transformation, which included the alteration of national toponymy and the destruction of places of memory to impose a new ideological narrative. The analysis concludes that the year 2007 marked the end of a state continuity lasting more than a century, giving way to a fragmentation of collective memory and the establishment of a communal state uprooted from previous identity systems.

**Keywords**— Hugo Chávez, Historical State, Autocracy, Socialism of the 21st Century, Venezuela, Collective Memory & Institutionalility.

## Introduction

*"Nearly all states were born to stop revolutions, what a challenge ours is, transforming the old counterrevolutionary state into a revolutionary state. I have the clear formula; forgive me if this sounds immodest". Chávez, January 8, 2007*

The "Historical State" is not merely a succession of leadership or partisan agendas; rather, it is defined as an entity that is simultaneously material and symbolic, functional in nature, and capable of fostering, directly and indirectly, attachment, memory, identity, and a kind of normalcy (or imperturbability) within a geographical and temporal space across successive generations.

The functionality of the Historical State is characterized by the following elements: a) continuity of projects: the interlinking of national projects whose gravitational center lies in political and socioeconomic traditions that survive even dictatorships, though not socialist ones; b) economic tradition: encompassing deeply rooted models of economic

relations, such as the sense of property, work, and the dignity of possession (Pipes, 2002), hence the Historical State survived the dictatorships between 1899 and 1959, but not the Chavista autocratization; c) citizen pact and memory: sustained by the permanence of citizens who accept a political pact and establish roots in a territory defined by a master historical narrative that becomes collective memory; d) interaction between history and memory: a dialectical interplay between historical facts and the affective, psychological memory of the citizenry.

In the Venezuelan case, the Historical State consolidated beginning in 1863 with the Treaty of Coche and entered its final phase of dismantling in 2007 under Hugo Chávez's administration. Its destruction constitutes a project conceived by Chávez from the possibilities afforded by his referendum-based authoritarian model, a model that functioned thanks to the oil boom, the discretionary use (through co-opted institutions) of that wealth, and electoral fraud (Cardozo, 2025).

However, not all signs of autocratization necessarily signalled the dismantling of the Historical State: prolonged dictatorships throughout the Caribbean basin (except Cuba) and South America endured human rights tragedies, political party repression, and curtailed democratic participation under autocratic military leaders. Their societies suffered persecution, censorship, university closures, torture, and forced disappearance. Yet in all these dictatorships, the Historical State survived. Upon democracy's return, reforms remained confined to the political sphere, constitutional changes enabling political opening, the return of exiled leaders, the acceptance of political parties, and their electoral competition for power, a phenomenon markedly different in socialist autocracies (Ángel & Mariottiz, 2024).

For the socialist project to be considered consolidated, once the agenda of absolute control is fulfilled, the dismantling of the Historical State begins: economic tradition, the citizen pact, and memory (rendered impossible once society undertakes mass migration or develops the desire to do so), the interaction between memory and history (within the Historical State, this operates as an inertia, like Newton's first law, proceeding rectilinearly and uniformly without need for alteration). These four characteristics are detected and destroyed through revolutionary change, autocratic acceleration, aspiring to establish a new State

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upon the ruins of the former: the Revolutionary State cannot survive while competing with the Historical one.

## The Reelected Autocrat

On December 3, 2006, Chávez secured his penultimate presidential reelection since the ratification of his mandate in the 2000 “Mega-elections” (following his constituent project victory) and since the 2004 Recall Referendum. This was his strategy: an evolving referendum-based authoritarianism made possible by the enormous cash flow his government enjoyed up to that point.<sup>2</sup>

However, the factor of electoral popularity thanks to the oil bonanza does not appear to be the sole element that led Chávez to impose his electoral hegemony. Thanks to the autocratic model that had been gestating, his internal leadership, the co-optation of the Armed Forces, the National Assembly, and self-censorship, Chavismo managed to create an electoral consortium (with companies and figures such as Smartmatic, Bizta, Antonio Mugica, Jorge Rodríguez, et al.) for fraud since at least 2004 (Pezzullo, 2025).

Chávez’s autocratic acceleration encompassed, beyond electoral fraud, more complex structural elements, including his own revolutionary delirium, precipitated from roughly 2006 onward by his self-appointed role as an anti-imperialist fighter, the new world champion of socialist revolution, and savior of the socialist utopia, which had been thoroughly discredited since the end of the 1980s (Courtois, et al., 1999).

Compounding all of the above, in 2006 the Venezuelan opposition exhibited the least sophisticated aspects of its political capital by choosing Manuel Rosales as its candidate, a politician with meager communication skills and no comparative advantages against an incumbent president-candidate with enormous propaganda resources, who had managed to co-opt much of the state and consequently answered to no one (López, M., & Panzarelli, D., 2012). By 2006, it seemed all conditions had converged for Chávez to complete the final step: the autocratic acceleration that would definitively enable him to dismantle the Venezuelan Historical State.

On January 8, 2007, the outgoing vice president, after four years in office, José Vicente Rangel, a journalist, handed the vice-presidential baton to psychiatrist Jorge Rodríguez: two civilians signed off on the end of the Venezuelan Historical State. Rangel, in his murky prose, made this known:

<sup>2</sup>Oil price: US\$56.30 per barrel daily; average daily oil production in 2006 was approximately 2,511,000 barrels; foreign currency from OPEC crude sales entering Venezuela in 2006 amounted to US\$57.972 billion, and GDP per capita stood at US\$6,739.4 that year.

*“We have been something more than officials and also something more than politicians, because we are certainly something more than politicians and officials; we are authentic human beings who are in politics and participate in this revolutionary process. We are the expression of what someone called the subsoil of the homeland, which emerged on February 4th and will not return to the darkness”.* (Rangel in Chávez, 2007).

That day, the Chavista cabinet was constituted, a cabinet that would progressively put an end to the Venezuelan Historical State. They, as Rangel indicates, were not typical officials of a republic; they were agents of the “subsoil” tasked with terminating the Historical State, which apparently emanated from the “darkness”, not from republican history. This incoming cabinet (January 2007) would dedicate itself to autocratic acceleration.

