

## First hegemony, then democracy: On ideology and the media discourse on the coup against Hugo Chávez.

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### Abstract

This study examines the media discourse on the 2002 coup d'état against the government of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, with the aim of exploring how ideology in media discourse helps construct democracy in a Latin American political context. Critical discourse analysis is used to examine written pieces from *Dagens Nyheter* (Sweden), *El País* (Uruguay), and the *New York Times* (US). The study finds that the discourse on the overthrow and the events preceding it constructs the coup as a potential victory for democracy and as the definitive end of Chávez. However, after the failure of the coup and the reinstallation of Chávez one can perceive discursive renegotiations, such as the publishing of non-fundamental criticism of the overthrow. The study argues that the media discourse on the coup displays a highly relativistic attitude towards democracy, which serves the interests of the elite classes in Venezuela and of US hegemony in global politics. The article also argues that the flexibility of the discourse at hand shows the need for a detailed analysis of how ideology is (re)formed in media discourse.

**Keywords:** Critical discourse analysis, democracy, ideology, hegemony, news media, Hugo Chávez.

### Introduction

As Daniel Bensaïd (2011) argues, the end of the Cold War – and with it the end of the antagonism between capitalism and communism and between imperialism and liberation movements – gave birth to a new antagonism: that between democracy and totalitarianism. Democracy, as Alain Badiou (2011) states, has become the emblem of our contemporary society, an axiom to which 'everyone' is subscribing. The problem, however, is that this 'everyone' does not actually refer to everyone, but only to those with the privilege of defining what democracy is.

Therefore I argue that the definition or construction of democracy is also a question of *ideology*, since it is intertwined with struggles over political and economic interests. The media constitutes an important arena in which such ideological struggles take place due to its discursive power (Street, 2011), making it an important arena for the reproduction or contestation of capitalist hegemony (Allan, 1998; Hall, 1977).

With the aim of exploring how ideology in media discourse helps in the construction of democracy in a particular political context in Latin America, this study examines the media discourse on the 2002 coup d'état against the elected government of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. This specific event (which actually

comprises several related events) was chosen because it constituted a violent break with the legal constitution of Venezuela, which was approved in a popular referendum in 1999. Even if the coup only lasted 48 hours, the de-facto government managed to abolish the constitution, dissolve the National Assembly, fire all the leading members of the Supreme Court, abolish radical economic laws passed by President Chávez, and reinstall the old elite that had managed the national oil company PdVSA (see Ellner, 2008; Golinger, 2004; Wilpert, 2007). At that time, the toppled government – headed by Chávez, who himself led a failed coup attempt in 1992 – was in the process of implementing an anti-neoliberal agenda which included the reorganization of the national oil production. This can help to explain the national opposition to the government. Internationally, Chávez's decision to reduce oil production in accordance with OPEC-recommendations, Venezuela's independent stance toward Global War on Terror (GWOT), and its contravention of the US blockade against Cuba must be perceived as policies conflicting with US interests (Golinger, 2004; Lander, 2008). In this perspective the coup shares similarities with other coups in Latin American history, in which the toppling of popular and progressive governments has served not only the political and economic interests of upper classes at a national level but also US interests at a global level.

Since coups involve rapid and dramatic changes, they potentially contain intense ideological struggles. This would make it possible to perceive the dialectic functioning of ideology, that is, how power struggles are discursively formed and changed in relation to material changes 'on the ground'. Such perceptions are important in order to avoid a rigid conception of ideology where the detection of a 'dominant ideology' replaces explanations of its continuous reformation (Carragee, 1993; Carragee & Roefs, 2004).

Several studies on international news suffer from problems of this kind. Even if critical scholars have done important work in exposing ideology in the media at a general level and how coverage of foreign affairs is well suited to the 'national interests' of the home country (Dimaggio, 2009; Herman & Chomsky, 1988/2002; Huang & McAdams, 2000; Jayakar & Jayakar, 2000; Kim, 2000; Klagen, 2002), these studies do not provide satisfactory accounts of the changing character of ideology in media discourse. While it is fairly common that ideology is equated with the presence of specific actors and sometimes topics, the ways in which ideology is discursively formed and reorganized have to a large extent been ignored. Concerning ideological change, the work of Hallin (1987) serves as an important exception, showing how changes in the political landscape, from the Vietnam War to the conflicts in Central America, also imply changes for the formation of what he calls ideological hegemony in the media.<sup>1</sup>

A few studies have examined the coverage of the Venezuelan coup, but these differ from the study at hand in scope, theory, and methods. In their longitudinal analysis of the coverage of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela, Salter and Weltman (2009), reveal the use of a liberal nationalist framework in the coverage.

<sup>1</sup> The terms *ideological hegemony* or simply *hegemony* are often used in media studies to conceptualize the ideological functioning of hegemony. As Eagleton (1991/2007) and Williams (1977) clarify, hegemony cannot be reduced to ideology, even if the latter constitutes an important part of hegemonic rule.

Political actions against class structures are accordingly perceived as attacks against the national well-being. A quantitative survey of the New York Times' coverage of the coup shows that anti-Chávez sources gained slightly more coverage before the coup, while pro-Chávez voices were more often cited after the coup failed (Gill et al., 2006). However, none of these studies works in depth with theories of discourse and ideology, and they each examine the media content of only one country. In order to avoid geo-political bias, the empirical material of the present study is gathered from newspapers in three different contexts: Sweden, (Dagens Nyheter), Uruguay (El País), and the USA (New York Times).