## Changing Symbols and Landscape: Another Mode of Destruction

Chávez had already begun demolition. The first step was, essentially, to twist and bend the country’s spiritual, identitarian, and historical tradition factors integral to a material and immaterial synergy of political practices, for they are foundational, protocol-based, symbolic, ceremonial, and venerable: values such as democracy and freedom of expression without timidity or fear; national identity (the stars on the flag were seven before Chávez; the addition of “Bolivarian” to Venezuela’s name was also his idea, and the design of the horse on the republic’s coat of arms, made to look leftward rather than right, was another of his endeavors); national character (from electoral festivity to Stalinism, from consensus to autocracy); and finally, the national political system, which also encompasses its model of economic relations, beyond the accumulative productive model, for there is an identitarian ritual in how peoples conduct business and trade (Pipes, 2002). All of this was dismantled by Chávez as an essential part of his autocratization strategy. In 2007, Chávez would also modify Venezuelan time zones: from minus four hours (-4.00 GMT) to minus four and a half hours (-4.30 GMT).

The imagination of the landscape was altered: on April 22, 2010, by a Chávez decree whose preamble read: “With the supreme commitment and will to achieve the refoundation of the Venezuelan nation (...) the expanse comprising El Ávila National Park shall henceforth be denominated Waraira Repano National Park”, for it is the name, “of its first aboriginal inhabitants, who had to remain there to survive the exploitation and mistreatment of the Spanish colonizers of the era” (Decree No. 7,388, 2010 in Chávez, 2010).

The name “Cerro Ávila” dates from the colonial period; it corresponds to the mountain that separates Caracas from

the Caribbean coast, forming two faces, one of the valleys and one of the coastlines, and is the most totemic landscape for its inhabitants. The imposed indigenous name (Waraira Repano) corresponds to the mental construction that Chávez, in his pursuit of dismantling, decreed to put an end to the truly ancestral imaginary for the historical republican “Ávila”. Chávez attempted<sup>3</sup> to give the mountain a historical endpoint and reinsert it into the new socialist state, uprooted and distant from vernacular identity systems:

*“With the supreme commitment and will to achieve the greatest political efficacy and revolutionary quality in the construction of Socialism, the re-foundation of the Venezuelan nation, based on humanist principles, sustained by moral and ethical conditions (...) The expanse comprising “El Ávila” National Park shall henceforth be denominated “Waraira Repano” National Park”. (Chávez, 2010)*

Chávez managed to destroy, in Pierre Nora’s words, the “places of memory” (Nora, 2008: 33), that is, he annihilated the role of citizenship in public space, that affective, psychological, emotive, and individual memory of Venezuelans. With Chávez’s historicism, an attempt was made to dissolve the changing meanings of the past in Venezuela’s present. If this Chavista task of desolation is coupled with the subsequent diaspora phenomenon (circa 2015-2025), that Venezuelan collective memory, distinguishing history from memory lies fragmented.

### ***For Dismantling, Missions Are Useful***

The Historical State was also destroyed to be replaced by Chávez’s creative models of power management: the Bolivarian Missions. The missions were a series of massive social assistance programs implemented starting in 2003. They were institutional structures parallel to the traditional state. Instead of utilizing existing ministries and agencies, Chávez created these missions, ostensibly to circumvent the bureaucracy of what he termed the “old bourgeois state”. These programs became the axis of his political and social management, designed to create an electoral market and a transactional popular support base: food, healthcare, scholarships, household goods, and housing in exchange for votes. Each mission, following demolition, would supplant a pillar of the Historical State:

*“With Mission Mercal, more than 15,000,000 Venezuelans are fed daily. And thousands of high school graduates continue to graduate through Mission Ribas, and thousands enter higher education with Mission Sucre, and with Mission Vuelvan Caras, they are incorporated into the productive process, and the*

<sup>3</sup>Beginning with the most significant change, from Republic of Venezuela to Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, names were changed: Rómulo Betancourt East Park to *Generalísimo Francisco de Miranda*; the Mérida cable car to the indigenous term *Mukumbarí*; the Francisco Fajardo Highway to *Gran Cacique Guaicaipuro Jefe de Jefes*; “La Casona” (former presidential residence) to *Casona Cultural Aquiles Nazoa*; the Military History Museum to *Cuartel de la Montaña 4F*; Vargas State to *La Guaira* State.

*feeding houses (...) Mission Ciencia democratizing knowledge and technology, using them for life. Mission Zamora: equality and social equity in the countryside, combating the latifundio system and granting peasants not only the land but also the equipment and knowledge to work it. (...) With Mission Robinson, which taught more than a million Venezuelans to read and write, Venezuela was declared a territory free of illiteracy. A new phase of the revolutionary process begins, and in the construction of 21st-century socialism, cooperatives, social production enterprises, endogenous development nuclei, and co-management are born”. (Chávez, 2007a)*

Each mission, after destroying the corresponding pillar of the Historical State, stripped away the purpose of each part of the republic. For example, Mission Sucre and Mission Ciencia would, unsuccessfully, with marked human, intellectual, and scientific deficiencies, act as substitutes for teaching and research within the university, an institution progressively suffocated through persecution and budget cuts, not to mention the student and faculty diasporas<sup>4</sup>

Mission Sucre and Mission Ciencia, in their purpose of substituting the public autonomous university, would attempt to fulfill some part of the task of the Venezuelan historical university; however, for natural reasons within the ambit of a revolutionary project, their management ended up reduced by the eagerness to construct the Chavista cultural and propagandistic apparatus, until resources were exhausted, as a mechanism and propagandistic system, with rather mediocre performance. These missions and the Bolivarian universities derived from them suffer from a lack of academic quality standards, academic corruption, authorities without higher degrees or credentials, no autonomy, publication and research indices practically nonexistent, the product of “a revolution that has lacked intellectual and academic vocation” (Albornoz, 2018, p. 238).