### **Ideology and media discourse**

In order to avoid a rigid and stale conceptualization of ideology in media discourse, it is necessary to preserve the dynamics that are inherent within the very concept. Below, I outline how this is understood in the current study.

Ideology is here conceptualized as ideas, values, and worldviews that provide 'the "cement" in a social formation', and that must be understood as being 'structural' and 'epistemological' (Hall, 1977: 333–334), as well as an 'accurate expression' of a group's 'material interests' (Hawkes, 2003: 114). Ideology is understood as being central in struggles for hegemony, which in turn is the organizing principle through which elite classes exert cultural and political direction in order to gain consent for their interests from subordinate groups (Boggs, 1976; Gramsci, 1971; Hall, 1977).

Following the principles of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997) it is appropriate to conceptualize discourse as being a 'sphere of cultural hegemony' (Fairclough, 1995a: 95) in which significant ideological struggles take place. Ideology is in this sense intertwined with language use and set in a dialectical relation with the social and material context which surrounds it (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Vološinov, 1986). The media accordingly produces 'fields of definition and association, symbol and rhetoric, through which ideology becomes manifest and concrete' (Gitlin, 1980: 2). Media discourse – here understood as the language used in the news media across genres – is an important arena for ideological struggles.

The codification of ideology in the media is, to great extent, the result of a set of 'structural imperatives' (Hall et al., 1978: 60) influencing the institutional practices of journalism. Internalized rituals and routines make it possible for journalists to process events perceived as newsworthy into news (Allan, 1998; Gitlin, 1980; Tuchman, 1978). To this, one must also add an economic dimension – meaning that news must be sellable – a factor that affects news production (Hallin, 2000; Palm, 2002). This results not only in a focus on events, conflicts, and persons instead of processes and explanations, but above all in the use of elite

sources, since these are both accessible and perceived as being credible (Hall et al., 1978; Gitlin, 1980; Palm, 2002). This has implications for the ideological limits of news media, because powerful actors are then allowed to be the *primary definers* of a situation, meaning they define what the *problem* is (Hall et al., 1978). The arguments, actors, and language used for a specific news event are usually limited by how the specific problem is defined, and what is considered to be accurate and legitimate in a specific political context (Gitlin, 1980; Hallin, 1986). By presenting itself as free from ideology (Hallin, 1987; Goldman & Rajagopal, 1991), hiding its own role in different events (Ekström, 2003), and avoiding systematic reflexivity (Nohrstedt, 2007), journalism can legitimize itself by claiming objectivity while at the same time – and perhaps implicitly – defending certain interests.

In order to claim impartiality, the media cannot merely exclude deviant voices; instead these can be absorbed or tamed (Gitlin, 1980). According to Gitlin (1980: 273), in times of crisis, some oppositional claims can be verified by the media, producing a 'shift' of the 'hegemonic frame'. Such a shift involves the acceptance of moderate opposition or critique while separating these from more radical accounts, which continue to be viewed as problematic.

Ideology in media discourse also appear in more direct forms, as in editorials, op-eds, letters to the editor, etc. In these genres impartiality is not as important as expressing a political opinion. Nevertheless, the manifestation of ideology in such genres also constitutes an important field of inquiry in order to perceive the overall ideological character of media discourse.

In relation to media discourse on foreign events, as analyzed in this article, ideology in the media also encompasses a geo-political dimension. The dominance of Western media companies and the massive concentration of international news agencies lead to international news typically being addressed to a primarily Western audience (Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 2004; Thussu, 2004; van Ginneken, 1998). This can explain the dominance of news on Western countries in foreign news around the world (Wu, 2004) and the dominance of violence and conflicts when it comes to news from Third World countries (Thussu, 2004). Following postcolonial theorists, it is proper to claim that Western epistemology (see Spivak, 1988) makes up a large part of the processing of foreign news. This includes an 'us vs. them'-binary and stereotyping as important strategies for the journalistic construction of the 'other' (Sonwalkar, 2005; see Pickering, 2001 on stereotyping).

## Method and materials

### *Critical discourse analysis*

This study uses CDA as a method to operationalize ideological struggles taking place in the construction of the Venezuelan coup. The method was chosen because of its critical aims, e.g., uncovering power-relations within language use and unveiling ideologies (Fairclough, 1995a; Wodak, 2001). Also, this approach has shown to be particularly relevant for the qualitative analysis of print media texts (Fairclough, 1995b; Mautner, 2008; Richardson, 2007), which constitutes the methodological basis for this study.

In order to follow one of the key principles of CDA, and avoid the narrowness of text-only-analysis (Philo, 2007), this study emphasizes the need to examine texts in relation to their context (see Reisigl & Wodak, 2001).

As critical sociologist John B. Thompson argues, the analysis of ideology in discourse 'may begin by analysing the structural features of symbolic forms, and may seek to establish these features as instances of particular strategies or processes of symbolic construction' (Thompson, 1990: 293). Following CDA-scholars, three dimensions are perceived to constitute textual meanings and structures through which ideology may operate: *topics*, *discursive strategies*, and *linguistic means* (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Wodak, 2010). Topics are understood, here, as the content or themes of the analyzed articles, discursive strategies are employed 'both consciously and subconsciously' to convey values, and linguistic means are 'drawn upon to realize both topics and strategies' (Wodak, 2010: 46). In order to narrow down the immense scope of linguistic means and adapt it to the analysis of texts of print news media, this study emphasizes the role of the *microstructure* (van Dijk, 1988) of a text in the realization of discursive strategies. This involves local coherence, implicit and redundant information, quotation choices, lexical choices, and rhetorical strategies (see Olausson, 2009: 425).