There were other missions, such as Barrio Adentro 1 and 2, with a strong presence of Cuban healthcare professionals, which served administrative and executive functions in place of the Ministry of Health. Mission Vuelvan Caras attempted to supplant the tasks of the Ministry of Labour. One might ask why to maintain those ministries at all if this parallel bureaucratic mission system was designed, a system of power transfers different from that directed toward popular empowerment (Cardozo, 2022), and from the perspective of political

<sup>4</sup>By 2019, 50% of university professors had emigrated; some authors estimate the figure at 10,000 (Martínez & López, 2023; Uzcátegui et al., 2022). A university professor’s monthly salary, depending on rank, ranges from US\$4 to US\$15; a primary school teacher’s monthly salary is US\$20.85. The autonomous public university began to be persecuted from the ideological debate of Chavismo against the “bourgeoisie” and “privileged sectors” that, apparently, accessed higher education unequally compared to popular sectors. In this vein, Chávez eliminated the long-standing Academic Aptitude Test in 2007 and confronted the university student movement as an ideological adversary from a class-based perspective.

subservience, more effective for Chávez's interests. Part of the answer lies in Chavismo's hypertrophy in public management, but there is also another key: the ministries remained to function as revenue terminals for the military, who had to accompany, without interfering, the revolution that is, autocratization. The ministries became niches allowing men in uniform to "play at power" while Chávez, together with this ministerial team debuting in January 2007, accelerated autocratization, paved the way for the communal state, and destroyed the Venezuelan Historical State.

*"These are interesting signs, aren't they? Of the things happening in Venezuela. The Venezuelan Armed Forces, from now on, begin to be called the Bolivarian Armed Forces of Venezuela, Bolivarian Army of Venezuela, Bolivarian Navy of Venezuela, Bolivarian Aviation, and Bolivarian Guard. We are truly entering a new era, and I invite you all, when I signed the decree changing the ministries' names, and now calling them Ministries of People's Power, that is not just to make it sound nice when we give a speech; no! I want you there, each day more immersed in the soul of people's power, the ministers, the deputy minister; and first, of course, myself". (Chávez, 2007a)*

During his reelection discourse, Chávez announced the name changes, and his narrative inserted itself taxatively into the ideological, "I am very much of Trotsky's line, permanent revolution". He boasted that the new 2007 cabinet was the first to include a minister who was a militant member of the Communist Party, David Nieves Velásquez (Chávez, 2007a). These denominative changes of the ministries were not just inventing a new portfolio, mere bureaucratic creativity, it was about all ministries having a kind of Maoist root as "ministry of people's power".

The Historical State should not be identified solely with a coherent succession of leadership continuity or power factions. The continuity of the Historical State does not depend on the continuity of partisan agendas, nor necessarily on one democratic narrative after another; nor does it depend on the continuity of a military lineage passing the baton by trust and affinity to another soldier, as within the so-called Andean cycle (Cipriano Castro in 1899 through Marcos Pérez Jiménez in 1959). Not even before, with how interrupted political projects were during the 19th century, was the Venezuelan Historical State annihilated, the same one from the Páez project in 1830 through the epilepsy of the Federal War (1859-1863). In that interval, the Historical State forged between the late Spanish empire and the War of Independence perished. The Historical State that Chávez dismantled was founded on the Treaty of Coche in the spring of 1863, and it perished, or began its agony, in 2007.

The continuity of the Historical State, therefore, will be the linking of one or several national projects whose gravitational

center is the tradition of political and socioeconomic forms that can survive even a dictatorship like that of Juan Vicente Gómez or Marcos Pérez Jiménez. Likewise, and as an immanent relation to the foregoing, with an economic tradition: work, sense of property, and dignity of possession, a model of economic relations and not merely a production model. The continuity of the Historical State is the permanence of several subjects-citizens who persist through the republic, accept the political pact, and establish material and immaterial roots in a territory defined by the master historical narrative that can simultaneously be collective memory. The Historical State is the interplay between memory and history; it is an interaction. The Historical State is material, symbolic, and functional.

All of the above is annihilated by Chávez that is, the last head of the Venezuelan Historical State dismantled it beginning in 2007, when he laid the foundations of the communal state and opened the landslide that would project within a few years as the largest and fastest migratory movement in the history of the Western hemisphere and one of the three most significant globally in the 21st century.

### Autocratic Acceleration

*"Well, I will dedicate myself fully to this new constitutional period of government; we are going to radicalize this process". (Chávez, January 10, 2007)*

Chávez began talking about socialism between late 2006 and early 2007. He insisted on this "new old" idea across all possible discursive spaces. It seemed the leader of Venezuelan autocratization was just beginning to don a new suit; he wanted to show it off at every opportunity.

Chávez spoke as if he were debuting an ideology: in the main hall of the Capitol, as soon as he was invested with the presidential sash for his re-election swearing-in on January 10, 2007, and before the protocolary pronouncement of the President of the National Assembly, Cilia Flores, "You are hereby invested, President Hugo Rafael Chávez Frías, with the office of Constitutional President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela for the period 2007-2013, by mandate of the people and with the authority conferred by the National Constitution", half jokingly, half fatuously, Chávez replied looking at the audience, "Left-wing president now". The courtly audience readily accepted the joke, which was no joke, for that would be the spirit for the demolition of the Historical State (Chávez, 2007b).

When he said, "Left-wing president", precisely in those circumstances and knowing it was his first presidential re-election under his own new law, Bolivarian constitution and state, he was making his ideological declaration to the world

watching him. The re-elected autocrat had been hinting for some time at the idea of socialism of a “new stamp” and “Venezuelan-style”, whose first allies were the Cubans, and he had openly declared his admiration for Fidel Castro and his dictatorship. However, it was in this new cycle that he rapidly turned the Bolivarian revolution toward a socialist, leftist, communal autocracy: the death sentence of the Venezuelan Historical State.

Chávez assumed a political project that finally pivoted toward socialism. He had said so during the campaign, and on December 3, 2006, on election day, the Venezuelan vote saw its highest turnout to date <sup>5</sup> a legitimizing element for the rising autocrat to assume that the construction of the “socialist homeland” and the dismantling of the Historical State were inevitable.

### *The Danger of History*

Chávez demolished the Historical State, starting with history itself, “That is why, without any exaggeration whatsoever, I have been affirming that the thought of Simón Bolívar is clearly socialist thought” (Chávez, 2007). With this absurd anachronism, he sought to modify the foundational totem of the Venezuelan Historical State. Likewise, he meticulously extracted discursive and epistolary statements from Bolívar to try to reconstruct an ideological paradigm, utilitarian, liberal, and socialist, dismissing obvious contradictions.