The identification of *topoi* (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001) is important here. By functioning as the guarantor of an argument and linking it to *doxa* – the background knowledge of the reader – the *topos* 'justifies a line of argument, but requires less justification itself because it is anchored in common attitudes' (Grue, 2009: 309). Thus *topoi* serve to link discourse with context, and by pointing at presuppositions in an argument they can serve as tools for unveiling ideologies. The methodological task is hence to discover how such presuppositions are realized in the microstructure of a text.

In order to 'transcend the pure linguistic dimension' and minimize 'the risk of critical biasing', triangulation is used to include a historical, political, and sociological dimension in the 'analysis and interpretation' of the 'specific discursive occasion' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001: 35). This has involved studying the political history of Venezuela as well as the economic implications of the so-called Bolivarian Revolution.

### *Materials and analytical procedures*

The empirical materials comprise articles from three newspapers: Dagens Nyheter (DN), El País (EP), and the New York Times (NYT). These were chosen for being leading quality broadsheet newspapers in countries from different geo-political locations. The selection is primarily intended to minimize geo-political bias rather than to make comparisons between the newspapers. In total, 191 *textual* items that referred to Venezuelan political affairs, were retrieved.<sup>2</sup>

The analysis was conducted in two steps. First, the 191 items were closely read in order to get an overview of the material and identify its genre structure (the prevalence of news articles, editorials, etc.), its thematic structure, and its temporal structure. This stage also involved the construction of four temporal categories in which the 191 items were sorted as follows: *pre-coup* (materials from before the coup), *overthrow* (the construction of the actual power-shift), *comeback* (after the fall of the coup and the return of Chávez), and *aftermath* (materials concerning the aftermath of the coup).

The second step was to make a narrower selection of items representing all the temporal categories in order to analyze the microstructures of these texts and the discursive strategies that these realize.<sup>3</sup> 59 items of different genres (8 from DN, 29 from EP, and 22 from NYT) that were considered to be of the greatest thematic relevance for the aims of the study were selected.<sup>4</sup>

It must be understood that CDA is an interpretative method, meaning that the validity and reliability of the results are tested against quotations from the analyzed material (Carvalho & Burgess, 2005; Olausson, 2009). Extracts are presented to serve as illustrations of the broader material.

In the following section the results of the study are presented.

### **Fixing the meaning: the overthrow**

The coverage of the pre-coup incidents and the actual overthrow is characterized in all three papers by a high level of discursive closure, which is important for fixing the meaning of the coup. By constructing the situation as a conflict between the *political power* (the Chávez government) and *civil society* (workers, trade unions, business, the church, and political parties), the overthrow of Chávez fits well into the

<sup>2</sup> Textual refers to materials that contain written elements. The overall sample involves materials published in April 2002. Materials from DN were retrieved in March 2010 after searching for 'Venezuela', 'Chávez', 'Chavez' and 'coup' ['kupp' in Swedish] in the database *Mediearkivet*. The materials from NYT were retrieved after searching the database *ProQuest* with the same search terms as for DN. The NYT-material was retrieved in July 2010. The retrieved articles from these two newspapers were checked against microfilm copies of the corresponding paper editions. Since EP lacks a digital database open to the public, the materials from this newspaper were collected at its archive in Montevideo. This involved a close reading of all issues from April 2002, and the selection of all items mentioning the Venezuelan coup. This was done in January 2010.

<sup>3</sup> In the presentation of the analysis the temporal categories of *pre-coup* and *overthrow* has been merged into one; otherwise it follows the temporal structure accounted for.

<sup>4</sup> The genres included in the second-step analysis are first page articles, news articles, commentaries, editorials, op-eds, columns, supplements, and summaries, differing between the different papers. The uneven distribution of articles from the different papers in the second step selection to some extent mirrors the differences between the newspapers concerning the number of articles published about the events. DN, for example, published many fewer articles than EP or NYT.

dichotomy of totalitarianism vs. democracy (see Bensaid, 2011). Here, several strategies are presented that structure such a construction, which serves to help mitigate the coup's implications for democracy.

*Chávez as defeated by the people*

The pre-coup conflict<sup>5</sup> is constructed in the coverage as a 'strike' or 'stoppage' called by business and trade unions 'to oppose the dismissals and forced retirements that the government ordered against a group of executives' (EP, April 9),<sup>6</sup> and as an attempt to 'prod Mr. Chavez to reverse his decision to appoint five allies to the board of Petroleos de Venezuela' (NYT, April 11). It is also explained that PdVSA 'enjoyed relative autonomy until Mr. Chavez won office in 1998' (NYT, April 10), and that the protestors are 'incensed by Mr. Chavez's left-leaning policies' (NYT, April 11).

None of the newspapers give any explanation of why the Chávez government decided to expel these board members from their posts at PdVSA. Any dispute between the two camps is only evident regarding the *effects* of the strike but not the reasons behind it. In a similar vein, Chávez's government is represented as being confronted by several important sectors of society, among them workers, which helps to construct the situation as being different from traditional conflicts over class-related interests.

The construction of a weakened government facing opposition from diverse sectors of civil society lays the foundation for representing the overthrow as the definitive end of Chávez and his political project.<sup>7</sup>

The 'Bolivarian Revolution' that Hugo Chávez initiated  
three years ago ended abruptly ... (EP, April 12b)

With that, the epoch in Venezuelan history that Hugo  
Chávez called the 'Bolivarian Republic' has been  
shattered. (DN, April 13b)

With yesterday's resignation of President Hugo  
Chavez, Venezuelan democracy is no longer  
threatened by a would-be dictator. (NYT, April 13d)

This conclusion is drawn in all three newspapers, but also in different genres. The EP quotation, for example, comes from a news article, the DN excerpt from a commentary, and the extract from NYT from an editorial. Chávez's definitive end is also affirmed by the reports that calm now reigns in Venezuela and that there are celebrations because of the overthrow.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> DN did not publish any relevant material during the pre-coup incidents.

<sup>6</sup> All excerpts originally appearing in other languages than English have been translated by the author.

<sup>7</sup> In relation to this, on April 13 the section in EP that contained news on Venezuela was titled 'The End of Hugo Chávez' [El Final de Hugo Chávez].

<sup>8</sup> Concerning the celebrations, in EP (April 12c) for example, one can find the celebrators being described as 'Venezuelans', and the celebrations as 'spontaneous' and including 'even children'. Such constructions help represent the toppling of Chávez as something consensual, which works for masking the consequences of the coup for democracy.

The construction of the overthrow as the political end of Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution, not only reveals a rather deterministic view of these events, but is also an important strategy for establishing closure around the meaning of these occurrences. According to this discourse, it would seem rather unlikely that Chávez would return to power after having been removed by what is constructed as a massive opposition movement. This strategy is ideologically important for emphasizing the failure of his political project and highlighting the problems surrounding Chávez and his authoritarianism, instead of shedding light on class antagonisms and related social problems as the core of the conflict. Such a construction paves the way for a more consensus-laden construction of his overthrow.

#### *Not a conventional coup*

In mitigating the authoritarian consequences of the coup, important use is made of referential strategies that construct the overthrow as *something other* than a conventional coup.

For example, in the initial reporting about the overthrow, the term 'coup' is only used to describe the overthrow in quotations, secondary headlines, or editorials.<sup>9</sup> Thus, *news journalists* do not directly use the term 'coup' here to describe the overthrow. This is important, since it shows that 'coup', as a signifier for the ousting of Chávez, exceeds the boundaries of what was accurate for a news journalist to directly state at that specific moment. On one occasion a NYT journalist even directly denies that a 'conventional Latin American military coup' has occurred since 'the armed forces did not actually take power' and 'political rights and guarantees were restored rather than suspended' (NYT, April 13c). Similarly, a DN commentary claims that 'the military's possession of power is expected to be temporary', since 'the epoch of military dictatorships in Latin America is over for the foreseeable future' (DN, April 13b).

Typically, the overthrow is instead journalistically described as a 'resignation', sometimes with the specification that Chávez resigned after military demands or force. Remarkably, one DN article states that 'Chávez announced his resignation in a short speech before the TV-cameras' (DN, April 13a), without giving any further evidence of it. The lack of evidence of a resignation is, however, acknowledged in an EP-article (EP, April 13a), but the term is nevertheless used to describe the overthrow. The journalistic use of the term 'resignation' instead of 'coup' is ideologically important, since it helps to downplay the democratically questionable circumstances of the toppling, and constructs Chávez as playing an active part in his own overthrow.

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<sup>9</sup> The headline of a news summary in DN (April 13d) uses the term 'military coup', another headline for a story in the same paper uses 'coup' (DN, April 13c), and the headline of an editorial in EP is 'Coup in Venezuela' (EP, April 13c). As regards source attribution, in one NYT article Cuba is mentioned as calling the ousting a coup. Further examples of the term being used can be found in news items not included within the second-step selection (such as letters to the editor, comments from politicians, etc.).



The construction of the overthrow as something other than a traditional coup is also visible in the labeling of the new power-holders as an 'interim' or 'transitional' 'government'.<sup>10</sup> In the same manner Pedro Carmona – the figurehead of the coup – is labeled 'president' of the interim government. These labels ascribe a certain legitimacy to the new power-holders, constructing them as only holding office for a limited time-period, which is reinforced by quotations of and references to Carmona saying that new presidential elections will be held within a year. Furthermore, in NYT Carmona is described as a 'conciliator' who 'never' has 'been comfortable in the limelight', and person in his surroundings is quoted as saying that he is 'a guy who is looking for compromises and solutions that everyone can work with' (NYT, April 13b). His background as former manager and current head of the Venezuelan Chambers of Commerce (Fedecamaras) is not an obstacle for constructing him as someone who will have to 'mend the wide gulf' between the mostly poor Chávez supporters and the 'middle and upper classes that strongly backed the turnover' (NYT, April 13b). Even if such a construction acknowledges some sort of class-based antagonism, it still helps to conceal the class character of the new power-holders, as well as to depict them as potential restorers of democracy.