The phrase of Bolívar that Chávez most repeated, like a mantra, was “The most perfect system of government is that which produces the greatest possible sum of happiness”, calculating that this idea was viable for any political regime and could fit any egalitarian ideology because the accumulation of happiness, Chávez thought, was another form of socialism. This Benthamite<sup>6</sup> utilitarian statement was very useful for Chávez; he used it as a vernacular philosophy of Bolívar’s, compliant for his post-historical ends where “government” should only

<sup>5</sup>1998, Chávez would achieve 3,673,685 votes (56.20%) in an electoral universe of 11,013,020 registered voters, with 6,988,291 people voting. His opponent, Henrique Salas, obtained 2,613,161 votes (39.97%). In 2000, Chávez would obtain 3,757,773 votes (59.76%) in a universe of 11,720,971 registered voters, with 6,637,276 voters participating. His opponent, former comrade-in-arms Francisco Arias Cárdenas, achieved 2,359,459 votes (37.52%). In 2006, Chávez achieved 7,309,080 votes (62.84%) in a universe of 15,784,777 registered voters, with 11,790,397 participating. His opponent, Manuel Rosales, obtained 36.90% of voter support (4,292,466 votes). In 2012, his final campaign, Chávez obtained 8,191,132 votes (55.07%) in an electoral demography of 27,645,302 inhabitants, with 18,903,143 registered voters and 15,146,096 Venezuelans voting.

<sup>6</sup>Jeremy Bentham, the anti-colonial English philosopher, wrote “The greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation”. Bolívar maintained an intense epistolary relationship with Bentham, even declaring himself his disciple. But the intellectual idyll lasted until 1828, when for political reasons the Liberator banned Bentham’s *Treatise on Civil and Penal Legislation* from Colombia (Schwartz and Rodríguez, 2013: 45-68).

seek the “happiness” of the people, neglecting justice, equality before the law, the right to private property, as a safeguard against state power, and individual liberty.

In this sense, he validated autocratic acceleration with history, or at least with its hagiographic referents:

*“Ezequiel Zamora, in his memory and with his inspiration, we also swear today: free land and free men, popular elections, and horror at the oligarchy. The profound socialist thought of Bolívar and even more of Zamora, more advanced still, by reason of time and circumstances, even more advanced in Simón Rodríguez also by reason of time and circumstance”.* (Chávez, 2007b)

He nested a rudimentary chronology of the “socialist thought” of its fundamental axes that, in any case, some more functional than others, had to be forced to the point of deformation to provide some bases for his socialist project as the termination of the Historical State. Chavista socialism was the end of the country as known until 2007, and thus, in the style of the caudillos, he shouted in the Federal Hall of the Venezuelan legislative palace, “The time has come! Nothing and no one, let it be heard well, nothing and no one will stop the chariot of the revolution, cost us what it may; nothing and no one will stop the chariot of the socialist revolution in Venezuela, cost what it may!” (Chávez, 2007b).

### *Dismantling the Historical Institutionalality*

*“The Fourth Republic<sup>7</sup> is alive at those levels; let’s demolish it, compatriots, let’s demolish it!”* (Chávez, January 10, 2007)

Chávez knew he had a limited time for dismantling the Historical State and was aware of the need for machinery: the 2007 National Assembly tailored to his measure, where barely one or two voices struck a discordant note with some part of his autocratization agenda.

The first blow to begin demolition was an enabling law called by Chávez himself “the law of revolutionary laws”. One will recall an essential characteristic of the Historical State already mentioned: the tradition of commerce and how business is conducted, how a society buys and sells goods and services, is a fundamental part of that tradition that becomes a fundamental part of a country’s idiosyncrasy.

It is not just about the mode of production; it is also the way people negotiate material things to live better or worse. Deciding how they administer their material resources, how they display them, and then, if applicable, trade them. Commerce

<sup>7</sup>The Fourth Republic was not only a chronological period (situated between 1958 and 1998) but a rhetorical construction by Chávez used as a tool to delegitimize the representative democratic system that, paradoxically, enabled his own social and political ascent.

is one of the most immovable roots of the Historical State. It is not only an economic dynamic, a tone, and ways of doing things. Every Latin American country, despite being a similar cultural community in some aspects, has different forms of commerce, language, peculiarities, and business conversation.

That daily Venezuelan space of commerce and business, sometimes also political, however large or small, had been customary since before Independence in the 19th century until 2007. It has been one of the existential spaces of the Historical State that survived caudillos, wars, uprisings, armed bands, invasions, dictatorships, and various democracies. Chávez was aware:

*“Notice that the Venezuelan Commerce Code, which is a symbol of capitalism, we still have a Commerce Code drafted over 100 years ago, in 1904, and they made several reforms to that Code, but within the same framework, and the last one, even so, was made in 1955 when General Marcos Pérez Jiménez governed Venezuela; that is the Commerce Code. What socialism are we going to build with a Commerce Code of that ilk, to say the least? To give just one example; regarding the reform of a set of laws, we will do it in an accelerated manner to, I repeat, absorb time, accelerate constituent time, or also form new laws, not only reform some but form new laws”. (Chávez, 2007b)*

It is not that Chávez ignored per se the value of commercial activity from the very existential form, the ethos of the Venezuelan “being”; evidently he knew that a commerce code drafted in 1908 balanced a complete scheme of national identity around the dynamics of commerce itself, around the transactions of Venezuelans’ worldly goods, an identity more penetrating than patriotic symbols artificially elaborated by some ideological metanarrative: commerce, which produced a code from the economic tradition of Venezuelans, not the reverse, was one of the first targets Chávez chose to destroy; it is not just any objective; it is the nervous system of the Historical State.

Chávez had managed to wound the belly of the Historical State in 1999 with the constituent assembly; however, divergent political actors from the Chavista revolution participated in that process who, although they did not contain the devastating fact itself, left some moorings to the Historical State that seemed to refuse to succumb during that end of the century and “political era”. For Chávez, these moorings were, in his words, “slip-ups of the old order, the old regime”, and therefore, to finish off the Historical State, one had to review his 1999 Chavista constitution again through a “National Commission for the profound and integral reform of the Constitution”:

*“The integral and profound reform of our Constitution, the revolutionary law of laws in some way and to some degree, will depend on the integral and profound reform of the Constitution; that is why, also allow me, Madam President, to express my*

*criticism about the urgency of the integral and profound reform of the Constitution. I have asked, I have requested cooperation from our President Cilia Flores to chair and coordinate the National Commission for the profound and integral reform of the Constitution, and she has accepted”. (Chávez, 2007b)*

This “law of revolutionary laws”, a propagandistic construct of Chávez, was only meant to refer to a great enabling law that an acquiescent National Assembly, due to the failed opposition abstentionist strategy of 2005, would grant him for dismantling the Historical State.