*The overthrow as a consequence of Chávez's autocracy*

In line with the strategies above is the construction of the overthrow as being a direct consequence of the killing of demonstrators, something that Chávez is accused of:<sup>11</sup>

A group of high-ranking generals broke ranks Thursday night to demand the resignation of President Hugo Chavez after at least 10 people were killed and more than 100 wounded when hundreds of thousands of protesters marched on the presidential palace. (NYT, April 12)

After the murder of civilian demonstrators he [Chávez] lost the remaining support from the influential Armed Forces. (DN, April 13a)

... the Armed Forces withdrew their support for Chávez – as a consequence of the bloody day that shook the Venezuelans ... (EP, April 13c)

<sup>10</sup> One should note that in EP and NYT the initial coverage of the overthrow did not explicitly mention any specific de-facto power-holder. It is also stated in one NYT article that it is not clear who is in charge. This can be explained by the simple fact that Carmona was sworn in as president several hours after Chávez was overthrown.

<sup>11</sup> The body count varies in the different papers, but it is reported that at least ten people were killed and about a hundred wounded in the demonstrations that preceded the overthrow.

The dominant representation offered is that Chávez is responsible for these killings, something that is constructed in different ways, but never questioned in the initial coverage of the overthrow. Representatives from the opposition and the military are quoted accusing Chávez of ordering the military to fire on civilians, or accusing groups aligned with the president of directly shooting at protesters. Some articles also center on the supposed investigations and lawsuits against Chávez following the killings, which helps not only to depoliticize the overthrow but also to fix the meaning of his involvement. The question, then, is not *if* Chávez actually is responsible, but what the consequences of his responsibility may be.

The ideological implications of this are twofold. First of all, this strategy reinforces the construction of Chávez as authoritarian. Secondly, this construction paves the way for a legitimization of the takeover of the executive power in Venezuela by an external, non-constitutional political force. This discursive mitigation is made possible by the construction's presupposition that the government's political power primarily depends on the will of the military and not on the constitution (or the National Assembly). Hence, the overthrow is not necessarily a conventional coup since Chávez lost his remaining support from the military after killing civilians. From that angle, the so-called transitional government can play an important and unproblematic role in re-establishing order and filling a power-gap. This exposes a rather problematic understanding of the situation, because one cannot forget that military coups occur when the armed forces withdraw their support from the constitutional principles of a country. By downplaying the role of the legal frameworks of the country and accentuating the role of Chávez as a totalitarian, the coup can be constructed as bearing democratic potential.

#### *The Chávez–'rogue states' connection*

This stereotypical construction of Venezuela is reinforced by the systematic reduction of its international allies to three so-called 'rogue states' (Chomsky, 2000): Cuba, Iraq, and Libya.

Hugo Chávez, however, challenged the USA by questioning the superpower's influence and by being the first foreign head of state to visit Iraq after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1991. He also established friendships with Libya's leader Moammar Khaddafi and Cuba's dictator Fidel Castro. ... Cuba helped Chávez build up an intelligence service and sent doctors and other experts to aid the leader whom Fidel Castro saw as his revolutionary successor in Latin America. (DN, April 13b)

This strategy, a typical case of guilt by association, is present in all the analyzed papers, and is ideologically important since it stereotypically frames Chávez as belonging to the authoritarian *other* (Sonwalkar, 2005; cf. Said, 1995).<sup>12</sup> This strategy shows the importance of *topoi* and *doxa* for argumentation (see Grue, 2009). No further explanation of Chávez's supposed allies is necessary; as symbols they are well known and carry negative connotations. For an international news event such as this, such a construction helps provide *global* references to the Venezuelan situation. However, these references simplify international relations and dilute political interests while concealing the economic interests that are at stake. The Chávez-US antagonism is here not constructed as being about global capitalist relations. Instead the rivalry is constructed as merely personal and to some extent symbolic (the Western democracies vs. rogue states). This strategy hence serves to disqualify Chávez as a legitimate political leader and mask power-relations through a simplification of global politics.

#### *Closure and the lack of fundamental critique*

The dominant picture is thus one in which the undemocratic aspects of the coup are thematically neglected in the construction of the overthrow. Carmona's decisions to annul Venezuela's constitution and dismantle key institutions in the country – such as the National Assembly and the Supreme Court – are reported but not problematized. Comments critical of the actions of the de-facto government do appear in the news articles, but apart from being exceptional, they appear in the form of short quotations in EP and NYT, mainly from political actors. Also, one editorial in each of these two papers contains passages *questioning* the coup. The EP editorial acknowledges that the 'constitutional order has been broken', and that Venezuela needs to 'reacquaint itself with democracy' (EP, April 13c). The NYT editorial states more directly that 'democracy has not yet been restored, and won't be until a new president is elected' (NYT, April 13c). But none of these propose the *reinstallation* of the elected government of Venezuela, in accordance with the country's constitution.

What can be perceived here is a discursive closure of the meaning of this situation, exposing a momentary stabilization of ideology in the media discourse. This fixation of the meaning renders fundamental criticism of the coup irrelevant, even if the overthrow bypassed the legal frameworks of the country. This exposes how this part of the coverage is heavily colored by Western elite ideology in the sense that the events in Venezuela are seen through the stereotypical lens of 'Third World authoritarianism' as opposed to 'Western democracies'. The problem, however, is that such a perception condones Third World authoritarianism by downplaying the negative consequences of the coup for democracy.

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<sup>12</sup> In one EP article about the overthrow it is alleged that Chávez is sheltering Colombian guerrillas (EP, April 12c), which also is an example of guilt by association.

**Chávez's comeback: discursive reformations**

Chávez's return to power caused disequilibrium in the previously stable and consensual construction of the overthrow. In this section I will show that important aspects of the previous constructions were renegotiated after the failing of the coup, while other key aspects – such as what is conceived as being the core problem of the situation – was preserved.

*Important renegotiations*

The interpretational problems that Chávez's comeback created for the stabilized ideological discourse accounted for above are evident in the fact that his return is considered to be *surprising*. A first-page EP headline states 'Surprise: Chávez came back' (EP, April 14a), another one labels it 'The resurrection of Lazarus' (EP, April 15a), and a NYT article calls it a 'stunning reversal' (NYT, April 14a).

Chávez's return also results in changes in the lexical choices used to describe the ousting. In none of the newspapers do journalists still claim that Chávez resigned; instead it is typically stated that he was 'removed', 'forced from power', or 'toppled'. In all three papers, one can now also find examples of journalists using the term 'coup' in direct reference to the ousting, even if this is rather exceptional for EP and NYT. Remarkably, these two newspapers label Chávez's return a 'counter coup' (EP, April 14b; NYT, April 15b), after neglecting the term 'coup' when constructing the toppling of him. Also, worth underlining is that the Carmona government is still described as 'interim' and 'transitional', linguistic constructions that downplay its authoritarian role. However, in a news article in DN (April 15a) Carmona's government is called the 'self-appointed transitional government', implicitly alluding to its unconstitutionality.

Also renegotiated in the construction of the comeback is the killing of demonstrators, which had been constructed as the factor triggering the coup. Chávez's return overshadows these incidents – causing them to receive less attention than before – but now there is also a greater diversity of interpretations of the events. For example, one of Chávez's ministers is cited in NYT as saying that 'most of those killed were Chavez supporters, fired upon by security forces allied with the interim government' (NYT, April 15b), a claim that starkly contrasts with explanations given in the coverage of the overthrow. However, such claims are not left uncontested, and accusations against Chávez are recurrent.

Furthermore, the coup's implications for Venezuelan democracy are now touched upon. Thematically this is, for example, shown by the existence of articles that center on the Organization of American States' (OAS) concerns about the constitutional order in the country or on Chávez supporters' demands for a comeback, or commentaries that directly question the toppling. At a micro level, quotes from Latin American politicians, members of the Venezuelan military, and ordinary citizens are directly or indirectly used to address democratic problems resulting from the coup. Also, attacks against Chávez's staff are reported. This is

mainly done by quoting ministers who are back in office, who witness about arrests and how they hid to escape repression.

An important example of the discursive changes accounted for in this section is the critical op-ed titled *A coup by any other name* (NYT, April 14c), in which the author argues that the incidents in Venezuela must be labeled a *coup*. Furthermore, the author argues that, like many other coups in the region's history, the Venezuelan coup went hand-in-hand with US interests:

For Washington, the real crisis in Caracas was Mr. Chavez. It ended with his leaving office at gunpoint. Now 1.5 million barrels of Venezuelan oil a day will keep flowing to the United States. And none will go to Fidel Castro's Cuba – Venezuela's new leader, an oil man, immediately declared that tap shut.

In Latin America, the United States has long preferred friendly faces in presidential palaces, playing reliable roles, whether or not they are wearing uniforms. It supported authoritarian regimes throughout Central and South America during and after the cold war in defense of its economic and political interests. (NYT, April 14c)

These arguments deviate significantly from the dominant discursive construction of the Venezuelan situation, since it is to some extent counter-ideological to perceive the coup in question through the lens of Latin America political history and to highlight the US interests at stake. This piece also shows that in the NYT there is space for criticism of this kind, at least in the form of op-eds.

#### *Maintaining the ideological core*

Even though there is greater room for ideological struggles in what is published after the failing of the coup, Chávez remains a problematic figure. For example, the association of him with Cuba, Iraq, and Libya, claims of his having an autocratic style of government, and references to his failed coup of 1992 are preserved in all the papers.

Constructions of this sort can for example be found even in the op-ed *A coup by any other name* (NYT, April 14c) that otherwise showed proof of severe criticism against the coup. The author, for example, hastens to add that 'There is no evidence that the United States covertly undermined Mr. Chavez. He did a decent job destabilizing himself.' This sustains the construction of Chávez as being cause of the problem.

No further explanations of the domestic antagonisms that caused the coup – for example class conflicts – are given. Furthermore, when explaining the reasons behind the US government's acceptance of the coup he states:

Yes, he [Chávez] was freely and democratically elected, and his starry-eyed visions of a united South America unshackled from the dominance of Washington's power did not bother the [Bush] administration much. But his selling oil to Mr. Castro? His alliances with brothers in petroleum production, Saddam Hussein and Muammar el-Qaddafi? His not-so-tacit support for the Colombian rebels? And the potential threat he posed to thousands of American gas stations? (NYT, April 14c)

Here the leaders of Cuba, Iraq, and Libya, and this time also Colombian rebels, again serve as *topoi* for warranting the US-Chávez antagonism. Hence, apart from 'the threat he [Chávez] posed to thousands of American gas stations', it is the connection between Chávez and 'rogue states' that is given as the explanation of the US's acceptance of the coup. The associations with Iraq and Libya are labeled 'alliances', but it is not stated in what way they are allied. Does the alliance consist in their mutual OPEC membership? In that case, it is not out of place to ask why other OPEC countries are not constructed as allied with Venezuela. Furthermore, in what concrete ways has Chávez expressed 'support' for the Colombian rebels? My point is that the arguments in this quotation mystify the relationship between Chávez and the 'rogue' political actors when explaining the situation. Such mystifications, in turn, risks reproducing ideological dichotomies between the West and the Other.