Another contour of the Historical State is represented in its territoriality. In the national political geography, there is a result, a nerve, an irrefutably historical realization of local processes interwoven with national processes to draw the country’s surroundings. This was another target of attack from Chávez’s plundering perspective the “new geometry of power”: “(...) many articles in the economic, in the political, presidential re-election, one of them, but they are many, the division, I, even let me put the issue here again, those who have been closest to me or were closer in the 90s after Yare, between 1990 and 1997 surely heard me say it on several occasions: must Venezuela necessarily be divided politically, territorially as it is?” (Chávez, 2007b).

In the new territorialization, the “new geometry of power,” Chávez blended two desires as the second step of dismantling: the conception of assuming other political-administrative divisions that ended up erasing state, municipal, and district identity, as well as all the spatial identity that this ordering reflects:

*“In such a way that, in that federal territory, or federal city surrounded by a territory, a territory that might be 10 by 10, 100 square kilometres, 10 kilometres this way and 10 that way, and maybe inside it there is a city, or two or three cities. On that federal territory we would concentrate all political, economic, social effort to begin transiting the path toward a communal city, a city where parish boards are not needed, where mayors’ offices and municipal councils are not needed, but communal power, communal power”. (Chávez, 2007b)*

To achieve this deformation of Venezuela’s historical territorial administration, Chávez added presidential re-election, an illegal consequence he achieved through his own authoritarian acceleration rather than through manipulation of the “original constituent power” or “popular power”; he did it through the enabling law that disregarded the electoral results of the December 2007 referendum, constituent reform, with which he could have modified 69 articles of the 1999 Constitution and the declaration of the socialist state within Venezuela’s own constitution.

The addition of the socialist algorithm was the final thrust: declaring the communal state that would replace the historical

one. Underlying his idea of indefinite presidential re-election was, evidently, the need to remain in power; however, it was also the end of power alternation, the powerful legal-political tradition of the last phase of the democratic Historical State (1961-1999). From the perspective of political anthropology, power relations and their social meanings, it was part of the country's tradition to alternate partisan leadership and change the leader figure every five years. With Chávez, that practice disappeared in two steps: first, government terms would no longer be five years but six-year terms, and from 2009, indefinite re-election; thus, one of the essential mechanics of democracy: alternation of power ceased.

One of Chávez's most sycophantic men, who enjoyed and perfectly understood the need to destroy the Venezuelan Historical State, was Farruco Sesto, an architect, unknown and mediocre, with ugly visions and poor-taste architectural conceptions, who nevertheless understood the historical opportunity offered by Chavismo to carry out a kind of vengeance against the country's main cities, especially Caracas. Chávez gave him control of the literally demolition machine, and the architect Sesto accelerated it to the end:

*"Farruco has a very interesting thesis about the socialism of cities, or socialist cities; they, socialist dreamer architects, and there are many ideas about this; they could be cities that already exist, they could be territories where there are no cities and we will build them completely new, like for example in the Orinoco Belt, I already told the Minister of Petroleum, along the Orinoco Belt, through the middle of it, we are going to build a highway and new cities; these cities must be born as communal cities, and embedded in a special territory, specially conceived; I call it federal territory and I call it federal city, later communal city, later, that is the transition, socialist city". (Chávez, 2007b)*

The minister/architect took Chávez's word and imitated the usual procedure: he did not build any socialist city but intervened in Caracas, an overpopulated and collapsed city since the 1970s, with his well-known idea: "Mr. President, another Caracas fits inside Caracas". With that idea, Farruco Sesto crammed the capital city with endless serpents of crammed buildings, installed in the few remaining spaces of the once modern and graceful capital city, through the overwhelming Mission Housing<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>8</sup>"Gran Misión Vivienda en Venezuela" (*The Great Dwelling Mission in Venezuela*) was a program of massive construction of housing solutions. Although its formal launch occurred in 2011, its logic and functioning represent the final stage of the state model transformation initiated years earlier. The Housing Mission acted as a catalyst: within the Historical State, urban planning and housing depended on technical ministries, mayoralties, and territorial planning ordinances with decades of force. The Housing Mission operated under a parallel structure that ignored these hierarchies and destroyed urban harmonies derived from the tradition of towns and cities tied to their own dynamics of growth and stratification.

In half a millennium since its founding, Caracas has had three great enemies: the English corsair Amyas Preston, who invaded and sacked it in 1595; the earthquake of 1967; and Farruco Sesto from 2007 onward. His most personal signature was left in 2010, in a historic Caracas square, Plaza El Venezolano, where the "gray architect" erected a sort of reddish-black pipe, 47.25 meters high and weighing 100 tons, in the heart of the place, like a monument of Attila appropriating a murdered people.

Another way of dismantling the Historical State is by altering spatial identity niches. This Plaza El Venezolano, the former site of the Dominican religious order, had been in the memory of Caracas residents since the 16th century as the identity niche of Plaza San Jacinto: an original meeting place for religion, teaching, commerce, market and leisure. The square lies at the heart of the Caracas historical circuit, in the immediate vicinity of Simón Bolívar's birthplace. Farruco Sesto's monument indicates a clear tactic of grotesque alteration of historical space to undermine local identitarian character, destroy it through ferocity and architectural incongruity with the place, which is simultaneously memory. Sesto's pipe, like the Chavista project itself since 2007, dilutes memory, which is identity, and devastates space, which is history; therefore, it eliminates any possible historical conversation: there is nothing, only what is yet to be seen but will never be built.

### ***The Engines to Devastate***

John Maisto, U.S. Ambassador from 1997 to 2000, recommended paying attention to what Chávez did, not what he said. Probably both verbs need watching. The "constituent engines" that Chávez ordered accelerated through his legislative operator, Cilia Flores, were ultimately like that demolition machine, a wrecking ball, that destroys buildings in a pendular motion:

*"The explosion of communal power, that's what I call it, the revolutionary explosion of communal power; all these engines are interconnected with one another; this is the fifth, it seems to me the one with the greatest force: the explosion of communal power. But the creative explosion of communal power will depend for its development, its impulse, its establishment, its expansion, its success, on the previous ones; it will depend on the reform of the Constitution". (Chávez, 2007b)*

The communal state was the final stage, but the "constituent power" had to be accelerated, for Chávez calculated that he had the license of votes to demolish the Historical State only for a limited time: "the constituent power activated as a great engine, an unleashed power, runs over space and swallows it and converts it into new time, and that time that swallows space is transfigured into fundamental actor, into multitude, into revolution" (Chávez, 2007b). The time Chávez calculated may have been more or less precise; however, although a majority

of Venezuelans voted for him in 2006, they did not wish to dismantle their Historical State, and in that sense, Chávez miscalculated.

## The Historical State Refused to Succumb

In 2006, Chávez had achieved a historic re-election. He knew that the noise of that electoral triumph would silence some critical voices toward the socialist plan for the country that left him in power for the third time. Did the Venezuelan voters who once again supported Chávez in December 2006 perhaps ignore his repeated invocations about a Venezuelan socialism project? They probably did not take it very seriously, as one might infer from a logical question: How did Chávez win a presidential election overwhelmingly and then lose the constitutional referendum that crystallized part of his electoral promise? This project to modify the constitution arose precisely on August 12, 2006, when Chávez registered his 2006 candidacy with the National Electoral Council. In his speeches that month, he began hinting that if he won, the country would enter a “new era” and that the 1999 Constitution needed “adjustment”, but he presented no specific articles nor a formal project to the legislature.

The constitutional reform project was presented and made official on August 15, 2007, when Chávez proposed his own 33 articles (10% of the 1999 Constitution) to the National Assembly, the body that would discuss the proposal and would contribute another set of modified articles to entrust to the CNE. His strategy consisted of, thanks to Chavismo’s hegemonic reality in parliament, of dividing up with Cilia Flores and the majority of allied deputies the articles he wanted to modify. Public opinion was led to believe that this initiative had separate legitimacy because the National Assembly, representing the people, also desired to reform the constitution, when it was obvious that it was all orchestrated by Chávez to change the country’s nature. All under the baton of a recently refined ideological whim, Chavista neo-socialism (Zelik, 2019), to modify the very constitution he had conceived as his movement’s central project in 1999.

### *Autocratic Legalism: The Reform for Eternal Power*

However, his third electoral victory seemed rather a conditional triumph of the people who voted for him, as if his electorate said: you continue being Chávez, but let Venezuela continue being Venezuela. Chávez asked his voters to accompany him in demolishing the Historical State; it was his project, he knew it and hurried it, that had to be done while the iron was hot: “I ask for support for this idea, because I believe in it; I have meditated for hours, I have made drawings, graphics,

I have read old notes, books, theories, theses, but come on, wisdom belongs to the collective, it is not mine at all (...) communal cities, and beyond, socialist cities, because that is not decreed, that must be built”. (Chávez, 2007b)

One of the aspects that irritated the electorate was when Chávez made one of his first reformist offers to his own 1999 constitution: “The President or President of the Republic may be re-elected immediately for a new term, as simple as that” (BBC, 2007). His idea was, initially, to change 33 articles of his very own “girl”, as he used to refer to the 1999 constitution; however, what he really longed for was the modification of the article that obliged him to leave power in 2012. It was not only about transforming the point of a single re-election into continuous and indefinite re-election but also increasing the term of office from 6 to 7 years, to make himself the perfect elected autocrat: the first candidate to head and inaugurate the change of law.

Chávez wanted to eliminate the autonomy of the Central Bank of Venezuela (Article 318), thereby having even greater discretion over the monetary mass and greater control of foreign currency resources entering the state oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA)* to the Central Bank: perfecting monetary populism. Likewise, statization would escalate to executive aggrandizement, another highly valued desire: a more powerful state would allow autocratic acceleration to definitively define a robust and eternal elected autocrat.

Among some of the prerogatives of this autocratic legalism was expropriation without courts intervening between the state’s robbery and the legitimate owner: control of private company assets would enrich the elites of the neopatrimonialism state, especially military agents who paid for the new clientelist handouts to Chavista patronage with loyalty (Rosales, A., Bull, B., & Sutherland, M., 2023).

Therefore, the ideological acceleration of the Armed Forces was necessary: first step, renaming them the Bolivarian Armed Forces, redefining them as “patriotic, popular, and anti-imperialist” (Article 328), while simultaneously inflicting upon the military institution an intense infiltration of revolutionary civilian cadres, Venezuelan and Cuban, with the recognition of a fourth component, purely ideological and partisan: the Bolivarian National Militia (Article 329).

The death of the Venezuelan Historical State would have its most immediate operational replacements in Article 70, concerning the Councils of People’s Power: communal councils, workers’ councils, peasant councils, to act directly on decisions previously made by structures arising from democratic elections, consensus, legislative debates, alternation, and representation.

Chávez, in his new demagogic semantics of plunder, would say that the state “recognizes and guarantees social, collective, mixed, and private property” as types of property, that is, by typifying private property, he eliminated it (Articles 112, 113, and 115). And his demagogic, dissimulated, and deceptive narrative: “Gentlemen businessmen, private sector: you are not excluded; we need you to ally with us. Come, together we will build the great country that Venezuela is already beginning to become”. (BBC, 2007)

Within the ambit of autocratic legalism, Chávez, the elected autocrat, responded to dictatorial alarms: “I doubt there is another country on the planet with a more vital democracy than the one we enjoy in Venezuela today”. This confusion between democracy and referendum-based authoritarianism was an extremely useful sophism between Chávez, his popular base, and his international allies. Many conflated democracy with mere electoral exercise, neglecting the separation of powers and their mutual autonomies the very factors most punished by the constitutional reform.

It seems that this, and the fear of losing what little democracy remained in this authoritarianism with elections, was perceived by some four and a half million Venezuelans<sup>9</sup>. Chávez’s first defeat on December 2, 2007, was a setback for autocratic legalism and an autocratic deceleration: Venezuelans refused and criticized through voting the modification of the articles of this reform project that, otherwise, and with the absolute majority in the National Assembly, would have proceeded on autopilot.