Furthermore, while the discourse on the comeback acknowledges the existence of popular support for Chávez, it also offers ways of mitigating it. For example a pollster is quoted as saying that Chávez 'still maintained strong support from at least 17 percent of the Venezuelan people' (NYT, April 14a), which is a modest figure compared to the near 60 percent he received in the presidential elections of 2000, and which is far from the majority of the population. A DN commentary (DN, April 15b) also accentuates that Chávez's support had 'fallen substantially' since the elections.

In EP and NYT one can find the construction of Chávez's supporters as belonging to the poorest sections of the population and as living in the 'slums'. By excluding supporters from other social strata (see Valencia Ramírez, 2007), Chávez can more easily, and stereotypically, be constructed as a populist that only appeals to groups with low economic and cultural clout. As NYT summarizes it: 'And even though their [the poorest

people's] lives have hardly changed after Mr. Chavez first few years in power, many people still love him' (NYT, April 14b).

Furthermore, Chávez's supporters are constructed as being armed and violent, and as targeting the free press:

Then thousands of chavistas [Chávez supporters] came to Miraflores [the presidential palace], down from the hills, many of them armed with sticks and others with firearms, as evidenced by the frequent sound of shots, and all making threatening gestures. ... The press, adversaries of Chávez, and its journalists, especially those from television, are a primary target of the rancor of the chavista masses. (EP, April 14c)

This discursive strategy is consistent with the construction of Chávez as being in a state of confrontation with the private media, and as keeping his followers 'in a state of agitation' (NYT, April 14b).

Thus, what is perceptible here is that even a greater plurality of opinions, and a broadened approach from the media – which made important discursive renegotiations of the coup possible – do not necessarily lead to fundamental ideological changes. The ideological core, or the construction of Chávez as being the central problem, is preserved but with a different discursive shell.

### **In retrospect: passive critique**

The remaining coverage in different ways offers a retrospective reconstruction of the coup, with the incidents in Venezuela perceived in the rear-view mirror.<sup>13</sup> Important at this stage of the coverage is the appearance of editorials, op-eds, and journalistic commentaries that in one way or another offer critical viewpoints on the overthrow of Chávez.<sup>14</sup> In this section, I will illustrate how this critique, even if rather hard at times, in the end has multiple ideological functions: it takes the hegemonic role of the US in global politics for granted, it serves to legitimize the reporting media's own behavior, and it reinforces the notion that Chávez and his political project represent the core set of problems in the Venezuelan situation. I call it *passive critique* – a critique without critique – to paraphrase Gramsci's notion of passive revolution.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> The topics and scope of these items vary. One can, for example, find renegotiations of the killings of demonstrators preceding the coup (NYT, April 29), as well as more critical and in-depth accounts that analyze Chávez as a political phenomenon through the socio-political history of Venezuela (EP, April 27a). Some of the reconstructions of the coup criticize the Venezuelan opposition's actions, but this typically takes the form of a couple of paragraphs in a news item, and not normally a macro-topic in itself.

<sup>14</sup> To some extent this critique resembles the critical op-ed *A coup by any other name* (NYT, April 14c), but is done *retrospectively*, thus including the notion that the coup failed.

<sup>15</sup> Gramsci uses the term passive revolution to describe how the ruling classes reorganize and sustain their hegemony by incorporating some oppositional claims. It is a ' "revolution", without a "revolution" ' in the words of Gramsci (1971: 59).

*Criticism of the coup and the US-role in it*

Some of the criticisms focus on what is perceived as a mishandling of the Venezuelan situation by the administration of George W. Bush. The Venezuelan coup is hence viewed in terms of the actions of the US government.

The US government is criticized for condoning the overthrow by, among other things, denying that a coup had occurred, blaming Chávez for the events, and recognizing the Carmona government as legitimate:

The USA was the only country that refused to condemn the military coup in Venezuela. According to sources, the coup plotters discussed with the USA in advance. This casts a dark shadow on the credibility of the American government as being the defenders of democracy. ... [T]he American government placed the entire blame on Chávez and has not publicly backed down from its viewpoint that he 'resigned' after popular protests. (DN, April 17)

This sort of criticism appears in the three papers, and is characterized by an *ideological contradiction*: the US's acceptance of the Venezuelan coup, and at times also its historical involvement in Latin American coups, is acknowledged, yet the US is perceived as the defender of democracy in Latin America and the world. This makes it possible to perceive the current US conduct towards Venezuela as an *exception*, as something better explained by the irrationality of the Bush administration than the logic of the political and economic interests of the US. Even if such criticism acknowledges the coup as a violation of Venezuelan democratic principles and as situated in a global political context, it works within the ideological frames of the US. In line with this is the fact that the actions of the Bush administration are represented as harming first and foremost *the US*, and not necessarily Venezuela. Thus US involvement in the coup can harm its democratic credibility but also its position in world affairs. A quote from an op-ed illustrates this well:

It is very much in our interest that Latin America break out of its traditional political cycle, in which crude populism alternated with military dictatorships. Everything that matters to the U.S. – trade, security, drugs, you name it – will be better if we have stable neighbors.



But how can such stability be achieved? In the 1990's there seemed, finally, to be a formula; call it the new world order. (NYT, April 16b)

Such arguments expose an inability to negotiate the dominant position of the US in global politics, and reveal the passivity of the criticism presented. This inability is found not only in NYT, but in all three newspapers, reflecting the dominance of US epistemology in the media of these diverse countries. In items of this kind one can also find the 'rogue states' connection, and other negative representations of Chávez.