Although there was a faction of opponents, Ramos Allup, Antonio Ledezma, and parties like Alianza Popular, that called for not voting for either option to prevent the referendum from taking place, days before the referendum, the abstentionists decided to support the “No” option, which ultimately won.

Chávez personally assumed part of the campaign strategy for the “Yes” (a campaign that began on November 4, 2007) with a typical mobilization walking through Caracas. The campaign command for “Yes” had a name and historical charge: the Zamora command. With multi-billion dollar advertising that simplified everything to “Yes with Chávez”; “The reform is eternal power for the people”; “Because the people, if they know something, they know”, and yes, at least that time the people knew how to vote to prevent, or contain the extinction of the Historical State.

<sup>9</sup>Valid votes were 8,883,746; null votes reached 118,693. Total votes scrutinized reached 9,002,439, i.e., abstention of 44.11%. However, experts indicate that if CNE figures are taken as true, 14,299,478 were registered to vote in 88.76% of totalized electoral records (16,109,664 minus 1,810,186 non-totalized voters). Considering total computed votes were 9,002,439, then 5,297,039 voters did not exercise their right to vote. Therefore, abstention in the first bulletin should have been 37.04% and not 44.1%.

## Whoever Votes Yes Is Voting for Chávez, and Whoever Votes No Is Voting for George W. Bush

*“Where are those from [Avenue] Universidad? Over there, I hear them. Can you hear me over there? Wait a moment, I’m going to check right now with my high-power nuclear binoculars. This is a nuclear binocular we’re making with President [Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad. Hey, Fidel! How are you? There’s Fidel”. (Chávez, Avenida Bolívar, Caracas, November 30, 2007)*

The rhetorical machinery of global confrontation was activated at critical moments, during the cleavage cycles of his revolution. One of the discursive tactics was to take a merely local scenario to the international existential dimension, where Chávez told his militants that an election to modify some articles of the constitution was not just a Venezuelan event; it was an international undertaking to confront U.S. imperialism.

Thus, he did on November 30 of that year, closing the campaign for “Yes” with binoculars to see his militants from the platform, accompanied by the Chavista nomenclature, all behind him, applauding the re-elected autocrat. This time, he observed the not very crowded Avenida Bolívar. Despite that, he ventured into the harangue that proves what was said: globalizing the local to justify his “everything or nothing”:

*“So, on Sunday, we will deliver a new knockout to the squalid ones, we will deliver a new knockout to the Venezuelan oligarchy, we will deliver a new knockout to the Bolivarian counterrevolution, to those who try to stop this march of the people, to those who try to turn us again into a North American colony. We say it, Venezuela, forget it, will never again be a colony of the United States, nor of anyone; this country is free [...] Venezuela was an enslaved country; until a few years ago, Venezuela was a country totally dependent on the United States. Venezuela was a country dominated by the Venezuelan oligarchy, the native bourgeoisie, kneeling to the North American empire”. (Chávez, 2007e)*

Chávez constructed his nemesis from the intimate, everyday, and local “the squalid ones”, a caricatural designation of his adversaries; then came the more sophisticated nemesis, the oligarchy, where he fixed an enemy of historical dialectics, of class struggle; the maximum level was the United States, which completely composed his nemesis: it encompassed and united the previous ones, squalid ones and oligarchs, at the service of imperialism, to give meaning to his national discourse on the international, and vice versa.

After the December 2006 elections, Chávez knew he had elevated electoral capital. He was probably at the zenith of his popularity, a situation that encouraged him toward the electoral precipice of the constituent reform. At this moment, in the midst of campaign closing, he thought he could blackmail his

electorate by demanding surreal loyalty to Venezuela or the United States:

*“Here we have come to tell Venezuela, and the world, to announce from today, Friday, what is inevitable: on Sunday, we are convinced, and we are sure that the Yes to the homeland, the Yes to life, the Yes to socialism, the Yes to the future, the Yes to Venezuela will prevail by an overwhelming majority. And well, the Yes, you know, I have said it to simplify it even more: those who vote for the Yes, the women who vote for the Yes, are voting for Chávez. Those who vote for the No, the women who vote for the No, who will be the minorities without any doubt, are voting against Chávez; that must be put clearly, clearly, red, bright red. Clearly, clearly, red, bright red. I want to remind you of something, besides what I have already said; I add the following: you know it, whoever votes for the Yes is voting for Chávez, and whoever votes for the No is voting for George W. Bush, the president of the United States, because that is the true confrontation we have”. (Chávez, 2007e)*

Chávez situated Venezuelan politics in the logic of the historical abyss: if his proposal did not emerge victorious, Venezuela’s destiny was the precipice. Apparently, in his imagination of anti-imperialist struggle, he believed he was the only one capable, for the most valuable article of his reform was Article 230, formulated by himself, on presidential perpetuation, indefinite election: “On the presidential term. Modified from 6 to 7 years. The limits to be re-elected are removed”. Thus, the struggle against U.S. imperialism would be in good hands if the people favoured block “A” of the constitutional referendum. The only setback Chávez suffered in his main field, the electoral one, occurred that Sunday in December after the anti-imperialist harangue of voting for him or for Bush.

The electoral demography was 9,002,439 votes scrutinized, 8,883,746 valid, and “civic abstention”, that is, null votes, 118,693. Of 16,109,664 Venezuelans registered to vote, 5,297,039 did not do so. The question submitted to vote was: “Do you approve the Constitutional Reform project with its Titles, Chapters, Transitory, Repealing and Final Provisions; presented in two blocks and sanctioned by the National Assembly, with the participation of the people and based on the initiative of President Hugo Chávez?” The people’s response to block “A” of articles: 4,521,494 Venezuelans did not approve Chávez’s reform; 4,404,626 did support it. For block “B”, 4,539,707 votes said no, 4,360,014 said yes.

In block “A” were the sensitive articles, where the sharpest changes of the Venezuelan algorithm were proposed: the presidential term increased from 6 to 7 years, indefinite presidential re-election established, socialism imposed as an integrated model in all spaces, autonomy removed from the Central Bank of Venezuela, and the Armed Forces definitively intervened, ideologizing their name (Bolivarian Armed Forces) and adding the Bolivarian Militia corps to the military institution. The

Bolivarian Militia is the ideological and civilian factor that ultimately disintegrated the country’s historical Armed Forces. Logically, this block “A” was the one drafted and proposed directly by Chávez; block “B” comprised the articles proposed by the National Assembly.

It was a defeat on Chávez’s home turf the electoral one. It was also a blow to his ego; his reform lost by a narrow margin, but it lost, and to acknowledge that setback in his project of dismantling the Venezuelan Historical State, in his own expression, he had to “eat crow”. In the early morning of that Monday, he tried to appear magnanimous toward his adversaries, but inevitably, defeat dragged him down: “A recommendation: know how to administer your victory, know how to administer it; don’t get carried away now; know how to administer a shitty victory; look well mathematically at the victory, right? I wouldn’t have wanted it, rather. It’s not that I give it to you; no, you earned it, and it’s yours, but I wouldn’t have wanted that Pyrrhic victory” (Chávez, 2007).

Chávez ventured to finalize the dismantling of the Historical State through autocratic legalism, changing its configuration: socialism and no alternation of power. He calculated votes based on the result of the past presidential elections, not forgetting that abstention among his own militants worked against him. He would reflect: “abstention defeated us, defeated us. Those millions of Venezuelans who voted a year ago, well, a good number didn’t go to vote, a lesson they have given us” (Chávez, 2007c); however, it was not just electoral abstention; it was also distrust of the socialist project and, yes, a popular president, a postmodern caudillo, an elected autocrat; nevertheless, part of his own electoral market did not want to destroy the Historical State.

#### ***What Cannot Be Achieved by Votes Is Achieved through Authoritarian Fraud***

The figure of the amendment should not have been used for articles that would modify the political nature of the state; moreover, constitutional reform by presidential initiative had already been exhausted in 2007, when part of the country did not want to destroy the Historical State. Sectors such as the student movement, which were activated energetically to prevent the socialist reform of that year through votes, defended the Historical State. However, the autocrat’s power was superior to the historical and political reasons that summoned his adversaries. With the capriciousness that characterized part of his political ways, Chávez announced that, supposedly, without saying it, another electoral crusade in the referendum dynamic: “From now on, I self-nominate within the PSUV as a presidential pre-candidate for the year 2012.” For this to be possible, and his authoritarian word was a subjective law, the

country had to be subjected electorally to another fatigue: the 2009 Constitutional Amendment Approval Referendum.

Another referendum on the same topic during the same constitutional period was unconstitutional; logic and legal reason indicated that the country had already chosen regarding the constitutional reform options. However, the Chavista nomenclature made an operational analogy: reform was asking to restore the house; the amendment was only remodelling one room. In autocratic legalism, everything is accommodating; Chávez unleashed his wolves for the legal fight: “I give my authorization to the United Socialist Party of Venezuela and the Venezuelan people to begin debate and actions to achieve the constitutional amendment and re-election as president of the Republic”. His governors and deputies, some first, then others, did all the norm analyses to seek the legal justification for repeating the referendum with one nuance or another.

In 2009, there was an economic margin for maneuver, because that would be the boundary year between boom and crisis: the dream of a wealthy socialism was not yet so outlandish at the end of 2008. Part of Venezuela tolerated the idea of an egalitarian nation because it was rich; therefore, a president obsessed with the socialist algorithm was palatable if he guaranteed a perennial oil bonanza. Alexis de Tocqueville’s maxim about the tyranny of the majority: people who sacrifice their liberty for equality.

Celebrating, precisely, his hegemonic decade, he restaged the other referendum, which he won by a margin in 2009: “Yes” obtained 6,319,636 votes (54.86%) and “No” 5,198,006 votes (45.13%), in an electoral demography of 16,767,511 registered voters, of whom 11,724,224 Venezuelans voted, with abstention at 30.08% better electoral behavior compared to the 37.04% abstention in the 2007 referendum.

He left the most valuable article for this sort of electoral revenge: “Do you approve the amendment of Articles 160, 162, 174, 192, and 230 of the Constitution of the Republic, processed by the National Assembly, which extends the political rights of the people to allow any citizen, in the exercise of a popularly elected office, to be subject to nomination as a candidate for the same office for the time established constitutionally, depending on their possible election exclusively on popular vote?” Chavismo, in one way or another, ignored the will expressed in 2007. Chávez’s underlying pressure concerned the essence of both referendum elections: his indefinite presidential re-election and evidently inserting the new socialist sign. In 2009, Chávez won; the “Yes” prevailed, and with that, the Venezuelan Historical State was demolished.

## Final Thoughts

The analysis of the 2006-2009 period allows us to conclude that Hugo Chávez’s autocratic acceleration did not merely represent another phase of his government, but rather an ontological rupture with Venezuelan institutionality accumulated over more than a century. Unlike the traditional military dictatorships of the 20th century that preserved the structure of the Historical State, the Chavista-Madurista project executed a systemic demolition of its functional pillars: project continuity, economic tradition, the citizen pact, and the dialectical interaction between history and memory.

The year 2007 stands as the definitive threshold of this transformation. Following the 2006 re-election, the transition from referendum-based authoritarianism toward a model of communal socialism enabled the supplanting of the representative republic by a new bureaucracy of People’s Power and the Missions system. This process not only co-opted national wealth through institutional opacity but also sought to dismantle the autonomy of key spaces such as the public university and the professional merit system.

On the symbolic plane, the destruction of “places of memory” and the alteration of national toponymy, as in the emblematic case of Cerro Ávila, were deliberate strategies to impose a new ideological narrative uprooted from vernacular identity systems. By modifying national symbols, the time zone, and the mental landscape of citizenship, the regime sought to break the historical inertia that had provided cohesion to Venezuelan society.

Ultimately, the dismantling of the Historical State has left as its legacy a fragmentation of collective memory and the establishment of a communal state that survives by competing against the ruins of republican tradition. The massive migratory crisis and the disintegration of the social fabric are the material evidence of a system that, by destroying property rights and the citizen pact, has left the nation without the anchors that enabled it to survive previous crises. Autocratic acceleration thus completed its objective: the refoundation of a country based on a continuous present, devoid of a shared past that might serve as a counterbalance to absolute power.

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