#### *Passive critique and media legitimization*

This type of critique also serves to legitimize the role of the media, since it obscures the newspapers' own problematic role in the handling of the coup. Bush is criticized for many things that resemble the analyzed papers' own construction of the *overthrow*, their claiming that Chávez resigned, blaming him for the crisis, and downplaying its negative consequences for democracy. To some extent the media forgets about its initial construction of the overthrow and hence projects it onto the problematic actions of Bush. Media reflexivity is here only visible in a piece of a NYT editor who, while criticizing Chávez for being 'divisive' and 'demagogic', admits that he and his colleagues 'shared' the applause that accompanied the overthrow, something that 'overlooked the undemocratic manner in which he [Chávez] was removed' (NYT, April 16a). But the media reflexivity does not go any deeper than this, which shows how the media, by failing to *problematize* their own role, also legitimize themselves (see Ekström, 2003; Nohrstedt, 2007).<sup>16</sup> This is important for the ideological function of the media, since it exposes a *flexibility* of interpretation. The undemocratic consequences of the coup could first be downplayed in the media, yet later on when the coup failed, the same media could publish criticism of those who downplayed the authoritarian character of the toppling. This elucidates the dynamic and dialectic character of ideology in media discourse.

#### **Conclusions**

The discursive construction of the coup in Venezuela and the ways it transforms itself illustrates the importance of ideology in the construction of democracy in the media discourse of a Latin American political situation. At a general level, this study echoes previous research on the coup in question (Salter & Weltman, 2009), and substantiates the 'media hegemony thesis' (Carragee, 1993).

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<sup>16</sup> My discussion of media reflexivity is restricted to the analyzed media's reflexive accounts on their own behavior, and how this imply legitimation of *themselves*. There are, however, examples in the materials where the actions of the *Venezuelan* media during the coup are treated. However, I believe that that is a separate theme.

One of the most pressing findings of this study is the existence of a large degree of relativism surrounding the meaning of democracy in the media discourse on the Venezuelan coup. What is clear is that the material presence of a legal constitution that has been approved by popular vote, and a government and parliament that have been elected in the same manner, is not a sufficient condition for defining a state as democratic. The coverage of the Venezuelan coup shows us precisely that. The violent uprisings against these legal institutions – which are key elements in the Western perception of democracy – are condoned in the initial reporting, by constructing the coup as *something else*. The coup appears to be a democratic opportunity when it is constructed as a solution to what constitutes *the* problem for Venezuelan democracy, namely Hugo Chávez. The construction of Chávez as an autocratic leader thus serves as a prerequisite for interpreting his removal as bearing democratic potential. In this sense, the dichotomy of democracy vs. totalitarianism (Bensaïd, 2011) is clearly present, and it is ideologically conditioned.

Hence, it seems that it is the political actors at hand – and their political baggage – that play a greater role in determining what is considered democratic. Chávez – along with his policies, ruling style, alleged allies, and (lack of) visions – remains a key problematic figure in the coverage regardless of the newspaper and of the twists and turns of the discourse on the coup. In contrast, problematizations about those plotting the coup and its international supporters in the form of the Bush administration become more central above all during the aftermaths of the coup. It is then hard to maintain the view of the overthrow as a democratic opportunity, and it is not until this time that what can be regarded as Western standards of democracy (free elections, legal constitutions, parliamentarianism, etc.) become a strong part of the interpretational frame of the media. This is important because it reveals *flexibility* in the media discourse – making the perception of democracy equally flexible – which to great extent matches the ‘success’ of the actions ‘on the ground’.

This flexibility in turn has consequences for the ideological scope of the media discourse. As shown, the initial reporting on the overthrow had a rather deterministic character, and ideologically the interpretation provided was fairly closed. This changed with the failing of the coup, implying more room for ideological struggles. At this point one can argue that a discursive shift is visible; the democratic problems of the coup become accepted. However, this shift does not involve a renegotiation of some key aspects, as for example what constitutes the core problem in the Venezuelan situation, and how this is linked with the global structures of capitalism. In this sense, this study echoes previous findings that stress the limits of ideological change (Hallin, 1987), and the absorption of deviant values into the range of broader interests (Gitlin, 1980). But the flexibility in the media discourse also shows the need for a detailed analysis of discursive (re)formation of ideology in the media.

The inability to negotiate the central problem in the Venezuelan situation implies that the media discourse on the coup in general serves the interests of elite classes in Venezuela and US political and economic interests on a global level. The class-based character of the coup could hardly be more apparent than when the president of the Venezuelan Chambers of Commerce (Fedecamaras), Pedro Carmona, appoints himself president of the country during the coup and reverses economic policies instituted by Chávez. Furthermore, by failing to give a deep contextualization of the role of the US in global politics, the media discourse works to conceal its interests. The use of the 'rogue state frame' for explaining the tense relations between the US and Venezuela in turn works for reinforcing dichotomies between the West and the Other.

One can argue that the Venezuelan coup situation was confusing and that the fast changes made it difficult for the media to provide a proper reporting on the events. I endorse this claim. At the same time, situations as the Venezuelan also test the ability of the news media of being critical of its sources, and fulfilling their democratic role. The construction of the Venezuelan coup instead suggests that democracy for the media can be fairly relativistic, which implies that the defense of capitalist hegemony comes before the defense of democratic principles.

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